

A HISTORY OF PLEASANTS COUNTY

CHAPTER I

GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION

Pleasants county is in the northwestern part of West Virginia, extending about eighteen miles along the Ohio river, its general direction being that of the river, southwest. Its greatest length is from the mouth of Sheets run in the line of Tyler county to the mouth of Bull creek, about twenty and one-half miles; the average distance from the river to the line of Ritchie county is about seven miles, varying from nine miles at Hebron to five miles near the head of Schultz Fork of French creek.

On the east it is bounded by Tyler county and on the south by Ritchie and Wood counties—the three counties from which it was formed. On the northwest lies Washington county, Ohio. It is one of the smallest counties in the State, having an area of 130 square miles. Only the counties of Hancock, Brooke and Ohio are smaller.

The title of West Virginia embraces the Ohio river to the low water mark on the farther shore, consequently several of the beautiful islands of that stream belong to Pleasants county. The first of these, following the flow of the river, are Grape and Bat Islands, about three miles above the town of St. Marys. The narrow channel between these

two islands has been partly filled with silt, so that now they form practically but one island, being separated only in high water. Grape Island received its name from the great tangle of grape vines found on it by the early settlers, and Bat Island, which is much smaller, was so called because it was infested by bats.

Barely half a mile farther down stream we come to Middle Island, getting its name from the fact that a large creek discharges itself about midway of its length. It lies close to the West Virginia shore, being separated from it only by a narrow creek known as the Thoroughfare. Ordinarily water from the river flows the whole length of the Thoroughfare, but when Middle Island creek is swollen by heavy rains, its waters flow up around the head of the island as well as down towards its foot, converting it into a true delta. The city of St. Marys lies opposite to the lower half of this island.

Proceeding down the river, below the mouth of French creek, are the Three Brothers Islands, named in honor of the Briscoe brothers, who are said to have taken tomahawk claims on them about 1783. The First Brother Island lies close to the main shore at Belmont, and the separating channel has so filled in recent years that now it is really a part of the mainland. The writer remembers skating in this channel in February, 1879, but for several years corn has been grown where the water of the river then flowed.

The Second Brother Island, commonly known as Broadhead because of the wide sandy bar which almost blocks the river in low water, lies well out in midstream. The boat channel, as in the case of almost all the islands in the whole course of the river, is on the Ohio side, and in order to scour out that channel, making it deeper, the Federal Government built a dyke about thirty-five years ago extending from the main shore just below French creek to the head of the island, resulting in the dead water below the dam becoming rapidly filled with silt. These two islands probably originated from the detritus carried out of French creek.

The Third Brother Island, located also well out in the river, perhaps owes its existence to McElroy run, and

Willow Island, which nestles close to the shore about a mile below, is perhaps a creation of Cow creek.

All of these islands have very fertile soil and are not much affected by high water, except in case of extreme floods. Permanent residences have been built on three of them—Grape, Middle and Broadhead Islands. They are especially adapted to growing peaches and small fruits, while the yield of corn is unexcelled.

The width of the Ohio varies greatly. At Bens Run it measures 1,320 feet between the low water marks on either shore, and at St. Marys the width is 1,056 feet. There are proportionately greater variations in the depth of the channel. At Bens Run the depth at low water is 2.3 feet; just above Grape Island it is 19 feet; about midway of Middle Island it is shallowest, being a little less than two feet; at St. Marys it gets down to 20 feet, and at Vaucuse to 23 feet. According to old rivermen, however, the low water marks set by government surveyors are not always to be relied upon, and one instance has been related to the effect that men rowing a skiff were compelled to look upward to see the established low water mark. This has led to occasional disputes as to the actual height of a flood.

Since the completion of the dams and locks built by the Federal Government steamboats have been enabled to navigate the river at all times excepting when prevented by very heavy ice. Before the dams were built, the depth was greatly affected by long continued drouths, so that only very small flat-bottomed boats could get over the shoals. At Grape Island and at Middle Island wagons have been driven from shore to shore.

The river has a fall of about six inches to the mile, giving it a slow current. It is subject, especially in early Spring, to sudden freshets, when its speed is increased to five or six miles an hour. These rises are usually due to thaws, melting snow and rain about the headwaters of the Allegheny or Monongahela rivers. As the Allegheny rises in northern Pennsylvania and flows through a part of New York, while the Monongahela rises in the interior of West Virginia, it is fortunately seldom that both of those streams pour out their over-swollen waters at the same

time. However, that happened in February, 1884, producing the largest flood known up to that time in the Ohio Valley. The flood of March, 1913, which affected the valley only south of Wheeling, was the result of rain alone falling over the entire State of Ohio.

Formerly the river was replete with all kinds of fresh-water fish, affording a good livelihood for many fishermen, as then there were no restrictions as to the amount of the catch or as to the means employed. The water was usually very clear and there were long stretches of sand or gravel beaches, backed by willows and balsam poplars or tacamahacs. Of late years, however, great quantities of poisonous acids, refuse from the manufactories, drain into it, making the water quite green and killing immense quantities of fish. At one time we recall seeing it literally white from one shore to the other with the upturned bodies of slain fish, and the smell of their decaying bodies was noticeable at a considerable distance.

The raising of the water level by the dams has entirely covered the white beaches. The average level of the pool formed by the dam is about 580 feet above sea level, or about eight feet above low water, so that a comparatively slight rise in the river will cover the dams. A rise of thirty feet sends the water over the lowest bottoms. But the floods carry down great quantities of silt, thus continually renewing the fertility of the low lands and gradually building them higher. At times the depth of this deposit on land that was covered by quiet backwater has been from two to four inches. But most of the bottom land in this county is above the highest flood known, and only a small portion is subject to overflow by an ordinary freshet.

This bottom land, or alluvial plain, extends the entire length of the county, a distance of eighteen miles, being broken only in two places by what are termed "narrows," where the river beats close to the foot of the hills. One of these is at Raven Rock and the other at Vaucluse. There are two or three terraces of these bottom lands, mostly composed of sand and gravel carried down from the upper waters towards the close of the glacial period.

The surface is usually composed of a rich humus, and in places there is an admixture of clay, rendering the land suitable for every kind of crop that can be grown in a temperate climate.

Back of the bottoms rise the hills, to the height of about 1100 feet above sea level, their several terraces showing evidences of the erosion that has been tearing them down through countless ages. Where the streams have cut deep channels in the ancient plateau, the several levels are easily traced on opposite sides of the valleys. For the most part the hills form long ridges, separating the streams, but in some places are unmistakable signs of cross currents and possibly of lakes, as might have been the case in the neighborhood of Arvilla, where there is a large area of low hills, the summits two or three hundred feet lower than the surrounding ridges.

The highest point in the county is on the old State Road ridge, which separates this county from Ritchie, near the head of Burnt Cabin Run. It is 1232 feet above sea level. The next highest point is 1207 feet high, near the residence of D. M. McCullough, a short distance west of Adlai postoffice

Though many of the hillsides are so steep as to be almost precipitous, yet the summits are gently rounded, affording excellent pasture and ideal sites for apple orchards. It is well known that the fruit grown on the hill tops has a much better flavor than that grown in the valleys.

The county is well supplied with streams. Excepting the Ohio river, the largest stream is Middle Island creek, which rises in the southeastern border of Doddridge county and flows through that county and Tyler before entering Pleasants near the village of Shiloh. Its length has been estimated variously between 150 and 200 miles, and it is designated as the longest creek in the world. Really its length and volume of water would entitle it to be ranked with the rivers, and, in fact, we have seen it stated that some of the first comers attempted to fasten upon it the name of Louisa river. The late Virgil A. Lewis, first State Historian of West Virginia, reports it as Be-yan-soss creek, a name given to it by the Indians, but whose mean-

ing is unknown, while a map of about 1753 gives it as By-en-soss. When Washington voyaged down the Ohio in 1770 he says it was known as Bull's creek, from a trapper of that name who frequented it.

After entering this county its course is generally parallel to that of the Ohio, from which it is separated by Mount Carmel ridge. Originally the creek probably joined the river below Newport, the Mount Carmel ridge then terminating in the hill on the farther side of the river, opposite St. Marys. The river then flowed westward, through what is known as Ferguson's Valley, to Milltown, where it again turned to the south. So the river dug into the ridge on the north while the creek attacked it from the southeast, their combined efforts wearing it down until a new channel was made for the river and the hill became isolated. This theory seems plausible, and would perhaps account for the high bottom land on which the greater part of St. Marys is located, and it is strengthened by the fact that there is plenty of river gravel on the Kelley farm, it having been probably washed there when the river broke through the ridge barrier.

In the floods of 1884 and 1913 the waters of the river again flowed in their ancient channel through Ferguson's Valley, completely encircling the Newport hill.

The principal tributaries of Middle Island creek in this county are Sugar creek and McKim creek, both rising in Tyler county, the latter being much the larger stream.

French creek, Cow creek and Bull creek are the other chief streams, all rising in the dividing ridge between this county and Ritchie, flowing northwest and emptying into the Ohio. French creek, whose mouth is about three miles below St. Marys, is $12\frac{1}{2}$ miles long and has a fall of 345 feet. Cow creek, a little shorter with about the same fall, empties into the river about seven miles below St. Marys. Bull creek, which enters the river ten miles below St. Marys, is credited with being $13\frac{1}{2}$ miles long and with a fall of 265 feet. The last named stream separates this county from Wood. All these streams have narrow valleys, with very little bottom land.

The Burning Springs-Eureka anticlinal or fold crosses the western part of the county, entering just below Borland, then running north to Cow creek near the mouth of Pedro run, in which course it crosses Horseneck. From Cow creek it runs northeast to the Ohio river at the mouth of French creek. The anticlinal is an upward break in the strata of the earth, forming a ridge from which the otherwise level beds of rock and earth slope on either side. The summit of this ridge has been eroded, leaving some of the lower strata exposed. At various places along this anticlinal oil bearing rocks are found lying on the surface. In fact, it was on this fold that oil was first found in West Virginia, both at Burnings Springs in Wirt county and at Horseneck in Pleasants. This discovery led to the conclusion which has since been verified that oil in considerable quantities is very apt to be found on anticlinals. The large rocks piled in mass near the base of the hill on the farm of T. C. Hammett, near Eureka, are samples of this oil bearing stratum.

However, while oil has been found in greatest profusion along this fold of the earth's crust, it has also been discovered in every portion of Pleasants county in varying rocks, or sands, as they are technically called. On Horseneck run the first producing sand is found at a depth of from 100 to 300 feet, or at 700 to 500 feet above sea level. This sand, locally called the Horseneck, is considered identical with the First Cow Run sand, and is recorded in the Smith well at Belmont at 520 feet above sea level.

These oil sands are far from being uniform in thickness, and in some places either thin away or break off entirely, leaving no trace. This may account for the wide divergences often found in well records or logs, some acknowledging only two Cow Run sands, others three; some taking account of the first and second Salt sands, the Maxton, the Keener and the Big Injun, while others classify all these as of the Big Injun series. Each sand, however, has its distinct characteristics, easily distinguished by experienced drillers.

The Smith well log did not put the Horseneck in the Cow Run series, for he records that he came to the First

Cow Run sand 294 feet below the Horseneck, or 126 feet above sea level. The log of the Brockunier well in the same field does not mention the Horseneck or the First Cow Run, but states that the Second Cow Run sand was struck at 80 feet above sea level, and curiously enough the Second Cow Run sand is noted in the log of a well drilled on the Arn farm at Lytton as at exactly the same level. The Brockunier well was on the anticlinal while the Arn well was about ten miles east by north.

The record of the Cooper Hollow well near St. Marys shows the depths of some of the sands below sea level: First Salt sand, 7 feet below; Second Salt 357 feet; Maxton sand, 452 feet; Keener, 572 feet; Big Injun, 592 feet, and Berea, 1152 feet below. In the Arn well at Lytton the number of feet below sea level: First Salt, 180; Maxton, 640; Keener, 740, and Big Injun, 808. In the A. W. Gorrell well on Cave Run near Hebron, drilling from a little more than 800 feet above tide, the log gives the First Salt sand at 1166 feet; Maxton, 1673 feet; Keener, 1792 feet; Big Injun, 1816 feet; Berea, 2273 feet; Gordon, 2553 feet, and the Fifth sand, 2656 feet.

Most of the oil produced in Pleasants county comes from the Cow Run and Salt sands, and it is all of a notably high grade quality. Some maintain that there is yet a strong probability that the deeper sands, when exploited, will yield plentifully. Gas in varying quantities is found in all parts of the county, but chiefly in the southern part, around Schultz. Usually enough gas is found in the oil wells to furnish power for pumping them.

While coal underlies almost all the county, the beds are thin and cannot be worked to advantage except in a few instances. Some of fairly good quality has been produced from the hills about St. Marys, the veins being from twelve to sixteen inches thick. In the neighborhood of Borland two or three mines are still operated for local use, and the beds are from two to three feet thick.

There are no massive beds of limestone, yet shallow strata of three or four feet in thickness are found everywhere. It is very hard and so far as known contains no fossils. On Sled Fork of Cow creek is found a thin layer of black limestone crowded with white fossil shells,

apparently minute clams or cockles. In the neighborhood of Belmont there is said to be a considerable showing of limestone of such quality that it could be burned, and a few years ago it was proposed to establish lime kilns there.

Sandstones, or freestones, of many grades are plentiful. In Tannery Hollow, below St. Marys, occur thick beds of Sewickley sandstone, of fine texture, the grains varying in color from gray to buff. This has been utilized for building purposes and also in late years for the manufacture of grindstones. On the ridge between Shawnee run and Middle Island creek is found a stone so soft that it can easily be cut with a heavy hoe, and is used in making concrete.

Good brick clay is plentiful, beds twelve to fifteen feet thick being found under the coal seams. And along the base of all the river hills is a good pottery clay, analysis showing more than 23 per cent of alumina and 70 per cent of silica.

In drilling oil wells sulphur water is occasionally encountered. One of these wells, said to have fine medicinal properties, is near the mouth of Broad run. At Borland is a sulphur and salt well of such acknowledged virtues that an hotel has been built to accommodate the many who resort there for the sake of their health. A few miles east of that is the Triplett mineral well, yielding about the same constituents, whose water had an extensive sale throughout the east about two score of years ago.

The climate is a fine average of the temperate zone. The temperature rarely gets above 90 in the summer or below zero in the winter. The average mean for February, the coldest month, is 29.2 degrees, and for July, the warmest month, 75.4 degrees. The mean annual temperature is 53.2 degrees. The average killing frosts occur on April 24 and October 16, giving about six months of growing weather. The snowfall averages 39.2 inches, and the rainfall average is 46.83 inches. The records show that we may depend on 100 days of clear sunshine every year.

The prevailing wind is from the southwest. Fortunately, this section seems to lie outside the paths of the great storms, for there is no record of anything more than what

might be called a "stiff gale" occurring within the county.

The rich flavor of fruit grown on the hills has been mentioned, and in addition the same peculiarity is said to mark the hill-grown potatoes, especially when grown in the clay soil locally known as "white oak clay." This soil, when properly tilled, will withstand quite a long drouth, and a yield of 100 to 200 bushels of potatoes per acre can usually be depended on. The average yield of corn on hill land is 25 bushels, and of wheat about 20. On the river bottoms corn will produce from 40 to 80 bushels, and potatoes 200 bushels and more. These are staple crops, but the diversity of farm products as exhibited at the annual county fair is remarkable, and demonstrates that whatever can be grown in a temperate zone can be successfully produced here, so varied are the soils and their adaptability. The river and creek bottoms are peculiarly suited to early truck gardening, and their value for that purpose is greatly enhanced by good roads and near markets.

Another matter upon which emphasis should be placed is that blue grass, red top and clover are indigenous over the entire county. After a clearing has been effected no seeding for pasture has to be made. Visitors from the north and east have frequently commented with surprise that our hills remain green all through the winter. This indicates that it is an ideal section for cattle raising and dairying, and every hillside can produce unfailing springs of fine water.

It is recorded that the early settlers on the river bottoms raised their own cotton, but a crop could not always be depended on and the growing of flax was much easier. But we have seen fairly good cotton produced in a hillside garden, leading us to believe that with a proper selection of site and suitable cultivation even this crop could be made available.

The people are mainly of Anglo-Saxon descent, among whom may be properly classed the Scotch-Irish, who settled here about 1820. There are a few of French, Irish and German descent. Many of the early settlers came from Virginia, east of the mountains, and some from