

Northern transplants praised Limestone in Letters to L&N

By Rebekah Davis
Limestone County Archivist

Perhaps one of the greatest public relations materials ever to promote Limestone County was compiled long before the term “public relations” was added to the American lexicon, and was written almost entirely by Northern transplants to the Southern soil.

The year was 1915, and the Louisville & Nashville Railroad had just invested mega bucks into Limestone County, building new passenger and freight depots in Athens and Ardmore and connecting to the Lewisburg and Northern Railroad within the county, among other improvements. Now the company needed a return on its investment, in the form of more passengers and freight, which meant Limestone County needed to grow, both in population and in product.

Limestone County was already in a New South boom of sorts. According to the 1910 census, 26,880 people lived in Limestone County, an increase of 20 percent since 1900, and about 3,000 of those people lived in the county seat of Athens. A full 78 percent of the county’s land was in farms, and so it was to those farmers that L&N turned for help; specifically, those farmers who had poured into the county just in the prior two decades.

They hailed from all points north – Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, New York, Iowa and Wisconsin, to name a few – as well as from Canada and Germany. Anderson, Ind., native Wade H. Gaul summed up the reason they had packed up and headed for the South: “A man can hardly get to own a farm in the North on account of the long winters and high-priced land, but here a young man of small means can come and if he is industrious and willing to work he can soon get started and buy a place of his own.”

Gaul’s is one of 80 letters that L&N ultimately printed in its 1915 magazine-size booklet, “Letters to L&N From People who Formerly Lived North about Limestone County.” Filled with photos of farms, homes and people, the booklet was one of many about Alabama counties that L&N distributed in Northern states to encourage people to move south. From the introduction: “On the pages which follow are printed letters from persons who formerly lived in the North, setting forth in detail the results of their efforts in general farming, fruit and vegetable growing, stock raising, etc., and last but not least, their unstinted praise of the section from the standpoint of comfort and health.”

The first letter was from Athens Mayor Ernest Hine, who said, “There has been a wonderful increase in our population and you can find people from most any section of our great Union located here and prospering too. Now, we have a good country, not half of it in use, and we want good citizens, who desire to change their locations, to come and see for themselves the wonderful opportunities that await them.”

Denmark, Norway, native A. Anderson had lived in Limestone since 1900 and praised the area’s positive effects, not only on his farming, but also on his health. In short, he said, “this country suits me.”

Several members of the German settlement 12 miles northeast of Athens – Bauers and Boeswetters and Krauses and Ruffs – spoke of successful farming and added that they sure would like for more German natives to join them.

Some Northern transplants seemed to be surprised at the hospitality.

“Before I came South I feared that perhaps a Yankee would meet a cold reception, but I was very pleasantly disappointed,” said Pittsburgh, Pa., native Robert J. Meloney. “Never have I met a more generous, hospitable and chivalrous set of men than my Southern neighbors. Of course, the ladies are superior to the gentlemen.”

Julius Hildebrand said, “I came to this county from New York City; had not the least idea about farming, but from the teaching of the kind-hearted southern people I soon learned how.”

The warmth of both the people and the climate kept people like Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, native L.E. Nelson here for good.

“I would not care to go back to Wisconsin and do not think I could stand the cold winters there,” Nelson said. “My home is here and here I will remain. There is good opportunity here for a man to come and build him a home. All he needs is ‘grit.’”

Another Wisconsin native, J. Kellogg, had found success as a dairy farmer, and he offered his vision for Limestone: “I predict for this county a great future, as it has all the essentials to make a great and prosperous county.”

To read more from the “Letters to L&N,” and perhaps even find your own Northern transplant ancestors in its pages, you can visit the Limestone County Archives in the former L&N Passenger Depot to peruse the archives library copy or purchase one of your own.

About the Archives:

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