OLD CROCKER DEPOT IS WELL REMEMBERED

By Rita Hammack

When I was asked to write this article, I was not only flattered but excited as well. The best way to relate some recollections about the depot, I felt, was to conduct several interviews with people who remember the depot in its heyday.

Hite Boren, who is 101 years old, lives in Hawkeye. In addition to looking forward to his 102nd birthday February 27th, he remembers much about the depot.

Boren: "Well, it (the depot) meant a lot to the people. (There we several stores) and I hauled most of the freight, chickens, and eggs, to them (the store owners). I'd take it (the poultry) up there to Heade's...poultry house. George Sparks, he run one then. Crocker is where it all went out from."

Myself: "Mr. Boren, you carried the mail. The mail came in on the train?"

Boren: "Of course, the mail came in on the train."

Myself: "Did you drop the mail at the depot?"

Boren: "No, I didn't bother. (I) just dropped it at the post office. Dan Johnson's wife and daughter ran the post office. He was the prosecutin' attorney, ole Dan was, and a lawyer. Now Babe Hammack was a-livin'. Now he could tell you lots of things."

Myself: "I am certain my Grandpa could tell a lot of stories about the old depot and about Crocker, but I doubt that I'd be able to print all of them. Someone told me that you used to drive wagon loads of stuff to Crocker to be loaded on the train?"

Boren: "Yeah. They shipped some of the stuff--the turkeys. If they didn't want to sell them to the poultry house, I'd drive across the railroad track, back up to the platform, and there was a guy there who helped unload it. That was Charlie Williams' boy. There was a blacksmith shop. Babe was right there behind the post office. Charlie Williams was to the right of it and down a little more west. The post office was down there. Well, when I carried the mail, it was in the old Bill Rowden's stand right across from Skaggs' on the east side of the highway as you go into Crocker. Well, I commenced carryin' in '15 and I registered for the army in that time. I think I was 'round 30 years old."

Myself: "What were your first recollections of the depot when you were a boy?"

Boren: "Well, I was never around it too much. I was born and raised here in Hawkeye...raised over here 2 miles on the highway between here and Crocker. We done most of our tradin' at Bostick and Johnson's. Yeah, my dad and my mother, we took our wool, our eggs and chickens and stuff to Richland; and old Henry Warren bought 'em. He was a captain in the Civil War. And he used to tease me when I was 'bout...3 years old. If I got a little hurt or cried or anything, why, he'd go git me candy. He always gave me that....stick candy. I guess Gertrude Newcomb is a-livin. She sure was a pretty young gal. I understand that she still is mighty pretty."

Myself: "She sure is. You know, My Uncle Harold Newcomb was Gertrude's brother."

Boren: "Oh, yeah. Harold...when they came here...they came not long 'fore I went to carryin' the mail. Harold was little and I'd go up there and Newcomb--Frank--if he had to go to the bank or anything and I was in there (his store), I'd stay 'til he came back."

"You know, after the civil war, they got the railroad to Rolla and the old Union soldiers had an encampment every year. They'd stay four days and they'd be a hundred tents there. They had one in Crocker, that's all they ever had. It was right across the road from the new store out there (H&L Supermarket). I was about 4 years old when they had one in Crocker. They had one at Richland and the rest of 'em in Iberia on the George Farm and the Irving place down there on the Tavern (Creek)."

"They'd just all meet and have all kinds of games and merry-go-rounds...just like a carnival. They were all Union Soldiers...but jest about anyone came who wanted to come. All the old soldiers and their kids could draw (for free beef.) But the others...they had to pay for theirs. Yeah, I was 'bout 4, but I recollect that I almost got a whuppin' 'fore I got to Crocker. We stopped at the Tavern (Creek) and ate dinner and watered the horses and fed 'em. My sister's boy was jest a little younger than I was and we had on light stripe suits they'd made for us of pants. We'd be wearin' dresses at home. It was in August, about the 20th, and we got runnin' barefoot, kickin' up that dust. My sister, Jane, came out there and kinda shook us and said if you boys don't quit that, I'm a gonna whup the hide off'n you. So, anyhow, as soon as she got away, we was back out there. And she got a hickory and came back out there. We promised that we wouldn't do it (anymore and kept our promise.) So, we never got no whuppin'."

Myself: "Mr. Boren, do you know anything amusing that happened around the depot? For instance, my Aunt Lorene told me about the unending marble games and the "not too secret" poker games."

Boren: "Oh, yeah...and the pitchin' horseshoes. Well now, when you cross the railroad track there at the depot and go right on down there, Faust's house was right there on the right. And right down about the third house on the left, there was jest a patch of woods. That was the poker yard. I'd go down there every day and watch (the men) gamble...(but) I never played."

Myself: "What do you remember about the prohibition period?"

Boren: "Oh, I knowed where there was five a'makin it one night. It went everywhere. They put it in milk cans, fruit jars, everything and took it up there (to Crocker) and (other places) and sold it. I remember when they was a-puttin' that double track through Swedeborg, (local men) would collect (the liquor) up and take it up there, and sell it to the boss. He'd sell it to his hands even 'fore payday. He'd put it in everything he could get his hands on. $10 a gallon. I don't imagine they ever shipped it out on the railroad, (but) they might a-took it out of here with them in the baggage or something. Yeah, that (the liquor) was a source of money, unless you made ties. Now, when I carried the mail and didn't have poultry to take, I'd buy ties. I bought them off'n Frank Ferguson."

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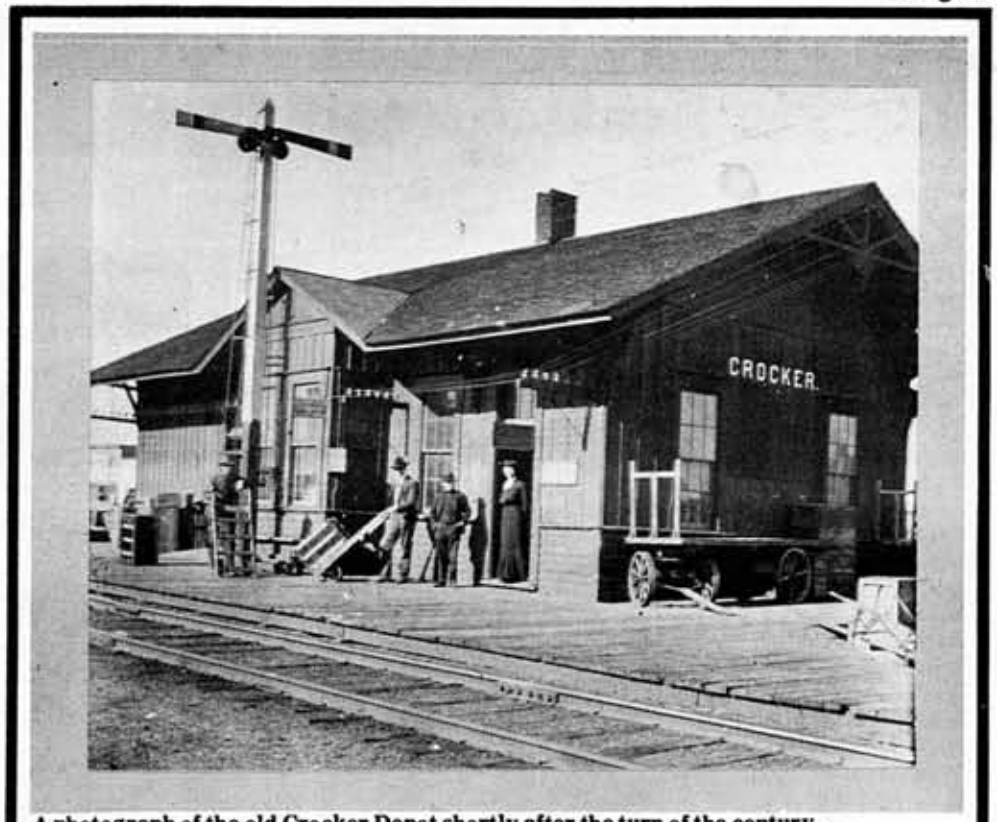
(Continued on Page 13)



A photograph of the old Crocker Depot shortly after the turn of the century.
(Photo Supplied By Nellie Stites Wills)

Saloon just across Maries County line at a time when Pulaski County went dry in the early 1900's.

(Photo Furnished By Lois Kreiser)

OLD CROCKER DEPOT REMEMBERED (CONTINUED)

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"Two of us (mail carriers) got $24 a month. We'd each carry the mail a week at a time. He'd carry a week and then I'd carry a week. We got twenty four dollars and a quarter a month. That's all we got for both of us."

"And so, I'd buy them ties. Then, when I didn't have anything to haul, I took them ties. They brought 30 cents a piece. I'd give a dime or maybe 15 cents. If I'd even make a nickel, I'd take 'em. I had to go anyhow."

"Now, when we went to Crocker the first two years and carried the mail, we went out to Zion Church. And we went right on down here to Charlie Cook's mail box. We'd turn over to the Tavern (Creek) and we had to go right down that bed of the Tavern to where the bridge is now. A lot of times my horses would have to swim even with the ties on."

Myself: "Did you ever get the mail wet?"

Boren: "No. I never had much mail. We never had over 14 boxes. But one day it had been raining all day and I didn't leave until 2 o'clock. I had a wagon with no top on it. I had Chris Adams' cream cans, a ten gallon one and another one, five gallons, for Jimmy Jennings. When I reached the creek, there was a big log washed in there. I couldn't see it, because it was down under. One of my horses fell over that log. Well, that sloshed that water and a big wave come a way up and lifted my buggy over the log. Out came my cream cans. One of my horses started running away. So, I got out, tied my horse to a tree, and waded to the bank and pulled the cream cans out of the water. Fortunately, I didn't have any mail."

Next follows and interview with Gertrude and Everett Wilkes. Mr. Wilkes was a telegrapher and later an agent for the railroad for many years. The couple operated their own chicken hatchery.

Mrs. Wilkes: "Everything in the world was shipped in. It had to be. Everett worked as a telegrapher and later as agent for the railroad at the Crocker Depot for more than 40 years, except for service in the Navy during World War One."

"The depot was the center of Crocker. It had to be. The marble games... and there were benches out in front of the depot. That was the loafing place for the men. They didn't have a park. There was no curbing to sit on and no park."

Mr. Wilkes worked at the Crocker Depot except for a period when he went into the Navy. He was sent to Washington, D.C., when the government needed some good telegraphers. They worked for the Bureau of Navigation. They would take messages by wireless and then radio them to the ships at sea. All of the information was in code, which of course meant nothing to the telegraphers. So, they really had to be good.

Activity around the Old Frisco Depot in Crocker on Cow Day December 28th, 1929.
(Photo supplied by Van Beydler)

Mrs. Wilkes: "In 1933, Everett left the railroad to open his own chicken hatchery. Although most of the chicks were sold locally, 2,000 baby chicks made their way to Florida by train."

Mrs. Wilkes went on to tell about the many bums who traveled by train during the depression years. The bums did not hang around the Depot, according to Mr. Wilkes. It was Mrs. Wilkes' opinion that they all came to her house for a handout.

Money for the banks came in the mail on the freight trains. The drummers (salesmen) had to get to the area by train. Young Crocker men would take them around the country in big, iron-wheeled wagons. Later they used hacks and still later travel was made by car.

Mrs. Wilkes: "By the time my daddy, Floyd Hammock, was a young boy, the salesmen were taken wherever necessary by car. I recall him saying that many times that "T" had to go up as many steep hills backwards as it did frontwise."

Mr. Wilkes: "They had a livery stable, too. The short distances could be covered by buggy, but the vacationers and salesmen had to get to the area first of all by train."

Mrs. Wilkes: "Mr. Mace owned the livery stable, but when he got his first car — and he told this on himself — he got in it and went down to his farm. Of course, everything was fenced in. He got to the gate and yelled, 'Whoa, Whoa!' He put on the clutch and the old fashioned Ford went right on through. Whoa just didn't work!"

The Great Depression was a hard time for Pulaski County residents, as it was for people all over the country. Both Mr. and Mrs. Wilkes remembered many events during that period of time.

Mrs. Wilkes: "Everyone shipped cream during the depression. You were either in the chicken, turkey, or dairy business around here, or you couldn't make any money. That was it. Only one other family I know of, they were in the turkey business, were able to send on child to college. We were able to send ours, but if we hadn't been in the chicken hatchery at the time, we would not have been able to do it."

"It would be a hot boiling day. Everett came in and told me don't ever serve me any butter. I don't want any. I've seen that sweet cream boil out in that sun all day."

The cream was put on trucks to await the time to load them on a freight car. Mr. Wilkes had to load the cans. In the heat of the day, the cream cans not only were bubbling over, they weren't very sweet smelling either.

Everett: "It seemed like we had vacationers coming in everyday, too. They'd go to Cave Lodge, Bartlett Springs. Some stayed in Crocker. Leah and Rufus Neal had a big home that the tourist simply loved. Mrs. Neal had a houseful every summer. She was the most hospitable person you could ever think of. She would come to the door and say, 'I'm so glad you got here alright,' and would make them feel so at home."

Mr. Wilkes: "During the stock market crash, many area businessmen and farmers had invested heavily in the market. They would come and hang around the depot because the only news available came in on the telegraph. They just stood around waiting. You could tell by the looks on their faces that they were losing their money. A man from Waynesville blew his brains out. That happened in Crocker, too."

Harold Newcomb was active until the last few years in the Newcomb Hardware business that he and Gertrude Wilkes' father founded in Crocker. He is still active in local service clubs and in the Crocker Baptist Church.

Mr. Newcomb: "For a young kid around Crocker there wasn't too much to do. So, a lot of our spare time was spent around the old depot. Some of the things I remember most was that they would gather there and have their marble games on the depot platform. Now I wasn't old enough to play some of those marble games. I remember some of the older boys such as Cliff Williams, Elmer Rose, Ott Rose, and Davey Sears. When they played, they'd get down on their knees and try to 'kill each other'. Of course, the main part of it was that they had five marbles in the ring and one in the center — four on the outside and one in the middle. And then, they stood so far from that ring. If they shot the middle marble out of the ring, they won. Otherwise, there were four who played and had to clear the ring. The one who cleared the ring first won that game or 'killed the other fellows off'."

"The best times I remember about the depot more than anything is that we did spend a lot of time there during the winter months when it was cold. We would go into the depot and sit by the old iron coal stoves. They wouldn't get very hot because they were made of cast iron. I don't know whatever happened to those old stoves. But anyway, we spent a lot of time around them telling yarns and big tales. We had a lot of fun."

"Now in the depot in those early days there were three operators and they had eight hour shifts. So, there was somebody there for the full 24 hour day. And along with that, there was an agent who worked throughout the day and took care usually of the freight. These operators used the telegraph and sent messages and gave orders to the train operators."

"I also recollect that in national election years like we're coming up to now, the telegraph was the only way that we actually got the returns. Now, of course, through television and radio we get it right off the reel. But in those days it would have been several days before we would find out how

OLD DEPOT (CONTINUED)

the election went, if we hadn't had the telegraph. The depot was the center point for those election years."

"A lot of us would go and meet the trains. We had trains that ran around the noon hour — one going west and the other one going east. They were local trains, but the one that I think we really went to meet the most was late in the afternoon about six o'clock. It was the old Train Number Nine, which came from St. Louis. On that train were a lot of people from St. Louis. They came out here, got off here at Crocker and would go to the Pippin Place. Some of them would go to Cave Lodge on the Gasconade River. It was amusing to see how they were dressed and the fun they were having in laughing, talking, and planning their vacations."

"In the early 20's, we used to go to St. Louis on excursion trains to see the baseball games out at Sportsman's Park. We would sit in the waiting room in the old depot waiting for those trains, which would have 12 or 15 cars, everyone of them filled. They'd start out at Springfield, Missouri, and stop at practically every station between Crocker and St. Louis. We'd get back into Crocker about daylight. We really had some good times, even though we lost a lot of sleep over it."

That concludes what I hope were very interesting interviews for you to read. Before closing, I'd like to share with you this excerpt from Nellie Stites Wills' "The First Hundred Years of Crocker".

"We have a landmark in Crocker. The Frisco Railroad Depot. We can truthfully say that it was the beginning of Crocker. Before it came into existence, there was a trading post northwest of Crocker called Humboldt — but no Crocker."

"Crocker was a product of the railroad and named for one of the railroad's officials."

"We have had the depot for 116 years. Many from Waynesville, Iberia, and surrounding areas remember sitting in its waiting room, heated by a pot bellied stove, waiting for Number Nine or some other passenger train to take them to some distant point. It was a link with the outside world and served to spark a bit of glamour to an otherwise drab existence."

"Now it is numbered with the endangered species. The railroad has had no need for its depot for a number of years and has destroyed a number of them, including the ones at Richland and Dixon. The one at Crocker is designated for the same fate. Citizens are uniting in a move to preserve this historic building and are inviting and soliciting your help."

SAVE DEPOT

If we do not save the Old Crocker Depot, no one five, fifty, or 100 years of age (from today) will know what a depot was and how vitally important it was to our glorious midlands of America.

As proof of this point, I'm reminded of a story told by Edna June Adamson, who went to the Crocker grade school not long ago to talk with a group of 1st graders. She asked the children if they knew just what a depot was. There was a short silence. Then a little boy raised his hand and said he knew the answer. "A depot," he said while stretching his little arms out as far as they would go to form a circle, "is a big round hole about this size... and it's very, very deep in the ground."

Our children deserve to learn about the true importance of the Old Frisco Depot and the vital role it played in the formation and development of Crocker as a community. With the help from all of us, the old depot can have another 116 years of useful life as an important part of Pulaski County as a Railroad Museum and Community Center. I think the next 100 years will be even more exciting. Do you agree?

The Dixon canning plant canned tomatoes. Picture dates around the 1920's.

(Photo Furnished By Lois Kreiser)

Built in 1905, the Dixon school building housed the high school upstairs and the grade school downstairs.

(Photo Furnished By Lois Kreiser)