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FOREST GROVE: A DISPERSED FARMING COMMUNITY IN EAST TEXAS, C 1900

by Thomas H. Guderjan

Forest Grove was a dispersed farming community just before and after the turn of this century. Located in Henderson County, Texas, about ten miles west of Athens, it was not centralized in the fashion of a town or a city. Instead, it covered a more diffuse area. The Forest Grove community was located and delineated by on-the-ground archaeological survey conducted by Southern Methodist University's Archaeology Research Program and informant interviews conducted with the assistance of Nancy Ross Mitchell. The archaeological survey located all of the standing structures remaining in the community and the locations of nearly all sites without surface indications. At many of the house sites only a few buried, broken household items such as table ceramics remain. To a large extent, the information concerning the community came from Mr. Harvey Johns of Malakoff, Texas. Mr. Johns was instrumental in identifying the nature and residents of the located sites. He also pointed out locations of several sites not found during the survey due to recent land modification. The other principal informants were Mr. D. E. Watt, Sr., and Mrs. Martha Syler, both of Athens, Texas.

Reading local histories, one is left with the impression that all previous residents were wilderness pioneers, statesmen, or merchants. This is, of course, not the case; but emphasis on highly visible persons and places of the past is real. In an anthropological approach to history understanding the entire cultural system becomes a high priority. Hence, historical archaeologists often investigate slave quarters as well as plantation homes. Similarly, this study concerns the patterns of settlement and subsistence among an entire non-urban Anglican group.

In many ways, Forest Grove was always part of the hinterlands of other more centralized communities: first Stockard (see Figure 1), then Eustace about eight miles to the northwest, and finally Athens. It was just the sort of place formal histories might miss. Yet, Forest Grove was a community in every sense. Social interaction, central places and intermarriage united the families of the area. Forest Grove in 1900 may exemplify the culture of East Texas better than, for example, the town of Athens. At the time most Henderson County residents were rural. The pattern of life at Forest Grove was a microcosm of the rural region. The population of Henderson County grew steadily to about 12,000 in 1900. By 1910, the population was about 20,000, and by 1920, it had increased to 30,000. This growth was based upon agricultural patterns like those of Forest Grove.

Forest Grove consisted of minimally 33 homes, two stores, a cemetery, and a school (Figure 1). Bounded by Caney Creek on the south, Stockard on the north, and Pickens on the east, Forest Grove was spread over six square miles. By 1910, this was a prosperous farming community intensively using some of the best farm lands in Henderson County. Virtually all of the Oak-Hickory Forest of the uplands had been cleared and cultivated.

Although 33 residences have been located, as many as ten more may exist. A few Black families lived along the north side of Caney Creek, at least one in the area encompassed by Figure 1. No remains of these residences were located and no informant was able to remember the precise locations of any such sites. Also, two or three other houses, formerly existing in the area of the Hughes and Heathington homes, were not relocated.

The focal point of the community was the school. Although no early enrollment figures are available for Forest Grove, enrollment lists for the nearby Hickory Grove school show 68 students in the school year of 1899-1900. The Forest Grove school was a one-room plank building with a shingled roof. A pot-bellied stove served as a heating source. Forty to fifty children, 6-17 years old, attended the school at any given time. In a 1812 photograph of the school, 47 students are shown. A fragment of the photograph has been lost and as many as six more students may have been there. Three trustees from the community directed operations of the school. In 1913, the Hickory Grove and Forest Grove schools consolidated and a three-room, brick structure was built just south of Stockard. In 1918-1919, enrollment records show that Stockard had 137 students and the next year, 127 students.

Although the people of Forest Grove were deeply religious, no church building existed in the community. Churches attended by the Forest Grove members were located in Stockard and Pickens (Picken Spur) community. Both Stockard and Pickens had Methodist churches and Stockard also had a Baptist church. Both churches in Stockard are gone, but the Pickens Methodist church is still used.

Payne Cemetery, now maintained by a bank in Eustace, was never affiliated with a church. Instead, it began as the burial plot of the Payne family in the 1840s and 1850s. Following the pattern of many rural cemeteries, it was enlarged to be used by the people of the area. It became a central burial place. Interred in Payne Cemetery are persons from the Forest Grove area and also from the town of Payne Springs, located several miles west. Historical ties between Payne Springs and the Forest Grove area seem to be quite strong. For example, the original Payne family is interred at Payne Cemetery at Forest Grove, and the town of Payne Springs was named for them. At both the Payne and

the Payne Springs cemeteries, residence crossovers are evident. Payne Cemetery has now expanded to several hundred burials, although only one family presently lives in the Forest Grove area. Further, this is a family of quite recent residents. During the past twenty years, the cemetery has been used principally by people who grew up in the community and have since relocated. Other recent interments have been new residents of Henderson County, attracted by Cedar Creek Reservoir.

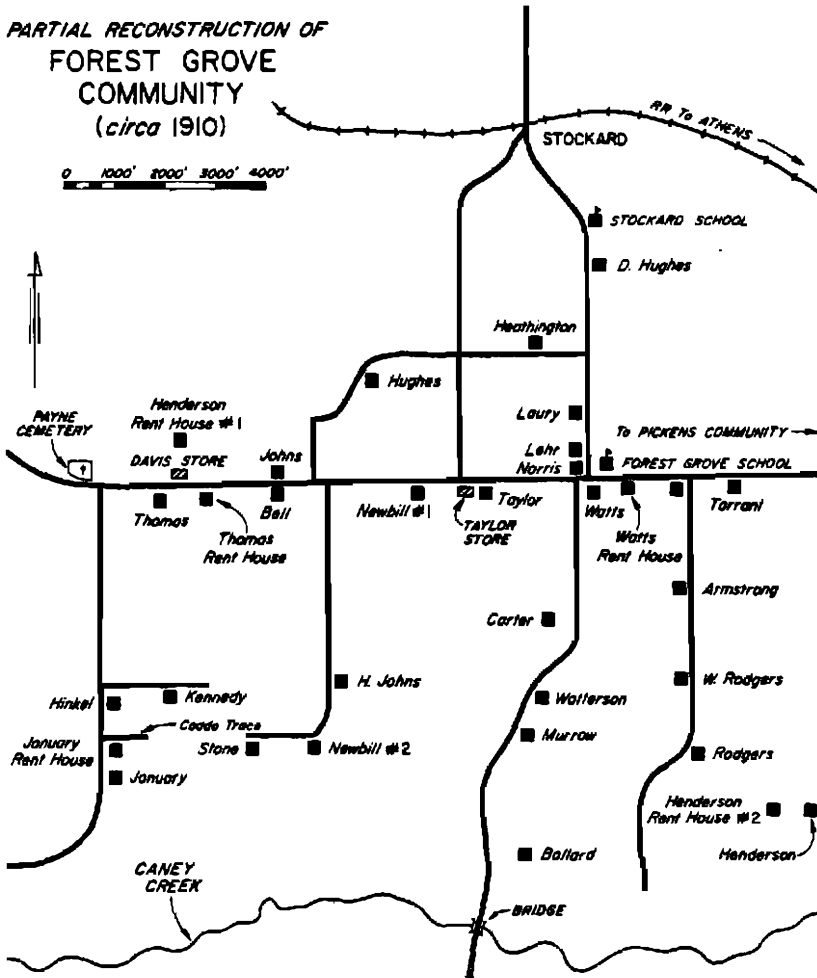


FIGURE 1.

Two stores, the Davis and Taylor stores, were located in the community. Neither was apparently very permanent, both being results of opportunistic entrepreneurship. A post office, casually arranged rather than official, was established in the home of Harvey Johns' father (Johns House).

Trade, however, was principally conducted elsewhere. In Stockard, a rather substantial town which also no longer exists, there was a grocery store, at least one saloon, a cotton gin, an official Post Office, a cannery, a train depot, and a school. For commercial opportunities beyond that offered at Stockard, a Forest Grove resident would travel by train to Athens, the county seat. Casual trade could also be conducted at Pickens where another store existed.

The economy of Forest Grove was one of diversified agriculture. Cotton was perhaps the most important crop. Secondary food crops were corn, peas, melons, and potatoes. In the lowlands of Clear Creek, immediately northwest of the community, "ribbon" cane was grown. Peaches also were quite important and remnant orchards may still be seen today in the vicinity of the community. Pigs and honey bees also were kept. The Forest Grove farmer, then, largely grew what was consumed locally. Cotton and peaches were cash crops, sold at Stockard and shipped by rail. Some local processing was done. For example, just north of Payne Cemetery, the Hughes family established a small ribbon cane refinery. This agricultural diversification was the principal reason for the survival of the community through the depression of the 1930s. Peaches remained important as a cash crop. The other agricultural products provided for most of the day to day needs while peach sales provided cash flow. Thus, communities such as Forest Grove were quite insulated from the economics the 1930s brought the rest of the country.

The residences of the community may be divided into three categories: family homes, satellite homes, and rent houses. Twenty-one family homes are known. These are the principal residence or parental homes. In Figure 1, these are denoted simply by last name of the family. Three satellite residences are known, marked by the family name preceded by an initial (H. Johns, D. Hughes, and W. Rodgers). These follow a generalized upland south pattern of patrilocal residence. A house is often constructed, as close as possible to the familial home, for a newly married son. The son is also provided enough farm land to establish economic independence. In one case, Newbill #1 and Newbill #2, it is not certain which is the family home and which is the satellite, or if such a relationship even existed. Newbill #1, however, is believed to be the family house. The final category, "rent" houses, are probably under-represented. The unlocated homes discussed pre-

viously were probably rent houses. The occupants of rent houses were tenant farmers or laborers employed on farms.

A high degree of kin relationship existed in Forest Grove, as in most upland south communities even today. This has not been fully investigated, but several examples are known. The Armstrongs and Tarrants are related, as Willie Tarrant married an Armstrong. Willie's sister married a January. The Carters and the Hughes were related by Tom Carter's marriage to a Hughes. Harvey Johns married Beatrice Watterson, uniting those two families.

The occupational multiplicity and diversified farming of Forest Grove made it a prosperous place. In 1911, land sold for as much as sixty dollars per acre. During the late 1910's many of the old homes were torn down and replaced by more substantial structures. Harvey Johns built his home (H. Johns in Figure 1) in 1912. The same year, Jesse Bell built a new home. Two years later, Robert January also built a new home. Common festivities included dances often held at the home of David Hughes (D. Hughes in Figure 1).

The occupational multiplicity which created the prosperous community also enabled it to survive the depression of the 1930's. Peaches were still viable as a cash crop and production of a variety of crops made the individuals self-sufficient. However, the land-use practices doomed the community. Ranching began in the 1930's, showing greater profits than farming. The intensive, non-conservation approach to farming also became destructive to the land. One informant in a nearby area recalls his father plowing a hill until all topsoil was gone. Today, massive sheet wash erosion has degraded most of the Forest Grove area, virtually destroying its agricultural potential and destroying prehistoric archaeological deposits. By the 1940's, only about ten standing structures were present in the Forest Grove area (U.S.G.S. 15' topographic map, 1948); it is not known how many were actually in use at that time.