

Rutledge Springs – Bethlehem Church and Opossum Valley, U.S.A.

by Robert E. Strain - 1992

William Brown was among the original settlers of ‘Possum Valley’. He blazed a trail from Tennessee to Alabama in 1815. He staked out land from what is now Fairfield (including ‘Possum Valley’) to Rock Creek near the Warrior River basin. He stayed in the area for a year, planted crops, and returned to Tennessee and brought his wife Sarah and their two children to their new land.

This was the beginning of the white civilization in ‘Possum Valley. Indians were in the area and William Brown got to know them and accompanied them on hunts.

Davey Crockett was an old friend of the Browns in Tennessee and he came to ‘Possum Valley for a visit. The Rutledges, another pioneer family, followed the William Brown family to Alabama.

The Browns settled near what is now called Dolomite and became known as Browntown. Old timers still refer to the area by that name.

Adjacent to Browntown was a small settlement called Snow Springs where the Fairfield Steel Works was erected, beginning in 1917, by the Tennessee Coal Iron and Railroad Company (T.C.I.). Snow Springs died in 1917 when Fairfield Steel Works was born.

Part of the land purchased by T.C.I. for its new facility included the Brown family cemetery at Browntown. The one-half acre cemetery with twenty-seven gravesites was preserved by T.C.I. They enclosed it with a fence and deeded it to the Brown family in 1919. Each year Brown family descendants return to the site, the first Sunday in June, for a Brown Family Memorial Day Reunion.

In 1923 the Brown family descendants erected a stone monument honoring William Brown and his descendants who are buried there.

The early Brown families were active members of Bethlehem Methodist Church.

In 1817 James Rutledge, who came from Tennessee with William Brown in 1816, purchased land for the Bethlehem Methodist Church and cemetery and in 1817 he donated it for the erection of a house of worship. It was completed in 1818. In 1819 Reverend James Tarrant became the first pastor. Early settlers were charter families of the church.

Much of Jefferson County’s growth and development, in its first 150 years, can be attributed to the pioneers who attended Bethlehem Methodist Church at Rutledge Springs.

The church still stands three miles west of Fairfield on ‘Possum Valley Road. It was attended by many of Alabama’s outstanding citizens during their childhood. It is the oldest church in Jefferson County. Many cemetery stones bear the names of Brown, Burgin, Vines, Jones, Hawkins, Fields, Snow, Sadler, Rutledge and many others who were among the settlers in Jones Valley.

Bethlehem Methodist Church still stands on the original location but now in the Dolomite community. It is not the same log building erected thirty years before the Civil War but some of the logs hewn by slaves and hauled by mules and wagons from Tuscaloosa County for the original building are still exposed beams in the church building basement foundation – and still solid.

Bethlehem Church is so old that its history is difficult to verify. It was built before Alabama became a state and before the town of Elyton (now the city of Birmingham) was established.

James Rutledge was a leader in the Bethlehem Methodist Church. His wife Martha Rutledge was the first person buried in the adjoining cemetery.

The Rutledge family homeplace had numerous very cold, clear water springs; this the name Rutledge Springs. Bethlehem Methodist Church was nearby.

There was an abundance of iron ore, coal and limestone in close proximity in Jones Valley, Jefferson County, Alabama in the 1800s. With a known and proven smelting process and the availability of raw materials iron was made in Jones Valley during the Civil War.

The close proximity of these iron and steel making ingredients caused major steps to be taken to develop iron ore mines, coal mines, limestone mines and dolomite quarries. Beehive coke ovens were also built near the coal mines.

Prospective workers immediately moved into the area which expanded rapidly.

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The steel making process spread from the north into Alabama and other areas of the south around the turn of the century following the Civil War. Job seekers were numerous from North, South, East and West. Job opportunities were enhanced in many areas which included Birmingham, Jefferson County and 'Possum Valley.

Many small communities sprang up. Among those was Rutledge Springs. The coal mines and beehive coke ovens at Dolomite and the iron making blast furnaces at Woodward brought many people to the area. Rutledge Springs with its adequate water supply made it an attractive location for families.

Following the Civil War some manufacturers already had iron production facilities in the Birmingham area and during World War I, in 1917, steel making facilities were erected by T.C.I. at Fairfield. U. S. Steel Corporation later took over the T.C.I. operations and greater expansion followed with its finishing mill operations. This brought in more workers. Many chose the Rutledge Springs area in which to reside.

Rutledge Springs was three miles west of the T.C.I. and U.S. Steel operations at Fairfield and the expanding operations at Fairfield and Dolomite by the Woodward Iron Company provided more and more jobs.

The nearest public transportation from Rutledge Springs was the electric driven street cars at Fairfield, which was three miles away, or a mile and one-half walk across a steep hill to the street car line at Wilkes Station. There were a few privately owned jitneys that would make the trip at a few cents per head. Some of the early settlers actually traveled by horse and buggies to the larger towns several miles away. There were very few automobile owners at Rutledge Springs and Dolomite so there was a lot of walking.

Groceries were usually delivered to the homes by the area merchants. Water was carried by family members to their homes from wells and pumps or springs. Home lighting was with kerosene lamps so the fuel was carried to the residences for lighting and in many instances for cooking. There was no electricity, water lines or telephones at Rutledge Springs (and few automobiles) until the middle to late 1920s. Families survived in spite of this lack of luxury.

Building home fires to cook and keep warm in the winter was a necessity.

Neighbors at Rutledge Springs, during those early years, were best friends. Families grew together and enjoyed one another. Children in grammar schools walked a mile or more to and from school. High school students rode county school buses.

You usually walked to and from church twice on Sundays. No one felt abused for this was a way of life. In most situations workers walked to and from their jobs.

Travel was a problem. Going to Birmingham on business or to shop was a sizeable chore which required walking or a jitney ride to Fairfield, a trolley ride to Birmingham. On return it was another trolley ride to Fairfield and if the jitney failed to show up it was a three mile walk from Fairfield or a one and one-half walk from the end of the dummy line at the T.C.I. plant. In spite of this the people of Rutledge Springs adjusted and survived.

Neighbors visited one another and many meetings were held in homes in the community.

Some marriages were between members of families in the same neighborhood. This was particularly true among families of the early settlers but less so after transportation improved.

About one mile north of Rutledge Springs on 'Possum Valley road was a settlement known as Dairytown where they were several dairies and many milk cows. Certain of these dairy owners were Mumpower, Davis, Jones, Cooley and Wilson. They made deliveries to Fairfield and several other areas of Jefferson County.

Rutledge Springs probably reached its peak in population in the middle to late 1920s. The name was changed to Fairfield Highlands around 1930. Transportation to Fairfield and Bessemer expanded. By this time electrical power, water lines and telephones were installed and most families had automobiles. It was a new day in Dixie for the residents.

During World War II the U.S. Steel employment in the Jefferson County area grew to around 35,000. With the changes in the technology of steelmaking and the discontinuance of many of the finishing mill and mining operations the 1992 employment of U.S. Steel (USX) has dropped to less than 3,000 employees.

The new interstate highway system had an adverse effect on the Rutledge Springs community. In the 1970s the North-South U.S. Highway, Interstate 59 joined the East-West U.S. Highway, Interstate 20 a few miles north of

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Birmingham and travels on a common highway to Meridian, Mississippi. I-59-I-20 highway follows 'Possum Valley through Fairfield, Rutledge Springs and Dolomite to and beyond Bessemer. Practically all of the original homesites at Rutledge Springs were torn down and removed to accommodate this new highway system. Fortunately, Bethlehem Methodist Church and Cemetery were untouched and still stand at the original site.

Bethlehem Methodist Church and other churches that had been established during the intervening years remained centers of activity until the late 1950s. However, D. R. Ray's store, until it was demolished for the New Interstate system, held its charm for area residents. There were groceries, a mail pick up and mail drop off station, and of course candy and ice cream cones for the kids as had been customary for many years.

Posterity should be reminded that Rutledge Springs also had much levity and a few dark moments in the 1920s. There was a group of fun loving "young turks" who were residents known as the "5-B's" who saw all and knew everything.

They were:

- "Barney" - Stanley Strain
- "Bill" - William Chappell
- "Brooks" - Brooks Davis
- "Byrd" - Gerald Byrd
- "Baby" - Wilson Strain (the youngest of the group)

They knew everything about anything that was happening in Rutledge Springs and were almost always willing to share their wealth of knowledge with others.

The "B's" also had some rather crude nicknames for several heads of families, such as:

- L. N. Crawford had no hair. He was referred to as "Bald Headed Lon".
- Sam Adkins seldom wore shoes. He was called "Barefooted Sammy".
- G. R. Miles had no teeth. He was called "Gummy Yates".
- A. Z. Strain was called "Fuzzy A.Z."
- D. R. Ray was extremely fat. He was called "Dough Belly Ray".

The "B's" were smart enough not to make such references in Public!

Attached is a sketch of the former Rutledge Springs Community and the location of certain residences and buildings.

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