



March 2017

Volume 11/No. 1

# The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

## Agricultural Evolution: 200 Years of Working the Land

As spring approaches, it seems fitting to examine how farming in Rabun County has evolved over time, beginning with the Cherokee who planted an assortment of vegetables and surrounded their villages with vast cornfields. Like the Cherokee, corn was also an important crop for Rabun's early settlers who, in the 1840 agricultural census, reported producing 62,521 bushels of "Indian" corn. For the next century, this single crop would remain the county's most reliable and versatile agricultural commodity...and for good reason.

Not only did corn provide food for Rabun's subsistence farmers and their families, but also for the mules, horses and oxen which worked the crop lands. Likewise, corn fed the hogs, chickens and milk cows which ensured families had access to meat, eggs, milk and butter. Corn even provided farmers with a ready source of

cash when used to make moonshine. This was evident as early as 1840 when Rabun reported that 2,080 gallons of liquor were produced by the county's thirteen distilleries, obviously then legal.



It is also important to acknowledge the contribution that slavery made to Rabun's early agricultural output. In 1840 the county reported 84 slaves, increasing to 206 by 1860. While we have no verified reports regarding the specific

types of work performed by these individuals, we do know that most slaves were held by a few large land owners in the Valley District. We also know that a number of slaves were children whose individual value was

placed at about \$100, and that some slaves remained in Rabun as tenant farmers following the war.

The Civil War was a difficult time for Rabun's farm families, as reflected in a proclamation from the Governor of Georgia during the waning days of the conflict. In his proclamation, the Governor excluded Rabun farmers (and those from six other North Georgia Counties) from military service "... on account of the great scarcity of provisions and the distance they have to

*haul them, (and) to preserve the lives of the inhabitants of those counties."*

Fortunately, by 1880 agricultural output in Rabun was on the rise and the number of farms stood at 677. Two years later the Tallulah Falls Railroad (TFRR)

## The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

Page 2

reached Tallulah Falls, by 1905 Clayton and by 1907 Dillard. Along with this progression came boardinghouses and hotels which welcomed tourists and the cash they brought with them. Local farmers benefitted by providing the homegrown food that hotels served in their dining halls.

In addition, farmers now had an efficient means by which to transport their agricultural products to wider markets. Apple growers especially made good use of the new rail line to almost double their production from 28,830 bushels in 1900 to 50,801 bushels in 1910. Similar robust outputs would continue until the 1960s, reaching a peak in 1940 at 100,474 bushels

John P. Fort first put Rabun's apples on the map when, in 1909, he won a first place award at the national apple show in Spokane, Washington for the "best new variety" of apples. What followed was a boon in apple cultivation which resulted in over fifty commercial orchards being scattered throughout the county. To accommodate the subsequent increase in production, large packing houses were built in Tiger and Mountain City. By the mid to late 1920s, these warehouses were shipping apples as far away as Oregon and England, making apples both Rabun's first true commercial crop and its most celebrated agricultural commodity of the twentieth century.

Another agricultural success story in the early twentieth century was launched in 1917 when

Andrew Ritchie, founder of what was then Rabun Gap Industrial School, began his Farm Family Plan. Support for this program came from the Carnegie Foundation, John D. Rockefeller, Ernest Woodruff and others who were impressed by Mr. Ritchie's goal of bringing entire families to live at the school for five to ten years. While there, men learned modern agricultural techniques, women studied homemaking and health care, and children gained their education.



Gathering hay at the York House in Rabun Gap, 1890s.

During the Great Depression, the number of farms in Rabun rose to 955, the third highest in the county's history. That so many farms were in operation during this time most likely reflected the difficulty faced by rural and urban dwellers alike in finding reliable wage-based employment. Also, those who farmed during the Depression enjoyed a certain level of resolve in knowing that, if nothing else, they could feed their families. In addition,



farm products could be exchanged for store-bought items like shoes and groceries not produced on the farm, as well as for in-kind payment of vital services like doctor visits.

During the next decade, the post-WWII years brought about a technological revolution in agriculture that forever altered the nature of farming and the lives of farm families. This was reflected in Rabun's 1945 census where, of Rabun's 944 farms, only 304 reported having electricity, 608 radios, 65 telephones, 137 motor trucks, and 25 tractors. All of these advances, and those that would follow, helped farmers to become more efficient.

Nevertheless, the following decades witnessed an overall decline in farming and farm production with the arrival of manufacturing companies like the Ritter Lumber Company (1950), Clayburne Manufacturing (1953) and Lees Carpets (1956). Now, farmers and their wives had the option of leaving farming for more financially secure factory jobs. The result was that the number of farms in the county dropped by more than half between 1945 (944 farms) and 1964 (316 farms).

One agricultural bright spot during this period of transition in Rabun's economic base was the construction of the Farmers' Market in Dillard. Built by the Georgia Department of Agriculture in 1951, the Farmers' Market quickly became a vital link to outside markets for truck farmers just as the TFRR began to cut back on its services before shutting down completely in 1961.

Unfortunately, even the State Farmer's Market

could not alter the challenges presented by evolving social and manufacturing trends. Farmers needed to find a new niche in order to reach new customers — and they did so in the 1960s when seven farmers reported having received "*recreation income*" from "*hunting, fishing and other recreational services*." Building upon this initial success, over subsequent decades farmers increasingly have taken advantage of Rabun's recreational and

tourist industries to open small and large fresh markets as well as berry-picking farms and other successful ventures including the county's award-winning vineyards. Equally important, the level of cooperation displayed between local restaurateurs and local farmers has led to Rabun's designation by the state legislature as Georgia's "Farm to Table Capital."

While this blending of farming, recreation and tourism is far removed from the roots of Rabun's original subsistence farming, it reflects a pattern of adaptability among local farmers who historically have proven successful in meeting new challenges. Even today, further evidence of this adaptability

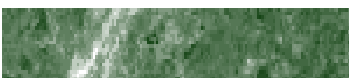
can be found in the most recent agricultural census of 2012 which reported that of Rabun's 114 farms, 2 were devoted to organic gardening, 78 had access to the internet, 13 made use of irrigation, 4 raised greenhouse vegetables and fresh cut herbs, and 18 were fully owned and operated by women. While small in number, it is these very types of new beginnings that have ensured the viability of Rabun's farms in the past and will do so in the future.



Sallie Watts hoeing her own patch of corn in the mid-1960s.

Rabun County Historical Society  
81 North Church Street  
P.O. Box 921  
Clayton, GA 30525

Phone: 706-782-5292  
[www.rabunhistory.org](http://www.rabunhistory.org)  
E-mail: [history@rabunhistory.org](mailto:history@rabunhistory.org)



- Please visit our museum and research library on Mondays and Fridays from 10:00 until 2:00 and on Wednesdays from 12:30 until 4:30.
- Group tours by appointment



Georgia State Fair, Macon 1912

John A. Reynolds' display of a variety of vegetables and the all-important apple crop. Reynolds was the owner of apple orchards in addition to publishing the *Clayton Tribune*.