AURORA, ARKANSAS

By: Joy Russell

It's hard to look at the present little community of Aurora,

Arkansas, and picture that it could have been a large, bustling town

at one time. I have always lived at Witter, which is about four

miles south of Aurora, and for years I had heard bits and pieces about

the old town of Aurora. Several years ago, I began to talk with older

people and to research what the town of Aurora had been like. In

the Winter 1993 issue of "The Madison County Musings", the complete

article was published which contained all of the information that I

was able to discover. Presented here will be excerpts from the

original story that was published in the Musings.

Madison County, as we know it today, was a part of a Spanish Land

Grant that was given to a comandante of the Post of Arkansas named Don

Joseph Valliere by the Spanish government on 22 day of December 1793.

Evidently this land grant to Joseph Valliere was quite large since the

deeds that are recorded in the Madison County Courthouse merely

describe the land as "lands being situate, lying and being upon the

waters of what is now called White River and its tributaries and now

being in the State of Arkansas and the State of Missouri and the State

of Louisiana". Madison County later became a part of the

Louisiana Purchase in 1803,and remained a part of it until 1812 when

it was declared to be a part of the Missouri Territory. Then in 1819

Congress created the Arkansas Territory and in 1817 established a fort

at Fort Smith to try to contain the discord among the Indians of the

area. In 1828 a treaty was signed with the Indians moving them out

of this area, and white settlers were free to claim the fertile lands

of Madison County.

As these first settlers made their way into the wilderness, I

believe they had no idea as to the impact that they would have on this

area, and of the legacy they would leave behind them. Today it is

easy to find landmarks that still bear the names of the early

pioneers: Jackson Creek, Bowen Township, Ferrels Creek, Whorton

Creek, Seals Creek, McConnell Chapel, Henderson Creek, and Bowen

Cemetery which is now called Aurora Cemetery. It was amazing to me

as I studied the early land patents, to see how many people presently

living at Aurora, still live on part of the old homesteads of their

ancestors. I am convinced that these pioneers were upstanding

people with the highest of characters and morals. They were brave

souls to leave their established homes and enter into the wilderness

to carve out a place for themselves and to establish themselves a name

in history. As they entered into this area, there were no

established roads and no settlements.

I have not been able to find out where the name "Aurora"

originally came from. The World Book Encyclopedia defines it as:

"Aurora, the goddess of dawn in Roman mythology. She opened the

gates of heaven for the sun god every morning. She is said to be the

mother of the winds. The word 'Aurora' refers to the first light of

dawn". This is the only definition of Aurora that I could find.

When you examine the origin of most of the names of towns in Madison

County, you will find that most of them were named after a person,

either living in the area or a famous person. Often the town was

given the name of the person on whose land the town was located or the

name of the first Postmaster who established the postoffice in the

area. Bowen Township, in which Aurora is located, is said to have

been named in honor of William Bowen, who settled in the area before

1837. Bowen Cemetery, which is now called the Aurora Cemetery, was

named for John Bowen, who supposedly donated the first piece of land

from his farm for the cemetery.

The Jackson family history book states that it is believed that

members of the Jackson and Bowen families from Tennessee may have come

into the area as early as 1818 with a party of explorers. These

people returned to Tennessee, but about 1831-32 they returned here

with their families. Thomas Jackson built a house in 1832 which

stood until 1874 when it burned. The Jackson history states, "The

house was already built when the survey was made before Arkansas

became a State". It is believed that the Jacksons, Bowens, and

McElhaneys came together from White County, Tennessee. Many of these

families still have descendants in Aurora today.

The 1837 Madison County Tax List, includes these residents of

Bowen Township: John and William Bowen; John Cluck; Nathan Driver;

William Henderson; David, Thomas, and William Jackson; Robert and

Daniel Lee; William and Henry McElhaney; Simon and Russell Smith;

and Joshua and John Whorton. Most of these settlers arrived in

Aurora between 1829-1836.

In 1833 the "Big Fork Freewill Baptist Church" was constituted in

Bowen Township by Isaac and Samuel Whiteley. Early preachers

included F. M. Blackburn; Robert Lee; and Jesse Guinn. It is

believed that a Church building was built but no sign of it remained

after 1900. Church services were held in the School with visiting

preachers after this time.

The first Post Office at Aurora was established in August 1873 by

John Upton and was located in Section 2, Township 15, Range 26. Up

until this time, the closest Post Offices had been at Huntsville,

which was established in January 1837, and at St. Peters, which

operated from 1840 until 1841 and was located one mile north of

Witter. There was no official post office building in Aurora, but as

was the case in most areas, the post office was merely a corner in

someone's house or store that had shelves where the mail could be

sorted.

There are four cemeteries in and around Aurora: Aurora

Cemetery; Jackson Creek Cemetery; Henderson Creek Cemetery and Lee

Cemetery. Numerous graves can be found in these cemeteries bearing

the names of the families of the original settlers. Even though the

land around Aurora was settled as early as the 1830's, it was not

until after the Civil War that the town of Aurora began to flourish.

The old town of Aurora was located approximately one-fourth mile

West of the current town, on the West bank of War Eagle River. Main

Street of Aurora followed the major road which connected Huntsville

and St. Paul. Over this road traveled the stagecoach, with stops

along the way. This road mainly followed the river and at times

traveled on gravel bars that were actually in the riverbed. In 1850

the population of Bowen Township was 650 but by 1880 it had grown to

997.

The first store at Aurora was opened by John W. Upton in 1874,

followed shortly by the Johnson Brothers' store in 1875. Most of the

stores located at Aurora were general stores and mercantiles.

Following is a list of general store and mercantiles owners: M. D.

Sisemore; George Sisemore; J. D. Jackson; William Robinson; Joel

Roberts; Mr. Robins with G. L. Shepard as clerk; W. J. Seals with

Lee McElhaney as clerk; Walter M. "Sport" Boatright (he had a slot

machine in his store); Clint Seals and Wiley Cluck; Clint Seals and

Charles L. McElhaney; Bill Markham; P. Marcus Cluck; George

Shepard; Brown Herriman; John Wolf; J. C. Hacker and Bert Jackson;

and James Everett Spurlock and Clint Seals. While this lists

contains names of a lot of store owners, there was probably not more

than six stores in business at any one time, but they did change

owners frequently. In addition to the general stores, there were

two drug stores , one of which was owned by Ed Price who kept a pet

alligator in his cellar. At some point the alligator escaped and

took up residence in the "Bluff Hole" in War Eagle River just north of

Aurora. For several years swimmers feared to go into the water for

fear of finding the alligator. Another drug store was owned by Walter

Ledbetter, while Dr. John M. Williams sold over the counter drugs.

Several doctors practiced at Aurora, including: Dr. John M. Williams;

Dr. Hedrick; Dr. James M. Scott; young Dr. Massey; Dr. J. H.

Spurgeon; and Dr. Harrison.

For the convenience of travelers, Aurora boasted a Hotel which

also served hot meals. It appears that the first hotel burned and a

second one was built to replace it. Hotel operators were George

"Bon" Harriman; Joe Whorton; Jas and Mary Hopper; and George and

Ella McElhaney. If a traveler's horse needed fed or shoes

replaced, the blacksmith shop of J. R. Robinson, which opened in about

1875, could help. After 1900, Hugh Boatright operated a blacksmith

shop.

In 1884, Charles Dennis organized the "Independent Order of

Knights of the Horse" with G. B. Scott as Grand President. On 23

November 1886, Infanta Lodge #437 was organized having these charter

members: J. B. Morris; W. C. Cluck; H. A. Reynolds; J. B. Scott;

R. M. Wood; J. B. Guinn; J. W. Rawlins; S. B. Smith; H. C. Ledbeter

and Williams Easterling. I have been told that meetings were held in

a lodge hall, but I don't know if these two organizations were

connected. The lodge continued until the 1920's and members had a

lodge pin that they wore with pride. I would like to hear from anyone

having any information on these Lodges.

Also, in the October 15, 1953 issue of the "Madison County

Record", a photo was published which was taken in 1886 in front of the

Old Town Hall at Aurora, showing early settlers and members of Company

G of the First Arkansas Infantry, which was formed from this area.

This photo belonged to Ethel Kilpatrick who lived at Aurora in 1953.

I would very much like to find a copy of this photo so that a print

could be made from it. If anyone has a copy of this photo please

contact me at HC 63 Box 2, Witter, AR 72776.

The only entertainment in Aurora, was singing schools, community

picnics, entertainment at the school building, or perhaps a traveling

magic show. Each July 4th was a special time at Aurora with a big

gathering held at town. Everyone got new clothes and went to town

for a big picnic. Also Christmas and other holidays were special

events. In the 1920's and 1930's, Aurora is said to have had its

own town Constable. Stories of fighting in the streets, with people

rolling around on the ground have been told. Most people think this

was playful fighting, as in a contest to see who was best, but

occasionally the fighting got violent. I have heard that the only

place that the Constable had to lock people up until they settled

down, was Ed Price's cellar---I only hope that the alligator wasn't in

residence there at the same time. There was also a barber shop in

Aurora, along with a grist mill that was operated by Mr. King on the

John Haney farm about 1/2 mile North of the town. Also Earl Souls

operated a stave mill at some point near the grist mill.

SCHOOLS

Aurora has had four school buildings and the fourth one is still

standing today. Aurora school district was created on November 11,

1868 and encompassed about seven square miles. The first school

building was a log building and burned sometime about 1928-30. The

fire was started by lanterns hanging on the walls during a revival

that was being held by a traveling Pentecostal minister. The

building was full of people and it was toward the end of the service,

with lots of people at the front of the building praying and shouting.

One of the lanterns had caught the wall near the back on fire and the

door was close to being blocked by the fire. Clarence Whelchel

hollered "The building is on fire" and everyone was able to escape,

but the building was totally destroyed.

The Aurora School was built back after this fire but was

destroyed in 1942 by the first tornado that hit Aurora. Another

school building was built and again in April 1945, a second tornado

destroyed the school, along with what other buildings were left of the

town of Aurora.

After April 1945, school was held in the Church buildings until

the present school building was completed . Aurora School District

#14 was consolidated with Huntsville District #1 on 2 June 1949. The

new building was completed and school began in it in 1950 and

continued in this building until 1967 or 1968 as a "wing school" of

Huntsville.

By the time that the 1945 tornado hit the town of Aurora, most of

the businesses had ceased operation. The main road, Highway 23, had

been moved to the east side of War Eagle River. George and Ella

McElhaney were still living in the old hotel when the tornado hit.

George was in Oklahoma but Ella was at home and was bruised by the

storm. Their dog and cat were killed. The big house of Walter

Boatright, which was still standing but was vacant, was totally

destroyed. More detailed information about this tornado which

traveled all across Madison County, destroying homes and killing

people, can be found in "Fading Memories II" on pages 156-58 or in the

Spring 1993 issue of "The Madison County Musings".

AURORA SCHOOL REUNION TO BE HELD

It is hard to comprehend how many children attended school at

Aurora from the school's beginning until its end in 1967. I attended

Aurora School from 1960 until 1966, and some of my fondest childhood

memories are rooted there. The friendships that I developed in the

early years at Aurora are still some of the closest ones in my life

today. Several years ago, several people began to entertain the idea

of having a school reunion at the Aurora School. It was hard to

imagine how to go about organizing such an event. However, a group

of people have been meeting the last few months and the reunion is now

set for Saturday, October 19, 1996. All people who attended

school at Aurora, all parents of children attending school there, as

well as all Aurora residents, both past and present are invited to

attend. We are expecting a great time of visiting and getting re-

acquainted. We have gathered together lots of old school photos and

plan on having them displayed. It's really fun to look at the photos

and reminiscence about the "good old days" at Aurora School. We are

relying on word of mouth to let people know about this reunion, so

please tell everyone you know that might be interested.

The reunion will begin at 10:00 a.m. on Saturday, October 19,

1996, at the Aurora School building. There will be a pot-luck meal

at noon with plates, cups, and silverware furnished. Please bring a

covered dish, drinks, and your lawn chairs and be prepared to see a

lot of old friends. Mark this date on your calendar now and plan

to attend !!

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