Those Were the Days!

By Dr. Rhodes B. Holliman, Dublin, Virginia

*Rhodes Holliman, who has had a distinguished college career in teaching and biological research, recorded in 2007, his boy hood memories of Fayette County, Alabama and his memories of his Holliman, Blakeney and Baker relatives. He captures nostalgically an earlier time in a simpler, more labor intensive America.– GNH, his second cousin*

As a boy, I lived for the opportunity to leave my home in Birmingham, Alabama to travel to Fayette County, Alabama in the Newtonville area. There approximately thirty miles north of Tuscaloosa, I would stay with great aunts and great uncles, hunt and fish and get back to the frontier environment away from the clamor of city life. My pleading to my father, Cecil Rhodes Holliman, was perpetual, an season, ‘let’s go see Uncle Eura, Aunt Mae, Uncle Mute, Aunt Lla, Uncle Virgil and Aunt Pearl, knowing full well that the roads might be impassable in wet weather and the old 1929 Ford A-Model sedan might break down.

This was a time, the 1930s, when the crossroads at Newtonville seem almost as primitive as when the Creeks and Cherokees moved out and my ancestors migrated in from South Carolina in the 1930s. There was no pavement south of Fayette, the rail road town, no electricity, only crank phones, no municipal water and no sewage treatment. Instead of having six rooms and a both, most of the homes were a dog trot, ‘4 rooms and a path!’. These wonderful kinfolks never owned a gas or electric stove, a refrigerator or even an ice box, a washing machine or dryer, electric lights, running water, a tub or s shower or any indoor plumbing. If you wanted water there was a hand-dug well in the back yard.

Needed to wash clothes? There was a big, cast iron, 3 legged pot in the back yard, in which you put water and under which you built a fire. When the water was hot, you put the dirty clothes in with some homemade lye soap, pulled out the wet garments and scrubbed them over a wash board and rinsed with cold water. Needed a cook stove? There was a chop block near the well where you split stove wood. Needed a bath? There was a 16 gallon washtub in front of the hearth or wood stove. Needed lights? Kerosene lamps did the trick. Needed to store cooked food? There was the pie safe. Needed heat in the winter? Back to the chop block or cross cut saw. Needed air conditioning? Get out your cardboard church fan. Needed to go somewhere? There was a buggy and a horse or mule in the barn. A few wealthy folk had a Model T or A Ford. Needed groceries? Go to the storm cellar and pick up smoke home canned vegetables and/or take a sack of corn or grain to the local grist mill and come back with meal or flour. Needed meat? Go out to the smokehouse and cut down a ham, bacon or sow belly. Needed a doctor? Dr. Blakeney coiuld be reached on your crank phone and he would come to your house in his antique car or on horseback. Need to satisfy a sense of visceral urgency? There was a path to the outhouse. It could be a one holer or a two holer. Worried about cholesterol? What was cholesterol?

In my boyhood mind, everyone was happy and did not seem to miss anything in life and always looked forward to family visiting, family reunions, church homecomings and revivals and all day singing and ‘eating on the grounds’. It was in this wonderful world of simplicity that I grew to manhood never feeling that I missed anything.

Hunting was my passion. A great uncle named Eura Carter lived in southern Fayette County near Patton’s Chapel and very close to the Sipsey River. He had a fox terrier named ‘Beans’ that was the finest squirrel dog that ever put a nose to the ground. Beans was a silent tracker. He did not bark until he had the squirrel treed and then would bark one time. You had to keep Beans in sight because if you did not hear his solo bark, you could lose him and he would hold a squirrel up a tree for hours. He was never a house pet. The only time he ever showed any friendly emotion was when we came out of the house with a shotgun and indicated that we were going hunting. Then he was bundle of energy leading the way.

In those days the virgin timber in the Sipsey Bottoms was composed of giant gum, water oak, beech, hickory and other trees that grew 100 plus feet tall and produced a canopy so dense that sunlight could not reach the forest floor except in the dead of winter. There was very little undergrowth and you could walk through the forest without being encumbered by thickets of briars, brush and saplings. It was in this pristine wilderness that I first went hunting at age 4 with my Dad, Cecil Rhodes Holliman, who was an attorney in Birmingham, Uncle Eura and Beans.

Beans trotted along ahead, nose to the ground and presently he barked and we saw him. If you couldn’t see the squirrel, you just got down on your knees and looked up Beans’ nose and there was the quarry! If the squirrel moved, Beans would move, always keeping his nose pointing dead on target. Well, Beans was pointing, Dad was loading his shotgun and I was standing under the tree looking straight up. There was a tremendous ‘BANG’, a thrashing in the tree top, and the squirrel fell directly on my head. Luckily the squirrel was DOA (dead on arrival) and did not bite or claw me. From that moment on, I was hooked to squirrel hunting and my question arose immediately, ‘when can I have a gun?’

Such a question today would probably instill a sense of horror and fear in a city bred parent but, ‘in the good old days’, a conservative father, reared on a farm, would give this question some serious consideration. I had to wait until I was 6 years old and learn hunter safety and be strong enough to carry a firearm. At 6, I became the happiest child in the Sipsey Swamps with my new .410 single barrel while Dad carried the ammunition. Beans would find the squirrel, Dad would stand behind me and hand me a shell and another squirrel would ‘bit the dust’. That gun produced a might kick for a 6 year old but the harvest it produced offset the pain and bruise.

In the days of the Great Depression, squirrel meat was a staple source of protein in Fayette County and many other rural areas of the South. Par-boiled and then fried or cooked as squirrel and dumplings. Yum! I learned quickly that the hunter is responsible for cleaning his harvest and uncle Eura was a master teacher of the techniques for skinning and squirrel. Any coon hounds standing around would be happy to eat the raw squirrel hides, hair and all, in one gulp!

As I grew older and larger, night time coon and possum hunting were added to my list of favorite things to do. There was much sadness when Beans departed this life. I continued to hunt squirrels with hounds but none of them could ever match the skill of Beans. I finally resorted to ‘still hunting’; going into the woods and finding a likely spot near some beech or hickory mast or a squirrel den in a hollow tree, sitting very still and quiet and watching for movement. When I was about 14 years old, using this technique, I killed 6 squirrels in one giant red oak den tree. I would shoot, the squirrel would hit the ground. I would mark the spot but not move, and wait for the next one to appear. This kind of hunting takes patience and perseverance.