

HISTORIC MOMENTS IN WILSON COUNTY, TEXAS

NATH F. WATKINS

SOME FAMILY EXPERIENCES IN HIS EARLY YEARS AT KICASTER

Nath Watkins was born September 11, 1865 in Bexar County near Atkins. When he was six months old his family moved to the Kicaster Community in Wilson County. His early life here on the then frontier after the American Civil War involved hard times with seemingly no money, meager schooling and endless furrows that required plowing to raise food for survival. At the end of the American Civil War, prices were high and money was scarce. The family learned to live without a lot of things. With flour selling at \$19.00 a barrel, corn was substituted for making bread. The corn was raised on the farm and taken to a grist mill to be ground. The grist mill was eight miles from the farm and the grinding charge was one-fourth of the ground product. Later on the mill site had a cotton gin and a lumber mill.

At this time there were no fences and barbed wire was not yet available. Livestock lived on the open range. The Watkins family didn't have many cattle but they did have a lot of hogs. The hogs would fatten on post oak and black jack acorns and grow to a weight of 300-400 pounds. When winter arrived, the family would butcher forty to fifty hogs. In the evening the butchered meat would be placed on top of the barn to cool. This was the only type of refrigeration available then. The barn roof was made of 18 inch post oak split boards and if these boards were properly laid, the roof wouldn't leak. Nath's father would then make a brine solution and cover the meat prepared for bacon which had been placed in a barrel. Then, on top of the barrel's contents he put brown sugar and developed some of the best "sugar-cured bacon" available in the area. The surplus bacon which the family didn't consume was sold for two and one-half to three cents per pound.

The Watkins place was a league of land out of the Chatman survey and Mr. Watkins wanted to buy additional land. However, he didn't have available funds to make such a purchase. A few miles from their place lived an older gentleman named Tiner. Mr. Watkins visited with Mr. Tiner and told him what he had in mind, but he didn't have the amount of money needed. The old man asked him how much money he needed and Mr. Watkins advised him that he needed \$1000.00. Mr Tiner then suggested they follow him back to an old log house which had cotton seed in it. In the northwest corner of the room he raked back the cotton seed until he uncovered a barrel. Inside the barrel was a big can filled with bags of money. The bags were canvas shot-bags, which originally had held 25 pounds of shot but now they were filled with silver dollars. Enough of the bags were carried out of the log house and placed in rows on the wagon bed until \$1000 had been collected. Mr. Watkins inquired about what type of note he needed but the old man replied, "Your word is as good as your note would be". The loan was fully paid off in time at an interest rate of 10%.

Nath was taught to plow as soon as he could follow one. He would begin plowing at sun-up with an old bull-tongue plow and was very good at laying off straight rows. In fact, he was so good his dad would trade him off to neighbors to lay off rows in their fields. These neighbors would in turn work on his dad's farm to replace Nath's time.

There were nine children in the Watkins family and even the boys had to assist in washing the clothes. In those early days a battling stick was used to beat the clothes. It is surprising how clean the clothes would become by just beating them. Later wash boards became available. These boards were merely wooden boards with grooves cut across them which made ridges for rubbing the clothes.

The replacement of the battling sticks occurred at almost the same time as kerosene lamps began to replace the grease lamps which were used for lighting. In addition to grease lamps, tallow candles were also used. These candles were made in molds in which eight or ten candles could be poured at one time.

Nath's early schooling was during the depth of the post Civil War Reconstruction Days. Children went to school dirty-faced, barefoot and half clothed most of the time. School was in a small wood building built by the neighbors. The annual school sessions were very short, lasting only a few months. However, it was adequate for the children to learn to write and spell and even have spelling matches. What the children especially enjoyed was the end of school programs when everyone was able to give speeches and recitations.

In between doing family chores and school the local boys would go coon hunting at night. Before taking off at night one of the boys in the group would manage to grab a chicken off his mother's hen roost. Other boys would bring bread and other stuff and about midnight while the dogs were hunting the friends would stop and build a fire. After cooking the chicken and preparing the other foods, they would enjoy a feast. The dogs were trained to come back to the group at the sound of a hunting horn. The horn would be blown and the dogs would go back home.

Whenever meat was really wanted in the home, Mr. Watkins would take his old deer gun, a muzzle-loading citizen rifle, and bring in a deer at most any time. With the hogs the family had, plus the sweet potatoes and Irish potatoes which were raised, there was always plenty of food to eat, even for visitors. At times, travelers would come by on the road in front of their place and stop and spend the night. They were always made to feel welcome and given meals and beds. There was also corn and fodder for their animals.

At the age of sixteen, Nath left home to begin life on his own. He traveled west to Frio County where he developed a livelihood as a ranch hand and then a trail driver.

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