

## THE DEATH SONG OF PURDY

By Nancy Wardlow Kennedy

It was a beautiful, little town nestled between the hills and forests and carved out of the wilderness by proper ladies and tough, clever men.

Purdy, established in 1825, was the county seat of McNairy County until 1890 but within a few years of the removal of the courthouse there was nothing to show for the 65 years except a few homes and deserted buildings. Almost overnight it became a ghost town.

The brick courthouse, built in 1830, was in the center of the public square and surrounded by general merchandise stores, saloons, livery stables, eating houses, an old tavern, shoe and saddle shop, stage stand, masonic lodge, offices of lawyers and doctors and at least one hotel. On the west side of court square was a theater call Thespain Hall where many masterpieces of Shakespeare was enacted. The town consisted of two streets, three hundred feet apart and about a half a mile long joined at each end with a half circle.

Purdy, the town among the hills, obtained a high level of social, educational, cultural and economic welfare. Judge Pitts stated that in 1875 Purdy "was the prettiest and most delightful town in the whole Eleventh Judicial Circuit."

A. W. Stovall, in his 1897 Reunion address, called Purdy beautiful and historic. "What memories well up in the hearts of those who saw Purdy in the zenith of her glory. She was the peer of the proudest and no town of any size or station ranked her in the intelligence of her men or the virtue of her women." Stovall describes Purdy in 1854 as a place with beautiful streets, costly houses, rich gardens, aromatic flowers, brave men and noble women pretty girls and playful boys, a picture of perfection.

But time and circumstances laid a heavy hand and before 1897 Purdy lay in ruins and desolation and all that was left was the memories of a picturesque and enchanting past.

Circumstances being the Mobile and Ohio Railroad and those that did not want the railroad in Purdy. The time, being that era, in which the railroad was the connection to the rest of the world.

The Mobile and Ohio railroad was chartered in 1848 and wanted to go through or by the town of Purdy providing the county would raise \$50,000 in taxes and \$50,000 in stock subscriptions. An election was held and the measure was defeated because the largest taxpayers opposed the measure. Oral tradition has been handed down that the elite of Purdy did not want to dirty their exquisite, little town with a dust flying, steam billowing engine that belched smoke from its furnace.

In the 1850's the train was important. Greater distances could be traveled in shorter time. Trains would bring food, mail and medicine and bridge even the most desolate place to the rest

of the world. Purdy's leaders, whoever they were, Judge Pitts named W. S. Wisdom, did not have the insight to see this and sealed their doom.

In 1858 the railroad was built through McNairy County but about 4 miles west of Purdy. Soon people began to move along the railroad. Falcon was one of the first towns to be established on the new railroad. Others included Bethel Springs and Finger and McNairy in the northern part of the county and Guys and Ramer in the southern part.

About fifty miles of rail tracked through McNairy County and the constant clackety clack put more than train wheels in motion. After the civil war, talk began of moving the county seat to a point on the railroad. Thus began a twenty year struggle and at least twelve attempts were made before a successful move to Selmer was made in 1891.

Documentation on the early removal elections has not been found but during the 1870's feelings grew intense and the courthouse was burned in March 1881. Thereafter court was held in an old store building because the County Court refused to rebuild.

Both Bethel Springs and Falcon rallied for the crowning glory of having the county seat. Both towns had been established on the railroad. Bethel Springs was located 4 miles west of Purdy and Falcon was seven miles south of Bethel Springs.

Bethel Springs had early visions. When the town was laid out in 1860 a court square was included. Even in 1887, sentiment was still strong and in the Tatum Addition (east of the railroad) another court square was laid out.

Falcon was one of the first towns to be established on the M & O Railroad in 1858. 54 lots were laid off and beautiful, mulberry trees adorned the streets. The town began to flourish in 1871 when several stores opened. (Falcon also died after the birth of Selmer.)

In July 1881 a meeting was held at Falcon for the purpose of organizing a campaign to remove the county seat to Falcon or to some other point on the M & O Railroad.

Apparently this was not the first meeting or election because plans were to assure the question of removal would never come up again.

In January 1884, being without a courthouse since 1881, the court ordered a committee to secure bids for a new courthouse at Purdy. Those on the committee were Moses Kirkpatrick, R. B. Turner, J. G. Combs, and J. P. Prince.

At the July 1884 session the court awarded the contract to William P. George of Kentucky to build the courthouse at Purdy for \$10,873 and to be finished by December 1, 1884. This courthouse was never built. The contract was suspended at the October session.

At this same quarterly court a group of citizens of Falcon agreed to build and donate a 60 x 40 foot, two story courthouse

at Falcon with four rooms on the first floor and walls two brick thick. These citizens consisted of L. J. M. Nelson, John Ray, J. J. Horn, Prather & Simpson (merchants) W. E. Darby, Erwin & Bro (merchants) F. P. Browder, H. C. Gooch, Josiah Jeans, W. H. Stone and W. E. Tedford.

At this time the Court ordered W. D. Jopling, Sheriff to hold an election for the purpose of voting on the question of removal from Purdy to Falcon to be held on Saturday August 23, 1884. On October 6 the vote was counted as: 1921 for removal to Falcon and 560 against it. The Court declared that 1921 was two thirds of the qualified vote and declared removal to Falcon. The committee appointed to remove records and secure a building was J. L. Smith, W. H. Stone, W. J. Darby, John F. Gilmer and W. E. Atkins.

There is no data recorded in the minutes of the McNairy County Court from October 1884 through April 1885. From May 1885 to May 1886 court was held at Falcon.

Immediately, those opposing the removal obtained an injunction. Chancellor Nixon heard the case and his decision was in favor of Purdy, therefore no removal. The case was settled by a Supreme Court decision also in favor of Purdy. In June 1886 the county seat was back at Purdy.

There was an election on August 21, 1886 to remove to Bethel Springs. No vote totals were recorded. Vote was for removal to Bethel Springs but apparently there were many ballots that just said "removal" instead of "removal to Bethel Springs" and it was unclear which way to count the ballots that just said "removal." The court voted as to whether the county seat had been moved from Purdy to Bethel Springs. Carried 5. Not carried 12.

On April 4, 1887 the court ordered a survey made to ascertain the most suitable and available place on the Mobile & Ohio Railroad, as near as practicable to the center of the county. Those appointed to conduct this survey were R. W. Michie, County Surveyor and a representative from each district: John F. Gilmer, Cornelius Graham, J. T. Houston, Thomas J. Huggins, W. W. Stone, Asa Bell, M. Kirkpatrick, John Aldridge, J. H. Wright, John B. Jopling, J. P. Atkins, R. T. Beck, Lewis B. Carter, J. T. Barnhill, T. B. Cox, Sidney Plunk, J. A. Bishop and J. J. Parrish.

The three sites considered were Bethel Springs, Falcon and Selmer. Selmer was declared the most suitable place near the center of the county and the election ordered for removal to Selmer (or New South as it was then known) for August 27, 1887 failed.

A meeting was attended by several thousand people on July 9, 1887 (prior to the election for removal) to rally for removal to New South (now Selmer). At this time the town of New South was still a dream. The settlement in 1887 consisted of one small store, one residence and one sawmill.

Moving the county seat to Selmer was conceived by P. H.

Thrasher. When Thrasher acquired the land where Selmer is now located he cleared the land, laid off streets and numbered lots. The proposed town was called New South which afterwards was changed to Selmer because the post office department would not accept two words. A new application was submitted for the name Selma but the word was misspelled and was approved as Selmer.

A second election was ordered and also failed. In April 1888 a petition was presented to request the court to call election for removal to Bethel Springs. This petition failed by one vote. 18 against and 17 for. Instead the court ordered an election for August 5 for removal to Selmer. No vote totals were recorded in the minutes but it did not receive the necessary vote for removal.

Thrasher organized the McNairy County Real Estate and Investment Company in 1889, to which he deeded almost all the business property of the proposed town with the agreement that the company build a courthouse and deed it to the county. The money for the courthouse to come from the sale of the lots. Members of the company were: P. H. Thrasher, R. D. Anderson, John T. Warren, Samuel Chambers, A. C. Hamm, H. L. W. Lancaster, H. P. Wood and J. W. Purviance.

After a petition filed by the McNairy County Real Estate and Development Company on behalf of the citizens of McNairy County a third election was held on July 26, 1890 and carried 2063 to 563.

G. D. McBee and other citizens of Purdy brought suit to declare the election void and prevent the move to Selmer and lost. Thus ending the twenty year struggle for removal and Purdy withered and died. The County Court held its first session at the new county seat April 7, 1891.

On June 16, 1891, ceremonies were held to lay the corner stone for the new courthouse. A large crowd of people gathered. There was music, speeches and a big picnic at the spring in the hollow north of town.

Contents of the corner stone was: a list of the names of the Board of Directors of the McNairy County Real Estate and Development Company, a Holy Bible, a history of the Rose Creek Lodge, a list of the officers of said lodge in charge of the ceremonies of laying the corner stone, a list of county officers, a catalogue of Henderson Christian College, a lot of stamps of various denominations, a section of the stake driven to mark the center of the county, a copy of the proceeding of the Grand Lodge of Tennessee for 1891, an arrow head taken from the skull of a Comanche Chief, a lot of coins bearing the date of the year 1891, a letter directed to who-ever may be Post Master at Rose Creek when --- the corner stone shall again see the light, a lot of other relics and copy of the Pepper Box which was the first and only paper then being published in Selmer.

Election Dates and Returns  
Required 2/3 of qualified voters

Date, Question, and Results, if found:

Aug 1, 1877 point on M & O Railroad  
1585 for removal  
833 against

August 1878 point on M & O Railroad  
1692 for removal  
727 no removal

August 1879 Bethel Springs or Falcon  
Results not found

July 4, 1881 From Purdy  
2104 for removal  
430 no removal

Nov 10, 1881 Select a Site  
Results not found

Aug 23, 1884 To Falcon  
1921 for removal  
560 no removal  
1 to Bethel  
2 Sims Tatum's  
2 removal

Oct 21, 1886 To Bethel Springs  
Results not found

Aug 27, 1887 To Selmer  
1580 to Selmer  
489 no removal  
26 to Falcon  
1 to Center  
1 Forty Forks  
5 to Bethel  
3 to Purdy  
124 removal

Aug 5, 1888 To Selmer  
Results not found  
Failed

July 16, 1890 To Selmer  
2063 to Selmer  
563 against

According to J. Louis Adams twelve election were held on the question of removal. The documentation for the other three elections have not been found.

The constant question in all elections was what constituted a two-thirds majority of qualified voters. The complainants argued there was a difference between two-thirds of the total that voted and two-thirds of those qualified to vote. Another argument was a ballot that said only "removal" should be not counted and that the ballot should state removal to Selmer or Falcon or Bethel. In the July 16, 1890 election complainants argued that 431 ballots that said only "removal" should not be counted, that all ballots counted should say "removal to Selmer." They also contended that 2063 was not a two-thirds majority of the 3,500 they could prove were entitled to vote.

John A. Pitts represented the Complainants until the final case after the election of 1890 in which he represented the Defendants. Pitts was reported to have said he could have prevented the removal of the courthouse to Selmer just as he had prevented it to Bethel Springs and Falcon. The Complainants ran out money and he switched sides to those that wanted the court house moved.

#### References:

McNairy County Independent dated: April 25, 1924, Nov 18, 1938,  
Jun 18, 1886, Nov 25, 1938  
Old Purdy by J. Louis Adams  
Personal and Professional Reminiscences of An Old Lawyer  
by John A. Pitts  
Town Plait of Bethel Springs  
Minutes of the McNairy County Court, various dates  
Historical Articles by J. C. Taylor, compiled by Bill Wagoner