

How Toadvine Got Its Name

by W. J. Boles

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Names make an interesting study and especially the derivation of names of communities and municipalities. Ofttimes in the course of passing events the origin and the originator of the name are forgotten, but not so in the case of Toadvine, Jefferson County, Ala.

The community has never risen to the dignity of a city, or even a village. For more than a century it has just been a small community in the western part of Jefferson County, a community of scattered homes and for a long period of years the site of two general merchandise stores.

But Toadvine for years has stood for a great deal in the life of Jefferson County. In the olden days and down to comparatively recent times the old saying was "As Toadvine goes, so goes Jefferson County" in political elections. Its first settlers made up of a sturdy stock of pioneers who came into this country before Jefferson County was created, felled the forest trees and opened broad acres to cultivation; a contented people, pursuing their chosen trade of farming and living off the products of their own land and through the efforts of themselves, they went their own way, working out their own business and financial salvation and lending their all to their country when the call came.

As it has been for nearly a century Toadvine is a community of thrifty farmers who attended to their own business and wish for others the same happiness and contentment in the proper attention to their affairs. Toadvine has contributed in a small way to the office-holding class of the county and has wielded a large influence in selection of county and state officials.

Back in the hectic political days of Populism and so-called "kolbism," Toadvine was the battle ground of contending forces. Thomas G. Jones and Reuben F. Kolb, rivals for the governorship of Alabama in the early nineties, in turn spoke to the electorate of this community and "button-holed" and pleaded with them for their votes. That was the year that Jones and Kolb made a precinct to precinct and almost house to house canvass of Jefferson County as well as the rest of the state. Opinion was so sharply divided and partisanship ran so high that the result hung in the balance until the final official count was made and the canvassing committee declared Jones the winner.

But back to the naming of Toadvine. This did not come until more than half a century after the first settlers came into the community.

They had struggled along merely as one of the important settlements of the county until after the War Between the States. The originator of the name and his reason for so naming the locality are told by A. A. Vines and E. A. Reeves, both known to the people of the county who have occasion to visit the courthouse, either on business or to see how county affairs are progressing.

When the War Between the States began in 1861, Cape Smith, son of one of the earliest settlers, volunteered his services and marched with a Jefferson County company to the battle front. He was a brave soldier, but unfortunately fell into the hands of federal soldiers and was taken to prison at Rock Island, Ill., where he remained until the close of the war. He was of a nervous temperament and easily lost his poise when things did not go right. One of the things he could not stand was whistling. The first whistled note got on his nerves and as the whistler continued he would lose all control of himself.

A fellow prisoner named Nash discovered this "weakness" and took special delight in annoying Smith. In time he added insult, verbal and otherwise, to his whistling but as he was a big strapping fellow and Smith a small timid man, the latter could only verbally protest. He realized his inability to cope with Nash in a physical contest. Another prisoner, Toadvine by name, from Georgia, struck up a close friendship with Smith and noticing the abuse Nash was heaping upon him protested to the latter. Nash merely grinned and whistled the louder, and added physical violence. Following several protests Toadvine aimed a terrific blow at Nash's face and straightened him out on the ground where he lay several minutes in a dazed condition. When he had recovered and risen to his feet Nash went for Toadvine with both fists, but lost in the engagement.

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Toadvine thus endeared himself the more to Smith and from there until they separated somewhere between Rock Island and their Southern homes in 1865 they were inseparable companions.

Soon after Smith's return home a postoffice was established in their little community and he suggested the name Toadvine in honor and as a compliment to his Georgia friend and fellow soldier. And so the name Toadvine was adopted and has continued until the present.

Capt. Smith was the son of one of the first settlers in the community.

Toadvine is 25 miles west of Birmingham and within six miles of the Warrior River. Valley Creek, once considered as a potential commercial canal to serve the Birmingham Industrial district, runs a half mile from the postoffice, now abandoned, and the center of the community. It is a mountainous section, picturesquely beautiful with its rustic scenery, its towering mountains, jutting cliffs of solid rock and varied list of native trees that spread their protecting shadows through the forest.

In the days gone by the forests teemed with game, but with the increasing population of the Birmingham district, the growing numbers of hunters and the lack of laws to protect it the game gradually disappeared until a few conveys of quail, an occasional squirrel and the ever present rabbit are about all that is left.

The first settlers came to the Toadvine community about 1814, Mr. Vines and Mr. Reeves agree. Among these were Thomas Reeves, grandfather of E. A. Reeves, who came from South Carolina in 1814 and lived there until his death at the age of 97. He was 11 years old when he came to Jefferson County. He married Sarah Carrington, daughter of another early settler, Albert Waldrop, maternal grandfather of Mr. Reeves and Richard Waldrop, came from Kentucky about the same time. Richard Waldrop was the grandfather of W. J. Waldrop, member of the Jefferson County Board of Revenue. Cape and Jake Smith, brothers, arrived about the same time. E. C. Smith, baliff in Judge Harrington P. Heflin's court, is a son of Cape Smith.

Allen Golden and Thomas Glaze were among the first to take up their homes in the Toadvine community. All of the original settlers reared large families and some of their descendants are prominent in the business life of Jefferson County.

Prof. M. V. Henry, treasurer of Jefferson County, tells an interesting story of how Toadvine voters were switched from one candidate to another through a speech delivered there. The late Col. John T. Milner, noted railroad builder, civil engineer and coal mine operator in the last half of the nineteenth century, was a candidate for state senator from Jefferson County. Bessemer had begun the agitation for a separate county with that thriving and growing industrial center as the county seat. The Bessemer candidate, advocating the new county, apparently had won the support of the majority of the voters in that end of the county on his plea of a new county with a courthouse closer to their homes. That was before the advent of the automobile and there were not so many railroads in the county then as now, or at least they did not reach as many localities.

Toadvine was remote from any of these lines and the only mode of transportation was by animal-drawn vehicles or astride one of the animals. Birmingham was about 25 miles away, Bessemer was only about 12. The trip to Birmingham required a day and if much business was to be attended to the return home could not be made until the second and sometimes the third day. The people all wanted the courthouse nearer home.

Col. Milner was one of the surveyors of the South & North Alabama Railroad, from Decatur to Montgomery, now part of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad System. He also assisted in making the survey of Birmingham, which was founded almost concurrently with the completion of the S. & N.A. and the Alabama Great Southern Railway, which crossed where Birmingham is. Col. Milner opposed the new county movement and never hesitated to state his position when speaking to the voters. He was billed for a speech at Toadvine. Warned beforehand of the opposition to him in that end of the county Col. Milner prepared to meet and offset the campaign "thunder" against him.

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At the appointed time, with all the voters and many of the women folks and children listening eagerly to his every word, Col. Milner proceeded almost to the conclusion of his speech without alluding to the new county project. Then casting his eyes over the audience, smiling and with a broad sweep of his arms, he said in substance, as reported by Prof. Henry, who as a candidate for representative in the Legislature, also was on the program for a speech, said:

“Fellow citizens of Toadvine, one of the most divinely blessed sections of imperial Jefferson County, a section rich in soil, in timber, in minerals and in the men and women that make up its citizenry, I am appealing to you to vote for me despite my opposition to dividing Jefferson into two counties. Let me explain my attitude. I am not opposed to a new county that will bring Toadvine nearer the courthouse, where her citizens frequently have business, but this is not the time to consider such a matter.

“I am a civil engineer and have helped build railroads. I have helped to survey a route for a new railroad from Mobile up through the western part of Alabama to the Tennessee River. The route we have about decided upon as the most feasible and the most economical to build and with the greatest prospects of becoming a revenue earning road, comes right through Toadvine. When that road is built and it will be some of these days, it will come to Toadvine, with all her natural wealth and her favorable location for serving a large section of this part of North Alabama will take on a growth that will put it among the large towns and a business center of importance.

When that day comes you will be in position to ask for and no doubt will be given a new county with Toadvine as the county seat. But if by your vote in this election you aid in creating a new county, with Bessemer as the county seat, your hope of bringing a courthouse to Toadvine will be forever gone. Are you willing to aid those people who are now trying to bring about a condition that in the future will work to your own disadvantage? That is why I am opposing the division of Jefferson County at present. Do you agree with me that I am taking the right course? I have stated my position clearly and unequivocally and now leave the matter to your judgment.”

It is sad that Col. Milner carried the Toadvine box almost unanimously at the election held shortly thereafter. He was elected and served out the four-year term in the Alabama Senate with distinction to himself and honor to his county and state.

Toadvine’s commercial interests never grew beyond two general stores, a blacksmith shop, a gunsmith, a corn and wheat mill. These were operated for years, but with the improved roads, the coming of the automobile and the growth of Birmingham, Bessemer and other trading and industrial centers these were discontinued, their owners either taking up other occupations or moving to the cities. Today there is not a business house in the community. The old mills have fallen down and the gunsmith and the blacksmith shops long ago went into disuse.

Toadvine men have participated in every war in which the United States was engaged since the founding of the community. One of them, Taylor, for whom Taylor’s Ferry was named, served in the Mexican War. The ferry across Warrior River, named for him, is six miles from Toadvine.

When the War Between the States started in 1861 the population of the community, yet unnamed, had increased considerably and a full quota of its men responded to the call to service. Several Toadvine men were in the United States army during the Spanish-American War in 1898 and again in 1917, when Congress declared war against Germany and President Wilson called for volunteers for many of her sons promptly responded.

Thomas Reeves, one of the first settlers, was a member of the Jefferson County Board of Commissioners when the county seat was at Elyton. He made the trip on horseback to the county seat to attend the meetings and is said never to have missed one of them.

Cape Smith, who had the distinction of naming Toadvine, also had quite a reputation as a gunmaker. He specialized in flint and steel rifles which are said to have shot as true as any gun ever made anywhere in the world.

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He made the gun complete from the barrel to the stock. From a rod of steel he made the barrel by boring it with his own instruments, rifling it perfectly. The trigger and the lock he worked out in his shop and the stock made of wood collected on his place he carved by hand. It is said that a good marksman could hit a bull's eye of a target, pick a squirrel out of a tree or kill a turkey more than 100 yards away with one of these rifles. Smith supplied most of the hunting guns used in that section until the War Between the States. Some of the rifles were still in use and in good state of preservation, until quite recently, but the breach-loading magazine gun and the cartridge supplanted the flint and steel muzzle-loader, and the latter is seen nowadays only as a relic of pioneer times in Alabama.

Game was plentiful in that section of Jefferson County until the invading white man killed or drove it out. Under the protection of the game laws of the state in effect the last few years quail and other game that delight the sportsman is becoming more plentiful again and in time it is believed the western section of Jefferson County will become a favorite haunt of the huntsman.

The Warrior River, only a few miles from Toadvine, has come into popularity with Birmingham people in recent years as a camping and outing resort. Scores of cottages have been built and houseboats and motor launches are maintained and operated on the Warrior's waters almost the year round.

The river furnishes fish in plenty for those who care to angle for this kind of food and between boating, fishing and resting under the cool shades of the protecting trees the Warrior is an ideal spot for a vacation or a few days' rest from the labors of office or shop duties.

Toadvine is near enough to claim the Warrior as its own river and while it has no need of boats to carry its goods or its products the citizens nevertheless are as boastful of this splendid stream as are the people of Birmingham who use it both for business and pleasure.

In the heyday of its prosperity Toadvine was the center of a thrifty farming district and the two stores did a big trade in such necessities as could not be raised or produced in the fields thereabouts.

Until the War Between the States "store clothes" were all but unknown in the Toadvine neighborhood. The farmers raised sheep and cotton, corn and wheat and oats, hogs and cattle and all the vegetables they could consume. Except cotton, they limited their production to family needs as there was no market for surpluses. Wool clipped from the sheep was sent by wagon to a woolen mill many miles away where it was carded and woven into cloth and returned to the owner.

The women cut the cloth into coats and breeches and dresses and made the garments themselves. Cotton brought from miles in every direction, was ginned at the Toadvine ginney and the women also converted much of this into clothes for themselves and their men folk. Spinning wheels and looms were an indispensable part of the household equipment and these were kept busy a large part of the time making cloth.

Several expert "cutters" lived in the community and their services were required at frequent intervals by those who were less expert in that line. It is said that garments cut by these experts, usually a woman of the family, equaled in fit and style anything that tailors of later years turned out. Of course, in the pioneer days, men and women were not as fastidious in the matter of clothes as they are now and a suit or a dress did not have to be pressed every time it was worn. Trousers had creases only when new or at infrequent intervals, and coats were as unaccustomed to the iron.

For amusement the men played "town ball," pitched horseshoes, and held tournaments of various kinds in which they became quite skilled. An occasional dance or "social" brought both sexes together for a pleasant evening, and corn huskings, quilting bees and "houseraisings" were noted events.

"Houseraising" probably means nothing to the present generation, but those who came from remote rural communities possibly recall such events at their old homes. A new dwelling was to be built, or a barn, and all the neighbors gathered at the home of the proposed builder bright and early one morning and lent a helping hand. Logs

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were cut, boards split, stones rolled into place as corner foundations and the willing workers went at the job with a vengeance. Unless it were a big house the structure would be completed in one day.

The women members of the families prepared a sumptuous feast for the "laborers" who "knocked off" from work long enough to do justice to the repast prepared for them.

Theaters were unknown and circuses only as an occasional event at the county town or at Tuscaloosa. All who could get away for a couple of days, made the trip to town to "see the animals."

Toadvine is just outside the mineral belt and has never directly felt the effects of the industrial development of the Birmingham district. The nearest coal mines are several miles distant and blast furnaces and foundries are no nearer than Bessemer. The railroad promised by Col. Milner never materialized, but a coal road was built several years ago from Ensley to Maxine, Praco and other coal mines on the west side of the Warrior River.

This road, now the property of the Inland Waterways, the agency of the federal government that operates the barge lines on the Warrior and Mississippi Rivers, passes within a few miles of Toadvine. It crosses the river at Birminghamport, the river terminal for Birmingham. This rail line, however, is operated as a freight carrier and affords no passenger service except such as can be provided by a caboose or an antiquated coach attached to a freight train. However, the road offers transportation facilities for such products of that sections are destined for outside consumption.

Toadvine having been settled by white people prior to 1810 or more than nine years before Alabama was erected into a state, is one of the oldest communities in Jefferson County. All this section was one great wilderness at that time and the pioneers had to follow Indian trails or hew their way through dense forests in passing from one home to another. Alabama, then part of Georgia, was just becoming known to the world towards the East.

Almost 300 years had elapsed since Hernando DeSoto and his 600 non-descript Spanish soldiers traversed the state and during that period only a few groups of white people had come into the vast wilderness. Mobile, and small sections along the Tennessee River and in Central Alabama had received small quotas of white people, but in this region white families were few and far between.

The Indians, under government persuasion, were moving westward and only a few of them remained to intimidate the new Caucasian invaders.

Toadvine has a long and honorable career as the home of a fearless, patriotic and homeloving people, and with the descendants of the original settlers still controlling its destinies it is likely to continue playing an important part in the history of Jefferson County.