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THE OLD KENTUCKY ROAD

By Dr. George F. Mellen

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article appeared in a Chattanooga newspaper in the early 1900s and was submitted by Virginia Knight Nelson, Knoxville, TN.

The young man approached the aged civil engineer with some diffidence, but he knew that his memory carried some delightful reminiscences. In the thirties of the past century Col. J. C. Trautwine had come from Philadelphia, Pa., to East Tennessee. Solomon D. Jacobs, of Knoxville, as president, and Asbury M. Coffey, of Athens, as secretary and treasurer, were zealous of effort to build the Hiwassee railroad as the outlet for surplus products of lower East Tennessee.

Trautwine, a competent young engineer from the north, was engaged for the constructive task. The first dirt was broken two miles west of Athens in 1837, one year before the removal of the Cherokees. Here the first stroke for railroad transportation was made in the state. In northeastern Tennessee the main public interest was centered on the building of a railroad through Cumberland Gap from Cincinnati or Louisville to Charleston, S. C. The rivalry between the two sections of the eastern grand division was acute, and the lower end saw earliest the fructification of effort.

In 1839, in company with a congenial party of young men and young ladies, on business and pleasure bent, Col. Trautwine made a trip of observation through the country from Knoxville to Cumberland Gap. "Yes, young man, it was the beauty and grandeur of the scenery around Cumberland Gap, combined with the romance attached to the old Wilderness road leading through it, that of itself would have taken me and my party to that strategic and historic spot. By the old stage road that led up the Holston river valley to Bean's Station we took our departure from the little queen city of East Tennessee. By sunset we had compassed thirty-three miles, reaching Rutledge, the Grainger county capital. It then numbered 200 people. Beyond the town a quarter of a mile was Cocke's Bell tavern, where we tarried overnight. An early start next morning would put us in Tazewell for the second night.

"Beyond Rutledge, Sinking creek first attracted attention as another example of the frequent streams that disappear underground in the limestone country. Let me tell you something interesting about another Sinking creek on the old Frederick S. Heiskell plantation in Knox county. When we were making the survey eastwardly from Charleston, in Bradley county, we followed the easy grades of this creek to the east of Concord. We were congratulating ourselves over the survey. Suddenly we came up against a wall of rock fifty feet high, from beneath which Sinking creek flowed. Finding that the underground disappearance was extensive, we had to go back several miles, take a fresh start and make a wide detour. After nine miles from Rutledge we came to historic Bean's Station. Here the stage road parted two ways. One, the Kentucky road, left that leading into Virginia at right angles and bearing away to the east.

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"In the early days more people passed through Bean's Station than any other point in East Tennessee. Here gathered the drovers from Bluegrass Kentucky and southwest Virginia with their horses, mules, cattle, hogs, sheep, to take into the Carolinas through the French Broad valley or into Georgia and Alabama by the old federal road. Of course, they had to have some fun as they went through the country, and at Bean's Station was a celebrated race course on which fleet steeds were tested and matched. In the neighborhood, too, were mineral springs whose medicinal qualities had been recognized, in prophecy of modern Carlsbads. I have visited Saratoga, Ballston and Rockaway resorts in the north, but when scenery and health are taken into view, the East Tennessee region surpasses them immeasurably. There prosperous merchants like John Shields thrived and wealthy farmers like Thomas Gill lived. 'Clinchdale' farm, with its meek-eyed Jerseys and soft-fleeced Southdowns, is merely a reminder of a glorious era that lives only in story and reminiscence.

"Well, from Bean's Station on through Clinch Gap, the road was called macadamized, and was maintained by commissioners. There was just one tollgate, which stood at the foot of Clinch mountain. The proceeds were sufficient for a passable summer road beyond, but beyond this small praise is due. Our vehicles rumbled and tossed over boulders ranging from the size of a cannon ball to that of a flour barrel. This much is to be said in its favor, that it was the first attempt at good road building in all the East Tennessee country. At the tollgate we got dinner, and were fifteen miles from Tazewell. All along, geologically, the roadway was interesting. Where we crossed the Clinch river the stream was 75 to 100 yards wide. The ford was treacherous by reason of uncertain depths, and a ferryboat just above took us over. Walden's ridge, less than three miles from the Claiborne capital, was interesting. From the blasting of the road, I notice the fine variegated marble which up north or near convenient transportation, would have proved a mine of wealth to the land owners. The road leading a mile downward from the ridge's summit is the longest I ever traveled for that distance. Reaching Tazewell, we stopped at Dickinson's hostelry where the toothsome country fare abides still in memory as refreshing to the palate. Then the county seat had about two hundred inhabitants, and Gray Garrett was representative of its lawyers as Hugh Graham was of its merchants.

"In the Tazewell vicinity I noticed casually what I took to be rich lead veins. It was now twelve miles to Cumberland Gap, with Powell's river, seven miles off, to be crossed. Here again, because of treacherous rocks and depths, it was deemed safest to cross by a ferryboat. Soon Cumberland Gap, three miles away, came into view. Soon this was to afford our little company one of the finest views in America. Caves and natural bridges were not to be the least of attractions. Mr. Beatty's house was our destination. He was to be our host and guide for the days of our tarrying and he did well his part.

"That old Kentucky Road, with its historic spots and personages, with its wonderful views and scenic effects, will one day come into wide notice. If I have enlightened or regaled you in any way by this account of a trip taken in the long ago, I am glad. On the other hand, I thank you for the pleasure given me in the revival, out of a full storehouse, of some pleasing reflections touching picturesque and historic East Tennessee."