

Union County

Established 1850 County Seat: Maynardville

Early History

Union County was formed from portions of Anderson, Campbell, Claiborne, Grainger and Knox counties. The legislation to establish the county was approved in 1850, but it faced a number of legal challenges. Because of these legal challenges, the county did not function independently until 1856, when court was held there for the first time. Union County's right to exist was championed by Knoxville lawyer Horace Maynard. The county seat, which was formerly named Liberty, was renamed Maynardville in his honor.

Two theories have been suggested to explain how Union County got its name. The first theory is that Union County took its name from the idea that it united territory from five surrounding counties. The second theory, put forth in 1961, is that residents of the county strongly supported the Union during the period of national debate that coincided with the debate over the county's creation. The connection between Union County and Horace Maynard, who opposed secession and continued to serve in Congress after Tennessee seceded, lends some support to this theory.

Civil War and Reconstruction

No major battles occurred in Union County during the Civil War. However, there were several skirmishes in 1863 and 1864. Most of the skirmishes occurred in connection to Confederate General Longstreet's East Tennessee campaign. Following the Civil War, the people of Union County continued to operate small scale farms. In 1871, seventeen year old Union County native Lloyd Branson received favorable notice for the paintings he exhibited at the East Tennessee Division Fair. In 1873, Branson moved to New York to study in the National Academy of Design. Branson won a first prize there in 1875, which allowed him to travel in Europe. Branson returned to Knoxville in 1877. Branson painted a number of major works related to Tennessee history. Branson's most famous historical painting is the Gathering of the Overmountain Men at Sycamore Shoals. Branson also painted portraits of a number of important Tennesseans including J.G.M. Ramsey, DeWitt Clinton Senter, Horace Maynard, and Alvin C. York.

Twentieth Century

Two New Deal programs, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) had profound effects on Union County in the 20th century. In 1933, TVA began its first major project in the Tennessee Valley: a dam across the Clinch River. The dam, called Norris in honor of Senator George Norris who had long championed improvements in the Tennessee Valley, was completed in 1936. The dam created a reservoir with 809 miles of shoreline and over 33,000 acres of water surface. Many Union county families were relocated as the rising waters of Norris Lake covered acres of prime farmland. Big Ridge State Park was created along the shores of Norris Lake as an example of public recreation development. The park was created as a partnership between TVA, the National

Park Service, and the CCC. Members of the CCC constructed many of the stone walls and buildings that remain in use today. The creation of Norris Lake and Big Ridge State Park allowed Union County to develop a local tourism industry.

County Music in Union County

Union County has produced a number of country music stars over the years, including Chet Atkins, Carl Smith, Kenny Chesney, and the “King of Country Music” Roy Acuff. Acuff was born in Maynardville in 1903. While playing baseball as a boy, Acuff suffered sunstroke. To ease his boredom during his recuperation, Acuff picked up his father’s fiddle and began to play. Within a few years, Acuff joined a traveling medicine show for Mocatán Tonic. The medicine show lured potential customers by providing entertainment along with hawking its products. In 1934, Acuff began performing on Knoxville’s WROL radio station. He later played on WNOX’s Midday Merry-Go-Round before returning to WROL. Acuff’s first hit song was “The Great Speckled Bird.” The song earned him a record deal with American Record Company, later named Columbia Records. Acuff made his first appearance on the Grand Ole Opry in 1938 and began hosting the “Prince Albert” segment sponsored by Prince Albert Tobacco in 1939. Acuff also began a successful music publishing house, Acuff-Rose Publishing, in 1942. Acuff quickly became a star and left the Opry in 1946 to tour nationally. In 1948, Acuff was the Republican candidate for governor of Tennessee, but lost to Gordon Browning. Acuff’s career waned in the 1950’s. In 1962, he became the first living artist to be inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. In his final years, Acuff lived in a house on the grounds of Opryland and performed at the Opry each weekend. Roy Acuff died on November 23, 1992. In speaking of his lifelong love of music, Acuff said, “*Many, many times back in Maynardville, when I was just a kid [Papa] would take the old fiddle out from under the bed and play it up there in the hollow... Those tones in the wee hours of the morning just before daylight, before we went out to feed...built something in me that I have never forgotten.*”

For More Information see,

***A Good Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* by Charles K. Wolfe**

***TVA and the Dispossessed: The Resettlement of the Population in the Norris Dam Area* by Michael McDonald and John Muldowny.**