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Claiborne Co (TN) Progress

By Nell Quesenbery

My mother, Louise Yoakum Marchio, has a glamorous cousin, Richard Austin “Dick” Yoakum of Morristown, who, ever so often, comes to Lone Mountain for a visit with his rustical kin.

For the last few years, Dick has formed an active interest in his Yoakum forebears. He feels justly pleased that Yoakum men and women were many times among the first people to penetrate “new wilds” in North America: New York, Pennsylvania, the South Potomac River on Peach Creek, Botetourt, Virginia, Greenbrier, West Virginia. Matthias and Eleanor Yoakum built the first log cabin in Kentucky; Powell’s Valley of Tennessee and on to the West.

One midsummer day, Dick came to visit my mother. This trip awakened an interest between us to work together to learn more of our ancestors. Much of the bridge to this knowledge was patiently put together by our Ray County, Missouri, cousin, Maude Yoakum Kincaide. Maude, an intelligent, stylish woman, lost her only child, a son, in World War II.

Fondly, I’ve written this story of Henderson Yoakum for Dick.

Henderson Yoakum was born on a farm September 6, 1810, in Powell’s Valley, Claiborne County, Tennessee. He was the oldest among eleven children of George Yoakum II and Mary Ann Maddy.

The family farm was located near Fort Yoakum, built in 1797 by Henderson’s grandfather, George Yoakum I. Earlier, in 1790, near the site of the fort, George Yoakum I, with his wife, Margaret, their children, along with his two brothers-in-law, John and Peter Van Bebber, had established Yoakum Station.

Henderson attended the Yoakum Academy and other local schools until his appointment at age seventeen to West Point. Henderson was a cadet at the U.S. Military Academy from July 1, 1828 to July 1, 1832, when he was graduated with distinction and promoted into the Army.

Reaching his full manhood, Henderson was a tall, strongly built man, giving credence to the bold cast of his features with his prominent, curving nose and great, dark questioning eyes.

In 1831, Black Hawk, chief of the Sac Indians of Illinois, was ordered to remove with his tribe to Iowa. Objecting to the cession of the tribal lands, he claimed the chiefs were placed under whiskey before they signed the treaty. He then stirred up the Indians of Iowa and Wisconsin in what was called the “Black Hawk War of 1831.” The braves fought to regain their Illinois hunting grounds. However, Black Hawk, now nearly 65, and the tribe were defeated in August of 1832. Second Lieutenant Henderson Yoakum of the 3rd Artillery served his country in the “Black

Hawk Expedition,” along with another young American, a volunteer from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln.

Being a staunch Democrat, Henderson, about this time, began the platform of becoming able to associate with the leaders and ideas (movements) of his time. These mighty marked men were people who truly won his esteem. He would become good friends with President Andrew Jackson and Colonel James Knox Polk, who later would become one of our greatest presidents.

President Jackson and Colonel Polk were also particular friends of Sam Houston. Sam Houston - an enigma - a hero - a man who could draw the people whether dressed in silks or buckskins. Houston was one of the best stump speakers of his time. As Henderson Yoakum became aware and excited about the annexation of Texas, which was to be talked up for years, he also became aware of Sam Houston, a man for whom he was destined to feel a fierce and devoted love. The man, Sam Houston, would return this love and, in his final hours, request of his wife, Margaret, “Bury me near my old friend, Colonel Yoakum.”

The year 1833 was a busy one for Henderson Yoakum. First, he resigned from the Army; then he married Eveline Cannon of Roane County, Tennessee, whose close relatives would serve Tennessee as senators, congressmen and governor.

Finding great delight in the young and beautiful Eveline, he moved with her to Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where he, while a witty man, began the pragmatic study of law.

Now practicing law, he occasionally, as the need arose, again took up military obligations. In 1836, Captain Yoakum served under General Edmund Pendleton Gaines to protect the Western frontier from the attacks of hostile Indians. Two years later, he commanded a regiment in the Cherokee War.

Upon his return home from the Cherokee War, he was elected a member of the Tennessee State Senate. After serving one term as senator, Henderson decided to move Eveline and the children west to Texas. They would go to Huntsville, where Sam Houston lived, in eastern Texas. In the eastern part of Texas, the land is hilly. The sparse sandy soil grows mostly mesquite, cottonwood (popular), blackjack and scrub oak. Henderson came to Texas in 1845, the same year Texas was annexed to the United States.

A dispute with Mexico about the southern land boundary of Texas inaugurated the Mexican War of 1846. Henderson joined the Texas Mounted Rifle Volunteers. He served under Captain J. Gillespie. For his bravery at Monterey and other engagements, Henderson was promoted to first lieutenant.

Henderson set up his law office in Huntsville; however, he built his house, a two-story structure of hand-hued logs, in Shepherd’s Valley, a country place outside of Huntsville. From Shepherd’s Valley to Huntsville was a very broad road cut through virgin timber. The road was called Yoakum’s Road.

He became colonel in the Texas Militia in 1850. About this time, while living at Shepherd's Valley, Henderson began to write a "History of Texas 1685-1846." He told of her first settlements, her people, her churches, her great men, her battles, the Alamo, Sam Houston and other great politicians. He finally told of her annexation to the United States. With love, he gave Texas her first complete written history. In return, Texans named a town Yoakum for him.

In 1854, Henderson, Eveline and the children left Shepherd's Valley, where they had felt so much, to live in Huntsville. This time a large colonial-style mansion had carefully been constructed for the family.

In the late fall of 1856, Colonel Yoakum went to Houston, Texas, to speak in front of the Masons of that city. He caught cold, and his lungs became infected. Putting a good face on matters, ignoring his weakened condition, on November 30, 1856, he died suddenly while talking with friends on the steps of the old Capitol building in Houston.

His body was returned to Huntsville and buried in Oak Wood Cemetery. A tall marble shaft, topped with a large, generous urn, was placed over his grave site. This white shaft bore the words: "In testimony of the high appreciation of his character as a man, his usefulness as a citizen, and his ability as a lawyer, his fellow citizens have erected this monument to the memory of Colonel Henderson Yoakum; who was born the 10th day of September, 1810, and died the 30th November, A.D. 1856, age 46 years, 2 months and twenty days."

The tomb and remains of Sam Houston (1793-1863) lie only a few yards away from Colonel Yoakum's Memorial.

A description by Dr. E.M. Carrington: "Yoakum, fiery historian of Shepherd's Valley, by vocation a lawyer, by avocation a fighter, this adopted son gave Texas her first full history."

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Hendersons lineage is as follows:

(1) Mathias Yoakum (~1698 - 1783)

b. abt 1705, New Amsterdam, NY

d. 18 Feb 1783, Botetourt, VA

(2) Valentine Yoakum (~1721 - 1763)

b. abt 1721, PA

d. 17 Jul 1763, Greenbrier, WV

(3) George Yoakum I (1752 - 1800)

b. 15 Jan 1752, Peach Creek, Greenbrier, VA

d. 28 Oct 1800

(4) George Yoakum II (1783 - 1841)

b. 30 Jul 1783, Greenbrier, VA

d. 31 Mar 1841, Madisonville, Monroe, TN

(5) Henderson King Yoakum

b. Sept 6, 1810 Powell's Valley, TN

d. 1856 Austin, Texas