

# The Life and Times of Greenfield, Tennessee

The Life and Times of Greenfield, Tennessee

With Sketches of Weakley County

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Editor Introduction by BLAKE CLARK Roving Editor, Reader's Digest

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## **PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The idea of writing and publishing a history of Greenfield originated among the members of the Greenfield City Library Board, upon realization of the fact that the new City Library could not contain or offer any historical reference volume on Greenfield unless one was written.

The Board members, with Mrs. Frank Prins, Jr., as Chairman, who assigned themselves this task, were: Mrs. Joseph Barton, Mrs. Aude Brock, Mrs. Clayton Caudle, Mrs. Russell Milligan, and Mrs. Ira Porter. In addition, Mrs. Michael Rourke proved of invaluable assistance to Mrs. Prins in compiling the data for this history.

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 The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers, Vol. No. XVII files in Archives in Nashville, newspaper clippings etc. Citizens of Greenfield

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**THE GREENFIELD PICTURE ALBUM**

(Following page 64)

"WAY BACK YONDER IN 1911"

A FAMOUS LAND MARK

"DOWN TO SEE THE TRAIN COME IN"

THE HAND PAINTED CURTAIN AT THE OPERA HOUSE

THE GREENFIELD BANK

CORNER OF MAIN AND FRONT STREETS AND SCENES ABOUT TOWN, 1908

OLD TIME STORES---HORSE AND BUGGY DAYS-THE COMING OF THE FORDS

THE COMMUNITY FAIR---AND THE MILKMAIDS

WHERE OUR MOTHERS AND FATHERS WENT TO SCHOOL

PRESENT DAY SCHOOLS

NEARBY UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE MARTIN BRANCH

MAPS

TENNESSEE 1796-WEST TENNESSEE WAS CHICKASAW INDIAN HUNTING

GROUNDS

WEAKLEY COUNTY 1964

THE CITY OF GREENFIELD-END PAPERS

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## INTRODUCTION

by Blake Clark, Roving Editor, Readers Digest

"I'M A BOY WHO GREW UP IN GREENFIELD, TENNESSEE"

No matter how much we travel, we remain the product of our early experiences. I spent formative years in Greenfield. The influences on me there and my responses to them have made me pretty much what I am today.

I felt a lot of warmth and affection in Greenfield. I always felt free to run in and out of neighbors' homes. The Brock girls and the Lowrance girls used to tell me how they spoiled me when I was only three years old running over to their houses to be petted and fed. Getting affection like this outside the bounds of home extended my radius of security. I thought everybody liked me. And, today, if presented with one of those psychological questionnaires that asks, "Do you have any enemies?" I answer, "No."

To speak of a different kind of affection, one of my most vivid memories is of my first kiss. I mean real kiss. It happened at the High School. I was about 12 and had heard a lot of joking about kissing and sweet hearting and was eager to explore the mystery. So I kept after a girl about my age to go outside and try it. I can't recall the precise wording of this conversation, but the idea was clearly understood. After considerable stalling, one day she suddenly said "all right," and ran out ahead of me to the agreed spot.

This was an outside corner formed by a classroom jutting out from the main building. It was a warm, sunny spring day, and we sat facing each other on a plank placed across the beveled corner. She was a tomboy kind of girl, but with considerable feminine appeal, reddish brown hair and a few freckles. We didn't say a word, and, as I recall, didn't even touch each other. We just leaned slowly forward until our lips met.

Well, I had been kissed by my mother and other persons a million times, but I learned that a word can have more than one meaning-I'd never experienced anything like this. Her lips were moist, slightly parted and quite warm, and when mine met them I realized that I was in contact with a

mysterious, powerful force I'd never known existed-comparable in effect to thunder and lightning and all the great elemental disturbances in nature. It was all over in a few seconds. She dashed away and we did not meet in a similar situation, but I was never the same again.

Example is all-important to youngsters. Their heroes are the people about them. One of mine was--completely unknown to him, I'm sure--Aude Brock. Aude came home from the wars when I was ten years old. He was one of those who "broke the Hindenberg Line." I saw it very clearly. Aude was a fellow of tremendous physique and all the courage in the world. I visualized him in his helmet, khaki uniform with those wrapped leggings, clutching his bayoneted rifle, plunging through a barbed-wire fence, the Hindenberg Line. Then, in a great burst of frenzied activity, swinging his rifle butt and bayonet back and forth, Aude smashed and scattered scores of steel-helmeted Huns, winning a great victory for his country.

One reason, I am sure, that I have never been satisfied with myself is that deep inside me I knew I'd never be able to live up to my idea of the hero, as personified by Aude Brock.

I was impressed by the whole Brock family. They made me think that there is more to heredity than modern sociology would admit. It suddenly struck me long after I'd grown up that I'd never met a Brock who didn't have a lot of spunk. Several were excellent athletes. Nearly all excelled in whatever they took up. Claude Brock was my best friend in school, and to me he exemplified all the best qualities of the breed--courage, loyalty, capability. And he still does. Claude's career has proven him to be a person of great physical and moral courage.

This is not to say that Claude was without fault. He had an exasperating way of always being the best student in the class and at the same time laughingly protesting that he never studied. And he seldom opened a book at school. We others told each other that he simply could not be that smart without working until far into the night. But he'd never admit it, and he showed none of the ill effects of loss of sleep. He was as rugged as they come.

People influence others without either party realizing it. Gent Belew, in my opinion, influenced me without either of us giving it a thought. Gent was perhaps the most cheerful, energetic worker I ever knew. And his outlook was not born of prosperity, but was there the first time I knew

him as a clerk in the drugstore. He had the moot appealing way of turning his stumbling blocks into stepping stones. An ornery customer who couldn't be pleased and got everybody else upset was to him just an amusing study in human nature. He relished the antics of eccentric fellows who came in, and he regaled his friends with delightful descriptions of them. I have no doubt that every boy and girl who spent even a few minutes a week in the store absorbed a wholesome lesson not only in how to succeed through extremely hard work but also in how to be happy while doing it.

Experience in Greenfield taught me to respect people for what they were rather than for what they had. In football and baseball, boys distinguished themselves by their skill and courage; no one cared whether their fathers had a big farm or a prosperous store.

In fact, no one in town had an overpowering amount of money and, fortunately, the one man who I thought was really well-to-do, Mr. Coke Brasfield, was such a gentleman that he seemed to prove that virtue was rewarded. Virtue and hard work-I remember my father often held up Ralph McCumber as an example of the way to get ahead in the world-use your brain and work hard.

Most of whatever knowledge I have of human nature stems from my summer work, mowing lawns. My brother Joel, always the most enterprising member of our family, started this business and passed it on to me when he outgrew it. Dealing as my own boss with 35 to 50 individuals, I learned that each was different. A few were hard to bargain with, always trying to get the job done for less. One or two really felt pain when pulling 60 cents out of their purse; for them, the most sensitive nerve was the one that ran to the pocketbook. Several made my work a pleasure by their generosity, praise and readiness to pay. Among others in this group were the Swearingen brothers, Mrs. Overton, who always sympathized loudly with me for tackling her big yard, making me feel I'd earned every cent, Mrs. Maiden, who usually had a pitcher of lemonade for me, Kate Kimery and Arthur Keel. One dear old lady dreaded August, the month the grass went to seed and became so hard to mow that the price went up 15 cents. She never blamed me, but the grass. Fingering into her purse for the necessary coins, she would mutter, "Drat that old Bermudy." I'd seen the word "drat" in print, but she is the only person I ever heard use it.

Something I have missed since I left Greenfield is the sound of extemporaneous whistling. Several

people, a number of them Negroes, just whistled as they walked along the road-not repeating any popular tune, but, picking up notes from nowhere, mocking birds, perhaps, they made up their own combination of trills and warbles for their private pleasure. Listening to some of them, I thought that if I could transfer their wood notes wild to paper and set appropriate words to them, I'd have a hit record.

For many years, I read a lot of poetry, and I think the interest was whetted when my father had our English class memorize Hamlet's soliloquy. I enjoyed these sad philosophizings about the mystery of death. Repeating them while cutting grass lightened the task. Later, in college, another teacher insisted on memory work and I learned other good poems. Having the pattern of such rhythms in the mind I think accustoms anyone to the sound of good writing and makes composition easier.

In the town of my boyhood was a lot of democracy, though no one ever called it that. There was considerable tolerance. People were accepted for what they were. If a man "squeezed a quarter 'til the eagle screamed," he took a goodly amount of kidding about it, but it was understood that this was his nature and that was that. Even the "characters" of the community knew that they were so considered, yet felt welcome to stop and join in the conversation of any of the joshing groups of fellows along Front Street. People are happiest when they are free to be themselves, and Greenfield's atmosphere contributed to the development of independent, outgoing, original human beings.

One day I saw my father walking along the sidewalk to town with a Negro man-not an educated Negro, but a tall, rangy country fellow who was known for his long strides and the "tow-sack" he always carried on his back. Seeing Daddy with this man slightly shocked me. I had supposed, I guess, that my father, the school principal, was too good to be seen with such an unschooled type. But as I pondered the matter, I realized that I thought no less of my parent for it, in fact, it seemed rather big of him. It was a small incident, yet I think it influenced my attitude towards race relations: there's no sense in not having communication with anybody, communication leads to understanding, and differences are reduced.

Here in Washington one evening, I begged to differ with a lady who said that America is culturally inferior to Europe. Angered, she turned on me and demanded witheringly, "Who are you?"

I hardly knew what to answer. What would you say to that question? The usual reply is not to tell who we are but what we do. In a way, we spend a lifetime trying to find the answer to that one little query, "Who am I ?" and come away from the quest feeling quite humble.

I think of the eight-year-old daughter of former U. S. ambassador to Ireland, William H. Taft, III, who was asked by her teacher to identify herself. "My great-grandfather was President of the United States," said the little girl, "my grandfather was Senator from Ohio, my father is ambassador to Ireland-and I am a Brownie." Don't we all sympathize with her struggle for identity?

When I consider the major influences on my life and character, next time someone asks "Who are you?" I am tempted to say, "I am a boy who grew up in Greenfield, Tennessee."

BLAKE CLARK