

# Catoosa County History

An interesting rock called coral is sometimes found on the tops of our mountains. Coral is composed of the shells of small animals that live in shallow tropical seas. Several million years ago the American landmass was located about 30 degrees south of the equator. Catoosa County was on the coast. Collisions with other landmasses caused Catoosa to be submerged, with huge mountains rising on each side. Erosion from the mountains mixed with the sand of the shallow sea and created layers of sandstone almost two miles thick. Once the mountains eroded down, Catoosa found itself again in a shallow sea with primitive saltwater animals growing, such as crinoids, trilobites, scallops, blastoids and coral.

Bumps with other landmasses caused the land surface to wrinkle, like pushing on opposite sides of a tablecloth. This created our parallel mountains and valleys. When the land surface wrinkles, the convex side of the wrinkle has to travel further than the concave side and this causes cracks in the convex surface. Water seeped into the cracks and caused erosion. When the mountains eroded down to the level of the valleys, their exposed rock formations were softer than the limestone of the valleys and they continued to erode. Consequently, today's mountains were once our valleys. This is why fossils of early sea life are found on the sides and tops of our mountains.

The first settlers to America may have followed the coast from Siberia to our West Coast and from Europe to Iceland and down our East Coast. The ocean is higher than during the Ice Age and their early settlements are now 300 feet underwater. But most of the early settlers came on the land bridge from Siberia to Alaska and on south about 12,000 years ago. They followed the animal herds that were their food supply and had no idea where they were going. We have no evidence of Ice Age animals in Catoosa County because the land they walked over has been eroded away. But in the open pit mines of Cartersville the remains of several Ice Age animals have been found.

As the climate became warmer, the vegetation changed and the Ice Age animals disappeared. Local Indians also had to change to the new environment. They developed the bow and arrow, domesticated the dog, and learned to fish and hunt smaller animals such as deer, bears and turkeys. For this they needed the smaller arrowhead that can still be found along our creek bottoms.

The best evidence we have of these early settlers was discovered in Ringgold Gap in 1959. Excavations for I-75 uncovered an Indian village at the south end of Anderson Cemetery dating back to 1000 BC. Artifacts were gathered and taken to the state Archeologists Laboratory in Carrollton, but have recently been returned to the museum at Stone Church.

The height of local Indian culture came when the art of growing corn, beans and squash made its way up the Tennessee Valley from Mexico. This enabled them to grow food crops that could be dried, stored and used in winter. For the first and only time, our local Indian civilization produced more food than they needed to survive. This enabled people to specialize in crafts of clay, stone, wood and shells. It also enabled the expansion of feasts, celebrations and trade. These were the Mound Builders and several of their mounds are still visible in Catoosa County.

## *Coosa, Creek and Cherokee*

Our local Indians belonged to the Coosa tribe, with its headquarters at the foot of Carter's Dam. They controlled all the settlements from the Cohutta Mountains to the Cumberland Mountains, north to Knoxville. This was the civilization that DeSoto found in 1540.

Measles, mumps, whooping cough and smallpox brought by the Europeans caused the downfall of Indian civilization in America. Epidemics over the next 250 years not only reduced Indian numbers but also reduced their quality of leadership and their ability to feed themselves.

The Creek Indians are believed to be the remnant of the Mound Builders. The Cherokees were a part of the Iroquois Confederation in the region of the Great Lakes. In the early 1600s they moved south and fought the Creeks at Suches and again in Cherokee County. The Creeks were pushed back into Alabama and south of the Chattahoochee River.

Early pioneers were constantly pressuring the Cherokees for more land. It should not be surprising that the Cherokees were not fond of their English neighbors. By this time the Indians were using rifles rather than bows and arrows. In fact, the Cherokees had better guns than the English, provided to them by the Spanish. Pack trains of over a hundred animals brought rifled guns and powder from Pensacola to the Chickamauga Cherokees for use against the English. By the late 1700s, the Cherokees were as dependent on corncribs and villages as the whites. When the frontiersmen under Sevier burned their villages and food storage bins, they had little choice but to surrender. The wars between Dragging Canoe and the frontiersmen of Tennessee are an interesting part of our heritage.

In 1805 the Federal Government cut a road through the Cherokee Nation. It went from Athens to Gainesville, Dawsonville, Tate, Jasper and Ramhurst, just below Chatsworth. There it split with one leg north to Knoxville and the other to Varnell, Ringgold, Ross's Landing and on to Nashville. Remnants of this "first road north of Atlanta" can still be seen in several places in our county. A number of local Indians maintained the road and were allowed to collect tolls for its use. They grew corn to feed the herds of livestock traveling down the road, put up taverns to entertain the drovers and grew rich.

Chief Richard Taylor was Chief of the Chickamauga District of the Nation. He lived at the corner of The Old Federal Road (LaFayette St.) and the Alabama Highway (Hwy. 151 South). Chief Taylor made several trips to Washington on behalf of his people and led one of the twelve contingents of Cherokees west during the removal of 1838. Even in Oklahoma he continued to be a leader within the Nation.

Mission schools were established at Spring Place (between Dalton and Chatsworth) and later in Brainerd. They not only educated the Indian children but also kept logs of their day-to-day experiences. These diaries bring us much of what we know about early life among the Cherokees. The cemetery of the Brainerd Mission can still be found behind the East Gate Shopping Center. The discovery of gold in Dahlonega brought a quick end to the Cherokee Nation in Georgia. Their land was surveyed and divided among the whites by lottery. Many of the winners sold their land having never seen it.

### *Early Settlers and Entrepreneurs*

The first settlers of Catoosa worked their way up from Dalton and Tunnel Hill and eventually north to the Tennessee line. Many of the original names are still around. The first settlers were Presbyterian but were quickly followed by Baptist and Methodist. Most of the local Baptist churches were founded around 1847 with the help of Baptist preachers Robert Ware, Zachariah Gordon or Humphrey Posey.

Catoosa filled with entrepreneurs. John Gray built the Western and Atlantic Railroad from Dalton, through his land at Graysville and on to Chattanooga. He had built railroads throughout the Southeast. He started a second railroad through the county from Harrison, TN, through Graysville to LaFayette. The war ended this project but one can still see the cuts, fills and find an occasional cross tie along the Peavine Valley route. There were plans to build a flume line through Ringgold Gap and run it around White Oak Mountain. It would have provided waterpower to a large number of mills. The Depot seems too large for the size of the town, but for years Ringgold was the northern terminus of the railroad. Wagons backed up for a mile loaded with wheat to be shipped to the East Coast. The mill at Trion brought its cloth to the depot and took back bales of cotton. Wagons pulled by eight to ten mules could make one leg of the trip each day. Ringgold filled with stores, mills and saloons.

### *Catoosa County in the Civil War*

Secession had mixed reviews in Catoosa County. Two delegates were sent to the secession convention in Milledgeville. Joseph T. McConnell voted to secede and Presley Yates seems to have seen how things were going and refused to vote. But once secession was decided, the county supported the Confederacy with six companies of Infantry and one of Cavalry.

The first taste of the war was the capture of the Andrews Raiders just north of Ringgold in 1862. A little later Ringgold was turned into a Confederate hospital town. Hospitals were set up in the Courthouse, Inman House, Baptist Church, Catoosa Springs and Cherokee Springs, totaling about 2,000 hospital beds. Patients were brought down by rail from the battlefields in Kentucky and Tennessee. Many of the adjacent buildings and homes were taken over for the housing of hospital personnel. Kate Cummings and Fannie Biers left diaries of their experiences in the Catoosa hospitals during the War.

As the Union Army moved south from Chattanooga, searching for the Confederates, Col. Wilder entered and burned part of the town. Gen. Longstreet arrived with part of the Army of Northern Virginia to help stop the Union at Chickamauga. He unloaded at Catoosa Platform because the Confederates had burned the bridges in Ringgold Gap to stop Wilder. Chickamauga was a victory for the Confederates but it took four days to gather their wounded from the field of battle. Most were evacuated to Ringgold by wagon and on to hospitals further south.

After the "Battle of Missionary Ridge," the entire Confederate Army retreated through Ringgold Gap. Gen. Patrick Cleburne and 4,000 men were given the job of trying to keep the Union at bay until the Confederates could regroup at Tunnel Hill and Dalton. For his gallant defense of the gap, he earned the appreciation of the Confederate Congress.

From November 1863 until May 1864, the fighting stopped while both sides built up their supplies and rested. Many Union soldiers camped at Catoosa Springs, Cherokee Springs and Ringgold. They must have dropped most of what they had because much of it is still here. Catoosa is a haven for those addicted to metal detectors. Minnie balls, buttons, cannon shells, and railroad ties are found almost weekly.

Catoosa saw the last of the Chattanooga Campaign and the first of the Atlanta Campaign. At one time there were 120,000 Union soldiers in Catoosa complete with their wagons, cannon and mules. When the Indians left in 1838, Catoosa was virgin forest. When Sherman left 26 years later, it was a burned out wasteland. "Nuten to eat, nuten to eat it outa" and nothing to eat it with. Most of the population packed up and moved to Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas. At one time a single family and a lady made up the total population of the town. The war threw Catoosa into a depression in 1864 that only ended with the construction of I-75 in 1960. We have very little history from 1865 until 1898. People were too busy trying to grub out a living to worry about recording history.

Some of the treasures of the county are our pre-civil war buildings. Generals Grant, Sherman and Thomas gathered around a barrel on the depot porch to discuss their war plans. Grant and company spent the night of November 27, 1863 in the Whitman house. Stone Church is the county's oldest church. The first three buildings in the downtown block of Ringgold were built before the war. The middle one has a hole in the second floor for a hand-turned elevator for the storage of grain. In Graysville, the Ward house and Graysville Mining and Manufacturing building are pre-war. The Jones home and Evans home in Ringgold, the Yates home in Woodstation, the Napier home in Chambers, the Magill cabin on Bandy Road and the Parks cabin at the end of Will Pots Road are all pre-war.

### *Post-War Catoosa and the Military*

In 1898, the Cubans rebelled against Spain. Spain put the Cubans into concentration camps and they died by the score. When the battleship Maine blew up in Havana harbor, Congress authorized the President to use whatever force necessary to bring the conflict in Cuba to an end. It also authorized the call up of 200,000 volunteers. One of the major staging areas for the Army was Camp George H. Thomas in Chickamauga Park. Acreage was purchased in Keith for a target range and a road constructed between

the range and Chickamauga Park (Boynton Drive). Crowded and unsanitary conditions and a lack of experienced officers led to an outbreak of typhoid fever that devastated the camp. Few of the troops trained in Chickamauga ever went overseas to the war.

Construction on Fort Oglethorpe was started in 1902. During WW I it served as the home of the U.S. Army Medical Department. The flu epidemic of 1918 caused the death of many of the troops. German civilians were interned here during WW I just as the Japanese were interned in Oregon during WW II. Their area was where K-Mart is now located and was called the Millionaires Club because many were quite wealthy.

During WW II, Fort Oglethorpe served as the home of the 6th Cavalry as well as the home of the Women's Army Corps (WACs). The post was decommissioned in 1946 and sold to the civilian sector. Many of the military buildings still stand and the polo field is still identifiable within Barnhart Circle.

### *Interstate 75*

The last important chapter in our history was the construction of I-75. No one had any idea how it would change the economic picture of the county. Catoosa County has four exits in about 3 miles of interstate and each is a center of economic activity. I-75 also puts us into close contact with Atlanta, Chattanooga, Nashville, Knoxville and Birmingham. Traffic from Alabama and West Georgia from Highway 27 usually enters I-75 at Ringgold by way of Highway 151.

We hope that the future of Catoosa is more peaceful than its past. There are a number of books on Catoosa County History available from the County Historical Society located at Stone Church. These include "Official History of Catoosa County" by McDaniel; "History In Catoosa County" by Clark and "Catoosa County Heritage" by the Historical Society.

*~Compiled by William H.H. (Bill) Clark*