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Kenneth Morgan

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## KIRBYVILLE, A 100-YEAR CELEBRATION

*by Kenneth Morgan*

Before railroads came to the piney woods of East Texas, lumber companies found it easier to set up sawmills where the timber was located rather than transport heavy logs over long distances. In some cases, it was convenient to cut logs near a river and float them to their final destination. This worked well for awhile, but in a matter of a few years, the supply was depleted.

In 1876, Texas Tram and Lumber Company of Beaumont established a logging camp at Cairo (near Buna) where they operated until 1882. The company moved operations to Magnolia Springs where it seemed there was an endless supply of timber. After twelve years of continuous cutting, the company found it necessary to set up logging camps farther from the Neches River to supply its mills in Beaumont.

One such camp was called Tram Town, located about twelve miles southeast of Magnolia Springs. Several things made the area attractive to officials of Texas Tram and Lumber Company. As far as the eye could see were stands of large long leaf pines with little brush or undergrowth to make their harvesting difficult. For the most part, the land was flat with few hills and steep inclines to hinder logging operations. A major factor causing the company to choose the site was that John Henry Kirby's new railroad was coming directly through the area. Since mud is always a factor in logging camps, the selected site was well-drained with a watershed to the north, east, and south. A main east-west thoroughfare was established through the camp with mule lots and harness sheds lying mostly on the south side. There were enclosures for oxen and sheds for tools, yokes, and log carts.

Until the arrival of the first railroad, logs were transported by tram line, log wagon, or cart, and put in the Neches River at various locations, including Wright's landing, located a few miles southwest of Magnolia Springs, from whence they were floated downstream to Beaumont.

Late in 1894, John Henry Kirby bought 276 acres from Texas Tram and Lumber Company to lay out a townsite, and hired Captain E.T. Kellie of Jasper to survey and plot the town which was named for Mr. Kirby. Within a matter of months, the task had been accomplished and newspaper ads appeared in most Southeast Texas cities advertising lots and inviting people to attend an auction on May 1, 1895.

On that date, approximately 1000 people gathered near the newly-built Gulf, Beaumont and Kansas City Railroad tracks that extended just past Main Street, waiting for the sound of a train whistle. A hush fell over the crowd as a series of blasts were heard, followed by the chugging of the locomotive itself. As the engine and seven coaches came to a noisy stop near the end of the tracks, an eleven-piece band from Beaumont disembarked, followed by many excited passengers.

In a large tent an auctioneer from Houston started selling lots in the new town. An historical marker has been erected on the site where lots were sold

on that first day to buyers from nearby areas as well as Beaumont, Houston, Galveston, and Louisiana.

Many of the streets of Kirbyville were named for relatives and friends of Kirby and his business associates. Lelia Street was named for Lelia Stewart Kirby, wife of John Henry Kirby. Harris Street was named for A.L. Harris, a business associate. Kellie Street was named for Jasper's Confederate war veteran, Captain E.I. Kellie. Vallie Street was named for Miss Vallie Fletcher of Beaumont. Lavielle Street was named for Lavielle Weathersby, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Lee Weathersby. Mrs. Weathersby was Kirby's sister.

The Roberts Addition of Kirbyville was developed by Carl Roberts, who married Juanita Stringer. The longest street in the addition was named Stringer, after the E.E. Stringer family. The last street to the north, running parallel to Stringer but still unopened to traffic, was named Conn for the Conn families. The street running in front of Trout Creek Lumber Company was named Herndon, since J.A. Herndon was the principal owner and manager.

Streets named for servicemen who gave their lives in World War II are: Shaw Guy, Doel Bean, Lester Hawthorne, Max Lee, Ray Fussel, J.C. Clax, Henry Robinson, Odis Cooper, Jr., Julian Morgan, Gus Griffiths, Tuck Beard, Harold McMahan, and J.P. Traylor. In 1988, portions of several streets were renamed to become one long street, Martin Luther King, Jr. There is also a (J.B.) Sanders Street.

At the time Captain E.I. Kellie surveyed the new townsite, many farm families already were established in the area. Among those whose descendants still live in Kirbyville were two Civil War veterans, John Benjamin Hale and James Joshua Gunter. A few years after the Civil War, John moved to Conroe and married Harriet Louisa, the fourth child of Benjamin W. and Pharbra Martin, on December 23, 1875. After living in San Saba County for awhile, they migrated to the East Texas area early in the 1890s.

After his first wife died in pregnancy, J.J. Gunter chose a new mate from the Horn family who lived near Zion Hill. He married olive-skinned, brown-eyed George Ann in the mid-1870s.

Kirbyville's first sawmill was built in 1896 by S.B. Conn and R.C. Withers and was located at the "Y" of the railroad near the present Community House. This mill was bought by Kirby Lumber Company, and it was there that the foundation timbers were milled for Kirby's big mill located on the west side of town in 1899, and called "Mill T." This facility had a capacity of 75,000 board feet daily, and its tall stacks blew smoke through "Smoky Row," the company houses where many of the workers lived. J.A. Herndon became manager of the mill in 1904, and it operated at full capacity until June 24, 1917, when it was destroyed by fire.

In 1925, Ross Cahal, P.V. Worthington, and J.T. Martin built a planer mill, kiln, and dry shed on a railroad switch in the city limits of Kirbyville. In 1927, J.A. Herndon, O.C. Herndon, and R.E. Campbell purchased this business.

The large sawmill built by George Adams and Denny Call in 1895, and located four miles southeast of Kirbyville, had a great impact on the area. The town that sprang up around this mill became Call. The mill was bought in 1901 by Kirby Lumber Company and continued operations through April 30, 1953.

The founders of Kirbyville knew there would be a definite need for a school if the community was to prosper; so, in the plat, a square block on Main Street was dedicated for this purpose. A wooden school building built about 1904 to replace the original, small one constructed in 1896, burned in April 1917, and a three-story red brick building replaced it and remained in use until 1967, when it was demolished. In 1937, Martin Jr. High and a gym were built on the property immediately behind the red brick school, facing W. Lavielle Street. The present high school was built in 1956, junior high in 1979, and elementary in 1967.

W.B. Thomas, Jackson Wright, and J.B. Gandy were appointed in February 1897 by the Jasper County Commissioner's Court to serve as school trustees of the Kirbyville School District No. 11. Then, in 1899, an election was called to elect trustees, with Dave Lee as presiding judge and the school district assigned No. 14. The first elected trustees were R.C. Lanier, J.C. Watson, and Jack Woods. R.Y. Haynes served as the first school master, and received \$70 a month. Miss Bertha Wright was the only other teacher, with a salary of \$35 a month.

B.W. Martin became superintendent of the Kirbyville School in 1911 and served for thirty-four years. He was born in Tyler County, near Colmesneil, and married the former Miss Clara Mayo. The couple reared a family of four boys, all of whom became teachers.

The first church built in Kirbyville was placed on lots 11 and 12, block 28, which is on the west side of North Margaret Street, and was deeded by Kirby to the Baptist Church in February 1898. The building was used on alternate Sundays by Baptists and Methodists, with a union Sunday School organized in 1899 by Methodist Frank W. Wimberly. The Methodists built their own building in 1905 on the corner of West Lavielle and South Lelia – a part of their present site. The Baptists built a new frame building in 1916 on West Main, which is part of the present location of the First Baptist Church. The Church of Christ was organized in 1905, and their first building was located near the end of West Main Street.

The Kirbyville Post Office was established on June 10, 1895, and Robert L. Frazer was named the first postmaster. Early postmasters who succeeded Frazer included Fannie J. Kennedy, William H. Kennedy, Moses J. Lee, Jasper C. Williamson, C.K. Bradbury, Charles A. Ehret, Evye Kennedy, Rufus H. Windham, W.P. Dowling, R.E. Stewart, G.T. Shurbutt, Nell Gee Pryor, and A.D. Stout.

The city of Kirbyville incorporated in 1919, and Amos Conn was elected mayor. When his term expired, no one ran for the office, so the city de-incorporated, then re-incorporated for a second time in November 1926. The first city council included S.B. Conn, mayor, and aldermen T.J. Martin, J.R. Willis, J.H. Winton, Max Mixon, and Dr. U.B. Ogden. Among the first things on the council's agenda was to vote for a public water system and institute an ordinance banning livestock from the city's streets.

Officials of the city included Thomas A. Wilson, tax assessor and collector; A.G. Maxwell, city marshal; and T.G. Fortenberry, city secretary. In June 1927, R.J. Cooper, J.A. Conn, and T.G. Hicks were appointed to an equalization board.

Kirbyville mayors have included S.B. Conn, A.L. Watson, J.A. Herndon, Ferris D. Bean, Alton Cain, E.E. Stringer, W.E. Beathard, O.J. Bean, G.T. Sharbutt, J.A. Martindale, G.N. Couch, Bruce Reed, Victor Hamilton, Ed Bradley, and Jerry Nobles.

Jerry, son of J.W. Nobles, was reared in Kirbyville with siblings Della, Kathleen, Mamie, Acie, Dalton, Curtis, and Willis. He was graduated from The University of Texas and owned Jerry's Family Pharmacy.

Marion Bass, Wesley Young, and Bevis Skinner served as Kirbyville's constables. Those serving as justice of the peace have included Dan Howell, Tom Wilson, Darby McMahon, Floyd Morris, Leon Causey, Della Nobles Stewart, Faye Elverston, G.W. Gaskin, J.B. "Kuhn" Sanders, Carlton Daughterty, and Evelyn Weaver.

A prominent and colorful person who lived in Kirbyville was Thomas Asbury Wilson, more commonly called "Uncle Tom." Wilson was born in Newton County, the son of Asbury and Elizabeth Stewart Wilson, and the grandson of Francis Wilson, Methodist circuit rider from Virginia. Wilson married Miss Mary Elizabeth Wingate of Belgrade on July 12, 1898, and became the father of seven children. The sons were Carl Bassett, Earl Manning, Buster Bryan, and David Earl. The daughters were Thelma "Bitsy" Wilson Hawkins, Mary Wilson Daniels, and Elizabeth Wilson Downs.

Wilson attended Blum Male and Female College in Burkeville. With skills acquired there, he worked as assistant bookkeeper and commissary clerk for the Texas Tram and Lumber Company at its logging camp on the Neches River, and later at Magnolia Springs and Kirbyville. In 1902, Kirby Lumber Company took over the facilities of the Texas Tram, and Wilson remained until the sawmill burned fifteen years later. He entered the hardware and furniture business until the Great Depression forced him to close the store. Afterwards, he served as justice of the peace and tax assessor-collector for both the City of Kirbyville and the school district until his death.

"Uncle Tom" was a devoted Southerner and an ardent historian. Late in the 1920s he published a series of articles in the Kirbyville Banner on the history of the area and prominent East Texas families. This information has been compiled and put into a volume entitled *Some Early Southeast Texas Families* (1965), edited by Madeleine Martin. A companion volume, *More Early Southeast Texas Families* (1978), also by Martin, followed a few years later. Both volumes can be purchased at the Kirbyville Public Library and have been acclaimed by East Texas genealogists.

Thomas Wilson never forgot his East Texas heritage or the people he grew up with and served. He died at age seventy-seven on February 15, 1944, and his wife at the age of ninety-six on June 21, 1969. They are buried in the Kirbyville Cemetery.

Kirbyville was home to "Ivory" Joe Hunter, the son of Dave Hunter, a guitarist and preacher, and his wife Anna Smith Hunter, a gospel singer, who passed on their talents to their children. After the death of his parents, Joe and his six siblings were cared for by his uncle, J.F. Evans, and his wife, Georgia.

After moving to the West Coast in the 1940s, "Ivory" Joe Hunter became

famous as a piano player, country-blues singer, band leader, and composer. After years of playing in night clubs, he and others formed Pacific Records and produced several successful records before contracting with King Records. A most popular hit was his million-dollar seller, "Since I Met You, Baby" (1956). Hunter died in Memphis, Tennessee, on November 8, 1974, following a two-year bout with cancer. He is buried in Magnolia Springs Cemetery. Some of his siblings included Angus, Ramsey, Big Baby, George, Dooks, and Georgia.

Mixson Bros. Store is linked with Kirbyville's past and present in many ways. J.M. Mixson came to Kirbyville in 1895 and worked for his uncle, James Lee, of Jas. Lee & Co., who bought the present location of Mixson Bros. at the auction of town lots in 1895. In 1900, T.S. Wright became connected with the company, and the name changed to Mixson and Wright, until Wright sold his interest to L. Condor Stewart.

In 1907, the store assumed the name of Mixson Bros. When J.M. Mixson, C.A. Mixson, and J.I. Mixson purchased all the holdings. Later, J.I. Mixson moved to Buna and opened a store there. Mixson Bros. was a general mercantile store, including a dry goods side, until a fire in 1925 destroyed the store. When the store was rebuilt, H.C. Hopkins took over the dry goods side, with Mixson Bros. retaining a half interest. Hopkins later sold his interest to B.F. Gainer.

The Mixsons also operated a fertilizer plant and a cotton gin, and later moved their hardware to a separate building across Kellie Street from the main store.

J.M. Mixson was born in Coffee County, Alabama, came to Magnolia Springs in 1886, and married Florrie McKinnon on December 17, 1890. He was employed as a clerk in Jas. Lee & Co. store in Magnolia Springs, then moved to Kirbyville. Mixson was active in the Methodist Church where he served as steward and secretary-treasurer of the Sunday School from its organization until his final illness. At the time of his death he was president of Peoples State Bank. He died on June 19, 1932.

Jack Woods and his brother, B.A., purchased Newton's Drug Store in 1905, moved it across the street, and renamed it Woods Drug Store. R.J. Cooper had a cafe in the early days that was later run by his nephew, Roy Lea. The Lee brothers, Sam, Cleve and Dewitt, had a tailor shop where a beauty shop now stands. Ernest Jordan, now a Jasper resident, worked in the tailor shop in the 1920s and later at the Kirbyville State Bank for Silas B. Conn. Jordan was also one of Kirbyville's first tax collectors. J.W. Beeler was employed as cashier in the bank and organized the Beeler Bible Class at the United Methodist Church.

Other early Kirbyville businesses included A.L. Watson Jewelry; Frank Meyers, General Hardware; and a People's State Bank, owned by the Mixsons and run by Mamie Winton. Others were Kimborough's Candy Store, R.C. Conn and Company, established 1904, Markley's Ford Place, Abe Hardy's 5&10¢, F.L. Henry's Bottling Works, Harry Duther's Blind Tiger, and Hick's Mule Lot. R.J. Cooper provided entertainment first through his Opera House and by 1925 at the Palace Theatre.

Kirbyville has had many fine doctors in its 100-year history. Some of these were Dr. Tom Falvey, Dr. D.M. Childers, Dr. L.L. Winton, Dr. J.D. Yates, Dr. Dru McMickin, Dr. G.H. Spurlock, Dr. B.F. Bean, Dr. Frank Blow, Dr. J.B. Ogden, Dr. W.F. McCright, and Dr. John Thomas Moore. Dentists included

Dr. Joe Simmons, Dr. J.C. Hawthorne, Dr. C.B. Lazenby, Dr. Lester Willis, Jr., Dr. Thurman Smith, and Dr. C.B. Caston.

Dr. B.F. Bean was a well-loved and generous individual. In 1925, when the Houston Oil Company deeded seven acres for a city cemetery, a Cemetery Association was formed, and they set a price of \$3.50 for each grave. Dr. Bean bought and deeded five acres across the road for the use of anyone to be buried free. He was an avid bird hunter, and it was a common sight to see him ride out of town on a fine horse with shotgun cradled under his arm with his faithful bird dog "Frank" trotting alongside. Dr. Bean's "black bag" and medical instruments have been acquired by Dr. Wade Parker and donated to the Calaboose Museum.

Dr. W.F. McCreight, who began practicing medicine in Kirbyville on August 15, 1912, was another of the area's most-loved physicians. Originally coming to Kirbyville as a doctor for Kirby Lumber Company, he started the practice of medicine with little equipment, relying mainly on a thermometer, stethoscope, and a few minor instruments. On September 13, 1912, he married Miss Inez Scarborough, daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Davis C. Scarborough, of Alba, Texas. He made his calls astride a big bay horse until he saved enough money to buy a "one-seat" buggy. In 1916, he was affluent enough to make a down payment on a Model-T Ford, which much improved his mobility when the roads were passable. When the flu epidemic of 1918 struck the area, Dr. McCreight lost only one patient.

On July 1, 1950, a young man who had just completed his medical training became associated with Dr. McCreight. Dr. Thomas Moore served the residents of the area with distinction for many years and became as respected as his mentor. Moore built the first clinic in Kirbyville on a property donated by Max Mixon. The facility was later enlarged and served many area residents. The clinic changed hands several times after Dr. Moore's death in 1981.

The East Texas Banner, formerly The Kirbyville Banner, was started by Roland Simmons in a small building on Main Street. By 1902, J.M. Scott owned the paper and later sold it to Jasper Williamson. It was later acquired by Mose Lee. Mrs. Rosa Long and Stanly Windham set type and Mildred Beavers of Call served as editor. At another time the Banner was owned by J.A. Herndon and Will Sharp. The next owners were two young Louisianians, Allen and Johnny Collett. Later, Denny O. Ingram bought the paper and moved all the equipment to a building adjacent to his home on east Lanier. Denny sold to Hunley and Robinson of Jasper, with Robert Sanders as editor and Dan Morrison, publisher.

Louise and Buck Herndon bought out the Jasper group, and the East Texas Banner is now located at the site of the old Opera House, later Cooper's Hotel, where the infamous outlaws Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow spent one night shortly before their deaths.

Rural electrification came to Kirbyville in the form of Jasper-Newton Electric Co-Op in 1943, with offices in a small building on Main Street. W.C. Cooper was manager, and Arbell Richardson and Delilah Tipton were two of the early workers. After Cooper left, Jack West was temporary manager for six months. Then, Troy Mitchell of San Augustine was employed there until Carl

Morgan, assistant manager, succeeded him. Morgan served with distinction until his retirement. His wife Bobbie worked in many local, state, and national leadership positions in various civic organizations.

Despite such setbacks as mill burnings and closings in the past 100 years, Kirbyville has evolved from a primitive logging camp with oxen and mule teams pulling heavy loads through muddy streets into a small town that has modernized without losing the flavor and atmosphere of its past. It is a living tribute to the people who worked together to prevent it from become just another East Texas "ghost town."