

Historical Sketch of Casscoe, Arkansas

LARRY FORTUNE

I was born at Drennen Hospital, 18th and Main Street, Stuttgart on November 30, 1945. A lot of excitement and confusion followed. Another baby was born the same day and lo and behold, they got us mixed up. I was raised up two miles east of Hunters Chapel on Fortune Lane on my mother's home place that was settled by my grandfather Payer, almost one hundred years ago. My mother was born there ninety-three years ago, and has lived in the same place all her life. I attended Casscoe School, one room, one teacher—T.A. Waddell—who had taught both of my parents twenty years previously. The 24-inch board hanging on the wall prevented any discipline problems. Casscoe consolidated with Stahley School when I was in the fourth grade. I attended Stuttgart Junior High and graduated from Stuttgart High School in 1963.

After school, I worked on the farm for the remainder of that year, since I was only seventeen. I worked in a steel fabrication shop for the next two years, and then went to work for Riceland Soybean Processing Plant for the next forty years. I retired in 2007 and pursued my ongoing hobbies of cattle ranching, farming, and playing with my grandkids. I attended Hunters Chapel Methodist Church most of my life and currently attend Grand Prairie Church in Stuttgart. I have many family members buried at Hunters Chapel, as well as two grandfathers in Trice Cemetery. I have been involved with the upkeep of Hunters Chapel Cemetery most of my life. The cemetery and church are two separate entities, the cemetery being a non-profit corporation with a state charter, and directed by three board members. I have been a member of Grand Prairie Historical Society for several years.

Founding of Casscoe

On May 10, 1850, an article headlined in the *Arkansas State Democrat* read: "New Town on the White River." The *Memphis Enquirer* referenced a new town recently laid off on the White River: "We have in our possession some days, a map or plan of a new city in embryo, laid off by our old friend C.P. Halley, formerly of Fayette County. It is situated on the west bank of White River, on that commanding, convenient location known as Pickens Bluff. We are informed that it possesses many advantages, not only as to navigation and location, but a fine back country to support it. It will be called Cass-Coe in honor of two distinguished Democrats. It may be well enough for those making improvements in Arkansas to take a look at this new place. The White River Country is fast gaining upon public attention and will now rapidly settle up with an enterprising, industrious, and intelligent population, and a town located at so favorable a point as this, is well worth attention. The White River trade with Memphis is now rapidly increasing." At the time this area was Polk Township, but it was changed to Keaton Township between 1870–1880.

HISTORICAL SKETCH OF CASSCOE

As for the namesakes of Casscoe, it is commonly believed that the town got its name from Lewis Cass and Levin H. Coe, who were both generals and Democrats. Cass was born in 1782 and rose to the rank of brigadier general in the War of 1812. He served as governor of Michigan, cabinet officer, diplomat, senator, and presidential candidate. He supported upholding the rights of territorial settlers to decide for themselves if slavery would be permitted. The Democratic Party approved and he won the presidential nomination in 1848. Zachary Taylor became president and Lewis Cass returned to the senate. He retired to Detroit and died in 1866. Levin Hudson Coe was born in 1806. He served as speaker of the Tennessee General Assembly, and practiced law in Bolivar, Somerville and Memphis. Coe attained the rank of inspector general of the Tennessee Militia. He was nominated for vice president at the 1848 Democratic convention, however when Lewis Cass was selected to head the ticket, Cass chose William Butler as his running mate. Levin Coe was fatally injured in a gun battle in Memphis in 1850. Interestingly, Coe was a prominent political figure in the same area of West Tennessee that was home to many of Casscoe's founders.

Early Settlers

I would like to talk about some settlers who were already present in 1850. Colonel Ben Walker's plantation had grown to 315 acres by 1857. This property was west of Big LaGrue bridge, and took in what are now the farms of Ab Leder, Bobby Dean Davis, and part of the McPherson farm. As of November 23, 1850, Colonel Walker had nine slaves over sixteen years old, along with ten other slaves. At that time he owned eighty acres of improved land. He also owned four horses, four oxen, and ten hogs, with a total value of \$363. In that same year, W.H. Ransdale owned 246 acres of which 36 were improved. His farm was half a mile west of Hunters Chapel. He had two horses, forty sheep, forty hogs, and eighty bushels of sweet potatoes. Adolph Radgesky, a 23-year-old Jewish merchant and native of Prussia, operated what the people called the supply house at the river landing. He stocked a line of hardware, groceries, dry goods, medicines, and agricultural machinery. Trading from the supply house ran along the river for miles, reaching all plantations.

Sports

Hunting wild game was a popular sport, and plentiful in the area. Another popular sport was horse racing. Before the war, there was a racetrack at the head of Halley's Prairie somewhere between Mount Adams and Marsh Cemetery. It consisted of two parallel lanes about five feet wide where the horses raced. As a boy, W.G.R. Hampton recalled being stationed as a guard over the betting money which was laid by racing fans on an old cypress block near the track.

Casscoe Boys Head Off to Service

With the vote for secession passing on May 6, 1861, sons of Casscoe settlers eagerly joined the infantry companies of Captains Robert H. Crockett and John R. Maxwell, because the Yankees were coming this way. Maxwell was formerly commanded by John Boswell. These young men fought tirelessly from Bull Run in Northern Virginia to Northern Kentucky in 1862. Action in Kentucky proved to be futile while under command of Major General Braxton Bragg. James Harkrider, a former overseer for Matthew A. Trice, was the company butcher of the commissary service. During the Atlanta Campaign in May 1864, Harkrider put himself in the line of enemy fire and was shot in the knee because his fellow soldiers teased him about being “away from the fighting.” This needless injury resulted in amputation.

Some miles east of Atlanta on July 22, a large number of Confederate units were destroyed in fierce fighting. Among Arkansas County victims were two of three Nobles brothers who were assigned to the infirmary corps. The brothers Fayette and Milton were born in Alabama and moved to what later became Casscoe in the 1840s. The brothers were carrying wounded Private E.F. English of Prairie Township on a stretcher. They stopped to rest, because the day was hot and their friend was heavy. While squatting at each end of the stretcher, a cannon fired and split Fayette in two. Both sides experienced great loss of many lives. The tattered remains of the Army of Tennessee surrendered at Durham, N.C. on April 26, 1865. James G. Pike was the only man present to represent Captain Crockett’s Company at the surrender. Other members of the company who were not killed or in the hospital were on work details or on special duty.

The war left Arkansas’s economy in devastation. Homes were abandoned and burned, and land was uncultivated and overgrown. Starving women and children and gaunt, ragged men newly discharged from the Army were left searching for their families and friends, and wondering if their homes survived the war. The destruction of gristmills forced farmers to grind their own grain. Loss of horses, mules, and oxen meant that men and women had to substitute for beasts of burden during and shortly after the war. Defeat left a bitter taste in the mouths of many. In the wilder parts of the Ozarks, the animosity was so intense that the Civil War continued there for decades.

In October 1863, the regiment which included Robert L. Fortune fought at Salem and at Collierville. Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest from Tennessee arrived in Mississippi in December with a large number of recruits. Robert Fortune fought with Lt. Gen. Forrest at Okolona, where they captured a battery while fighting on foot, and participated in the advance back into Tennessee, where they captured the garrison of Union City. They were responsible for stopping the Federal infantry advance at Brice’s Crossroads. They also fought at Harrisburg and the Middle Tennessee raid of September 1864, where they fought to the point of exhaustion. The troops recovered in time to go with Forrest to Johnsonville, where the regiment provided men to crew the captured boats Forrest used briefly on the Tennessee River. The regiment opposed Wilson’s 1865 advance into Alabama, surrendering on May 10 at Gainesville. The night before

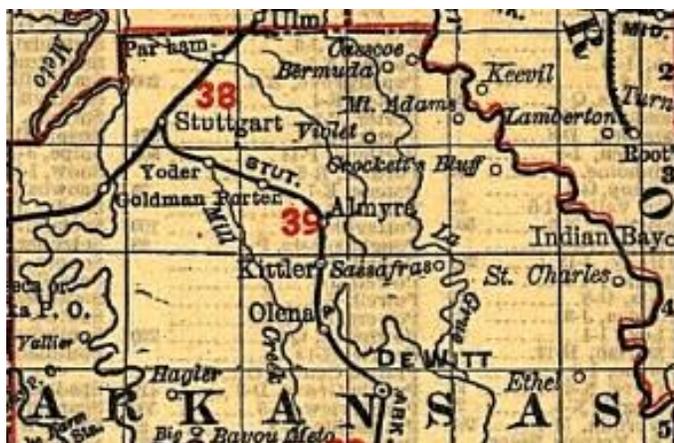
HISTORICAL SKETCH OF CASSCOE

turning in their weapons, the men tore their battle flag into pieces, with each person taking a piece. There seems to be a lot of glory in Confederate veterans being able to claim they rode with Forrest. I guess my only claim to fame is that Grandpa Robert did!

Price, Shelton, Trice and Duke Families Come to Casscoe

On August 14, 1834, Matthew Anderson Trice moved to Moss Creek, Tennessee with his family from Virginia. I understand my Fortune ancestors also moved from Virginia to Tennessee at the same time but did not come to Arkansas until after the war ended. They stopped there because of an ill slave and decided to stay in McNairy County. In 1856, Truman Price came to visit relatives at Peppers Ferry in Polk Township. He was so impressed that he bought 360 acres and built a log house. He then married a native Arkansan, Miss Haigh. Price then returned to Bolivar, Tennessee and gave such a glowing account that the Trice, Price, Duke, and Shelton clans decided to settle here, within a three mile radius of each other. Matthew A. Trice built his home facing the stage road, which ran west of the present Casscoe post office, from Arkansas Post to DeValls Bluff.

The name Bermuda was chosen for the Trice estate. Bermuda (shown on an 1898 map, right) was a stage stop where passengers were provided meals, had their horses fed, and fresh horses hitched to the stage. When the stage had passengers that desired a meal, the driver's assistant would blow a horn within a half mile of the house, and each blast of the horn represented a passenger to be fed. By the end of the century, the Trice Plantation grew to approximately 4,000



acres. Shortly after settling here, the Trices established the Trice Cemetery, with the burial of their toddler Irene in 1863. On May 10, 1944, a tornado travelling from Almyra through Casscoe destroyed Trice's General Store, killing C.P. Trice. The storm moved northeast, killing Rush Faulkner at the end of Fortune Lane. Both men are buried in the Hunters Chapel Cemetery.

Stuttgart Country Club Built Near Casscoe

The White River played a big part in the settlement and growth of this state and especially this area. When the city fathers of the young town of Stuttgart considered building a country club, they thought of the river and the majestic beauty it offered. The original directors of the club bought approximately eight acres overlooking the river at Preston Ferry, eighteen miles from Stuttgart. Preston Ferry and Old Casscoe were companion settlements on the White River, dating

GRAND PRAIRIE HISTORICAL BULLETIN

back to pre-Civil War days. F.M. Gibb, Little Rock architect, said the site was the most beautiful in the state with delightful river frontage. Records indicate that by January 30, 1919, 111 members had signed up and paid the initial \$10 joining fee. Officers elected were E.E. Saul, president; R.P. Young, vice-president; J.B. Buckley, secretary; and Fred Selig, treasurer. Directors named were Frank Stuckey, Pat Swimm, Ben Roth, R.B. Noakley, James Miller, and Lee Power. An additional 100 members joined prior to the club's grand opening in March 1922.



This photograph of the first Stuttgart Country Club was taken around 1925. *Author's collection.*

According to an article from the *Casscoe News* written by Dale Shelton, describing the Stuttgart Country Club when it was new, "The club building is a two and one half story structure with a fifteen foot veranda on three sides and is planned to give the best in pleasure and enjoyment. A spacious lounging room extends across the entire front of the building. Smaller lounging rooms are arranged most delightfully. Ladies' club rooms, a dining room, nine bedrooms, two fireplaces, electric lights, hot air heat, etc. assures the best in conveniences. Swimming, hunting, boating, tennis, dancing, and trap shooting are among the many pleasures planned for the members, their families and guests. Following the grand opening, the club was used by its members and guests for various activities for several years."

The country club honored members from different states with events such as "Ohio Day" and "Illinois Day." My mother remembers going to parties there. The club eventually had to be removed sometime in the late 1920s, due to the erosion of the bluff bank on which it was built. The material from the building was used to build the Boy Scout hut, which still stands and is located at 1605 South Main Street in Stuttgart.

HISTORICAL SKETCH OF CASSCOE

Hunters Chapel Methodist Church

Early settlers in the Casscoe Community with names like Duke, Trice, Price, English, Gibson, Mayberry, and Allen were mostly Methodists who came from Virginia. These families and others built a log structure called Prairie Chapel situated on the Duke Plantation, south of Trice's Store. William A. Price was the pastor of the Methodist Church. Following the War of Northern Aggression, the Hinsons deeded two acres for a church and cemetery, and a framed building was erected in 1879. Hunters Chapel got its name from a famous pioneer Methodist minister, Andrew Hunter. It is a little church located in Arkansas County, nine miles south of Roe on Highway 33. Throughout the years, it has watched generations of travelers go by. When I attended church here as a child, Hunters Chapel was on a circuit with three other churches—Roe, Ulm, and Shiloh. Ulm Church had an early morning service, followed by Roe, then Shiloh at 11 a.m. The night service was here with some attending from Roe and Shiloh. I particularly remember James and Pattie Gunnell. Ms. Pattie played the piano. Several men from that generation sat on opposite sides of the church from their wives, men on the left, wives on the right. The church's furniture came from Prairie Chapel. The cemetery was established in eighteen rows east to west, and south of the church.

Dr. Andrew Hunter was born in Ireland. He was converted early in life, and was called into the ministry at the age of twenty-two, having in the meantime immigrated to America. He was assigned to a charge in Arkansas in 1836, the year of statehood. He never relocated, nor transferred to another Methodist Conference. The years of his ministry were spent in stations or districts, and on circuits in his chosen state. His interest and range of service extended from the humblest to the presiding eldership, from the most humble home to the presidency of the Annual Conference, from the honest position of a citizen to president of the Arkansas State Senate, from which position he was elected to the United States Senate, a position which he did not fill. Later he was asked to run for governor of his state, but was far too busy with his beloved ministry to accept the nomination. He served in the Pine Bluff District in the early years of his life, making regular visits to this charge. Dr. Hunter died in 1902 at the age of 89. I have to wonder how many horses he wore out in his lifetime.

Homecoming at Hunters Chapel

Every year on the first Sunday in September, Hunters Chapel hosts "Homecoming." From the very first Homecoming in 1951, the morning service is opened with the singing of "The Church in the Wildwood" and closed with "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds." The success of the collection at the Homecoming and the interest generated in the upkeep of the cemetery caused action to be taken to organize a Cemetery Association with a State Charter, as a non-profit corporation. One hundred percent of the contributions collected during Homecoming go directly to the Hunters Chapel Cemetery.



Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church, near Casscoe. (*Courtesy of Glenn Mosenthin.*)

Dale Shelton

Houston Dale Shelton always used to say, “If you don’t use your brain, you’ll lose it.” Dale Shelton made good use of his brain, serving the Casscoe Community through public office and as a historian. Many students from Casscoe didn’t go beyond an eighth grade education, but Dale graduated from Roe High School in 1942. In the early 1940s he joined the U.S. Army and was stationed in Texas, eventually becoming a corporal. After his honorable discharge in 1945, Dale focused on raising cattle and working part-time measuring crops for a farming agency now known as the Farm Service Agency. He was also a full-time caregiver for his grandmother, Addie Hinson Shelton, who had raised him since he was three years old when his mother died. Dale cared for her until she passed away at almost 100 years old, even putting off marrying his sweetheart, Lorene Shirkey. The couple finally married in December 1964.

Since Dale was a “clean-cut, no-nonsense, fun person,” he ran for Arkansas County assessor in the early 1960s and served in that position for twelve years. He then became Arkansas County judge for six years, following in his grandfather’s footsteps, who was county judge 100 years before. From helping to start a ranch for troubled boys to paving the roads, “he tried to help his county in any way he could.” He also performed some marriage ceremonies. A lifelong devoted member of Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church in Casscoe, Dale served as Sunday School superintendent, secretary, and treasurer of both the church and Hunters Chapel Cemetery for

HISTORICAL SKETCH OF CASSCOE

more than fifty years. Before his death, Dale was still involved in the cemetery, most notably setting up a perpetual care fund. He had a strong desire to make sure the cemetery was groomed and looked nice. To him, it was like showing we cared about those who had gone on.

In his retirement, he enjoyed researching his family's history and the history of the community through court documents and talking with neighbors. He helped create and served as co-editor of the *Casscoe News Journal*, a publication with historical articles about the community. The paper was in circulation for two years. Dale's great-great-grandfather David Shelton was the son of John Shelton of Rural Plains, near Mechanicsville, Virginia. John fought at Valley Forge, and was later killed in the Battle of Brandywine on September 11, 1777. John's sister Sarah was the first wife of Patrick Henry. I would say Dale Shelton knew more about the community of Casscoe than anyone. People confided a lot of things in him. He gave a lot of guidance and direction. Though Dale didn't have children, he treated his younger relatives like his own. He was our best friend. He would load up the pickup truck with neighborhood kids and take us to a sandbar on the White River for an afternoon of swimming and fun. Dale died from injuries suffered in a car accident in April 2011 at the age of 86.



Oak Rhodes with his yacht on White River at Preston Ferry in 1923. The first Stuttgart Country Club is visible on the right. *Courtesy of Amici Club/Stuttgart Public Library.*