

The Clan Robertson

(continued from last week's edition)

John Crichton Robertson died in 1877 at 55 years of age. He had come to Fayette Court House town from Scotland 33 years earlier with one pair of scissors and seventy-five cents in his pocket. He was a tailor by trade. He immediately began a tailoring business that he expanded into FCH town's first store. He married a feisty 15-year-old, Mary Fletcher Alley, and together they had 14 children, 3 of whom died in infancy. They were a well matched and an admirable couple with a dedication to hard work, honesty, kindness and benevolence.

An excerpt from the long memorial of John C. Robertson published in the local paper in 1877 read, "He arrived in the county without friends or money, but by his indefatigable energy, untiring efforts, and noble traits of character, never ceasing to battle the hardship of life, he gained both fortune and friends. He was well known by perhaps every citizen of the county" "He was not known except to be loved. No man ever possessed a more liberal heart, and none ever exhibited a more willing disposition to promote the interests of his fellowmen by the good use of the means which God saw fit to place in his care. Much of his time and means were devoted to the building up of the county. He was certainly a very exceptional man with no aspiration for public or worldly honors and we fear that the county will never be so fortunate as to possess another such treasure."

After the death of John C., his widow, Mary Fletcher, operated the store. None of the children seemed to want to take charge of the family's businesses. The oldest son, John C. Robertson, Jr., had married and moved to Texas. Twenty-year-old Felix began to manage the store with the next eldest son, Fenton as co-administrator. Then Fenton married and moved to Columbus, MS, to start his own business, leaving the store solely to Felix. Most people agreed but for Mary's dynamic abilities the store would have folded. Mary was a strong taskmaster who remained sharp, thrifty, and industrious until her death in 1915.

Thomas Henry Robertson, the youngest child who was 6 years of age when his father died had learned the lessons of life well. Thomas Henry was described as tough and smart. (Thomas Henry was the grandfather of Bill and John Robertson of the Citizen's Bank.) In the late 1800's, as a very young man, he opened a store in Winfield. He continued living in FCH town with his mother and commuted daily to the Winfield store by bicycle over a dusty or muddy rutted road. (There must be some truth to the genes theory!)

One Sunday morning in 1890, Felix came to his mother's home and asked Thomas to take a walk in the pasture with him. Coming upon a fallen tree, Felix sat down and motioned for Thomas to sit beside him. "I want to sell you the store," said Felix. When Thomas refused, Felix insisted. This back and forth continued for quite some time. When they walked out of the pasture, Thomas, then 20 years old, owned two stores and Felix began packing to leave for California where he lived the remainder of his life.

Thomas sent Mr. Raymond Harris, a clerk at the Fayette store, to operate the Winfield store, which was renamed Harris and Company, and Thomas took over operation of Robertson & Sons

store in Fayette CH. The business in Winfield continued to prosper and Mr. Harris eventually bought the store.

The first real crisis faced by Thomas Henry Robertson was whether to abandon the location of the store in Fayette Court House town, now Fayetteville, and move the store nearer the completed railroad line at what many were calling Depot Town or Frog Level. Many other business owners in Fayetteville were facing the same dilemma. The townsmen were equally divided on whether to relocate to the swampland around the railroad. Thomas decided to move the store and the town moved with him. The first store was located on the corner of Temple Avenue where the GMS building now sits. The town was named Latona and a mayor and council of aldermen were soon seated.

In 1900, a roving reporter from New York was in the South doing feature articles for his paper, The New York Evening Post. He wrote an article on Robertson's store describing the lofty 50 feet wide by 150 feet long building with walls and ceilings sheathed in brown-grained Alabama pine, counters that ran down the two long sides of the room, walls covered with shelves filled to the ceiling and the great floor space filled with goods piled upon the floor or stacked on stout tables set so closely as barely to leave passage between. A dozen or fifteen men moved among the mountains of goods waiting on customers, he wrote. The sales ran from \$50,000 to \$100,000 per year in a town of less than 1,000 people. Ten thousand bales of cotton were marketed there each year.

Thomas Henry had inherited his business sense as well as common sense from both his parents. In addition to running the store and the farm, he expanded his business enterprises to meet the needs of the town by opening an ice plant along with a coal-fired power plant furnishing electricity to homes and businesses.

At one point, the town council passed "blue laws" forbidding any business to be done on the Sabbath. Thomas never opened the store on Sunday but he did go down early and check the nightlights and go over the books. If someone came knocking on the door in dire need of something, he would unlock the doors and let them in. One week the town councilmen came in mass to kindly speak to Mr. Tom about the blue laws. The following Saturday night, Thomas went to the power plant and told the employees to kill the fires under the boilers and go home at midnight. He was awakened early Sunday morning by a large group of townspeople including the councilmen complaining about the power failure. "Yes, you are right", said Thomas, "there is no power today. The council has passed laws prohibiting business being done on the Sabbath. The power will be back on when you get up in the morning." The next morning the council met and repealed the blue laws.

The entire town was destroyed by fire in 1911 and Robertson's Store suffered losses equal to almost one-third the total loss. Total losses for the town were reported to be \$383,350 and Robertson's losses were well over \$100,000 of that amount. However, Thomas decided to rebuild a larger store that contained 20,000 square feet on two floors. The store was located at the front of the block where the Shop and Save grocery now sits. The store continued to prosper.

After Thomas established Fayette's first bank, Alabama State Bank and Trust, later to become the Citizen's Bank, he wanted out of the store. He sold the store to L. M. Dodds in 1914. The roaring twenties saw an upsurge of business and freight came in by the train carload.

Later, as business began to wane and Mr. Dodds wanted out. Thomas wanted the store back so that he could provide jobs for his two sons, Thomas Henry Robertson, Jr. (father of Tim, who died of polio at age 13, and Bill) and John Crichton Robertson, III (father of John and Bob). In 1923, the store became T.H. Robertson and Sons and carried the largest load of welfare and help in the county during the depression years. They overlooked old accounts, increased credit limits and furnished many farmers money for their next crop when there was no certainty of ever getting it back. Only a business the size and strength of Robertson's could have passed through such a crisis and remained solvent. Thomas had always been discretely benevolent to churches, individuals with promise, and the community.

Thomas Henry Robertson died in 1936 and the store, the bank and other enterprises continued under the leadership of his sons "Little Tom" and John C. The one hundred and fourteen year old general store started by the first John Crichton Robertson in 1844 closed its doors forever on December 31st 1958.

Upon the death of Thomas Henry Robertson the people of the county and surrounding areas realized that they had been fortunate enough to be blessed with two such treasures as the man described in the memorial of John Crichton Robertson. The character and values of these men continue through the lineage.

Note: The original scissors brought to Fayette Court House town by John C. Robertson one hundred and sixty-five years ago have been passed down through the generations to the oldest male heir. Bill Robertson recently received those scissors.

We would like to pay a special tribute to the late Evelyn Walker Robertson who is responsible for the publication of the Fayette County Historical Society publications. Without her diligent work in documenting most of the historical information about Fayette County it would now be lost forever.