

ALBERTA SIMMONS RECALLS COTTON PICKING DAYS

By Virginia Jewell

When presenting the Hickman County Museum with a nine-foot long canvas sack which she had used for gathering cotton, Mrs. Alberta Simmons told about her cotton picking days. (Her husband, Cardie Simmons Sr., died in 1978.)

"We grew up in cotton picking families," she said. "His parents and my parents all picked cotton. Cardie and I could pick a bale of cotton in two and a half days. That's between 1,400 and 1,500 pounds. In 1925, when I was six years old, I could pick 176 pounds in a day." And a boll of cotton is almost weightless!

She and her husband moved from the Hickman area in Fulton County to their Clinton farm in the 1950's where they continued to grow the crop.

Together they raised one of the last cotton crops grown in the county which was around 1970. "When I quit picking, I was gathering about 400 pounds a day four days a week, but I couldn't keep up that pace on the fifth day. We worked from daybreak to sundown in the early fall months.

"Sometimes I leaned over to pick. Other times I crawled on my knees. I had seven children, six boys and one girl. When I was carrying a baby, I used a bench to sit on while picking between two rows. I picked in two sacks instead of one to keep the load light. When one was half full, Cardie would come and get it. The day before Albert was born, I picked 130 pounds, came home and fixed supper.

"I picked with both hands and my mouth," she continued. "If a stem broke off with a boll of cotton on it, I'd pull the cotton off with my mouth and drop it in the sack."

She remembers, too, how the burrs surrounding the cotton hurt the picker's hands. A cheerful and pretty woman, Mrs. Simmons said she protected her hands by taping the ends of her fingers and wearing gloves with the fingers cut out.

Hickman County was once the land o' cotton. One of the most northern points in the nation which produced cotton, the county had three cotton gins in the 1920's and 30's to process the fluffy fiber. Over 4,400 bales were produced in 1925. There's not a cotton plant to be seen in the area now.

TWILIGHT NEAR THE RIVERS

On an afternoon in April the waning light
near the confluence of the Ohio
and the Mississippi touches the fields of winter wheat
and the new grass along the banks of the creek
so gently that we cannot perceive more than
a wide brushing of an acrylic yellow.

We learned from a master that nothing
golden can linger, even for a painter,
and so we capture for a moment a panorama,
unrecorded for the rest of the world.

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