

“Early Days of Yellow Banks”

By Cora Lee Webb
(1868-1958)



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 14 August 1927, pp.1B & 12B:

Miss Cora Lee Webb Gives Very Interesting Story Of The “Early Days of Yellow Banks” And Settlers

Miss Cora Lee Webb recently gave a very interesting story of the "Early Days of Yellow Banks," before the General Evan Shelby chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, which will be kept among the historical records of the chapter in its library. Among the many first things to be established in Owensboro, then Yellow Banks, and its early history she tells of a visit of Charles Dickens, who was en route by boat to St., Louis, when the boat was stranded opposite Yellow Banks and he with other passengers came over to the town until the boat was repaired. She also states that in Washington Irving's book, "Wolfert's Roost," the story, "Early Experiences of Ralph Ringwood," is a story of this section. All of the characters in the story, she states, were well known hereat that time. Excerpts from Miss Webb's story follow:

Early Wilderness

Prior to 1797, the location of Daviess county was a wilderness, made up of hills, valleys, open spaces, ravines, and creeks. Animals such as wolves, bear, elk, deer, panther, wildcat, jaguar, wild hog, otter, mink, beaver and others roamed at will through the forest, following the narrow trails made by the Indians or the broader ones by the buffalo herds, or lurked in the cane brake. Wild fowls such as turkeys, geese, duck, were plentiful; and birds of many kinds flashed here, there and everywhere, filling the air with melody and beauty.

It was into this region there wandered one day a noted hunter and Indian fighter, William Smothers, familiarly called Bill Smithers." He was born in Virginia, but his parents had emigrated to Kentucky.

One morning his father was killed by the Indians, and though only a child nine years of age, he stood by his dead father's side, and swore to kill every Indian that crossed his path, and he kept his word, though often congratulating himself that he never met a squaw, as he had scruples about killing a woman. After his father's death he was sent back to Virginia to live with, an uncle. When nineteen years old he married his uncle's daughter and came back to Kentucky. His wife dying soon after, the call of the wild became so strong, he started out to explore new regions of Kentucky. He soon landed at the Ohio river and as he stood on its banks looking toward Bon Harbor, he thought he had never seen a more beautiful view or a more desirable location for a home as he decided to remain for a time. He cleared a small tract of land and built a cabin on the

ravine; about where the jail now stands. This was built of logs with a stick and clay daub chimney; it had one room and a small lean-to and two doors, - one looking: towards the river, the other to the south.

Here he lived alone for several years, the only inhabitant from the Ohio river to Panther creek and from "Green river to Yellow creek.

Trial at Hartford

He made a trip back home and finding his sister's husband had died, persuaded her to come back and live with him. Bill was intelligent, honest and truthful and noted for his bravery, and while he loved solitude, was. very hospitable. . One day some river men were his guests and one of them made a remark, before his sister which Bill, resented; after they, left he called this man back – no one knows just what happened but in the end, Bill killed, the man. He was horrified at what he had done and hid in the woods but finally decided it was best to give himself up. The trial at Hartford was the most noted ever held there. He was prosecuted by. Gen. John Daviess and defended by his great friend, Col. Joe Daviess. Bill was cleared, and came back home. In 1803, to his horror and disgust, several other hunters wandered in and located about twelve miles from him.

In 1812, there were three cabins very close to him, and in 1815, by an. act of the legislature. Daviess county was formed by taking part from Ohio county and four miles along Green river from Henderson county. It was called Daviess county for Col. Joe Daviess, who with his brother, Gen. John Daviess, had owned practically all of it.

Yellow Banks

In 1816, the settlers laid off a small plot of ground extending from the river to Fourth street and from Walnut to Lewis and called it Yellow Banks from a peculiar strata of yellow clay which extended along the river bank for about six miles. Later this name was changed to Owensborough, for Col. Abraham Owen, a noted Kentuckian, lawyer, congressman and a member of the convention that formed the constitution of Kentucky. He and Col. Daviess were both killed at the battle of Tippecanoe and buried there.

The first school taught in Yellow Banks was by Mrs. Tarleton, who came to Yellow Banks in a most unusual way and a very unpleasant one for her. She was on a boat going to Mississippi, when near Cloverport the .boat struck a snag and sank so rapidly that several on board were drowned. She managed to secure a plank and on this floated down the river until she came to Yellow Banks where she was discovered and rescued. She had lost everything and. desiring to teach small children, a public spirited man, Philip Thompson, gave her the use of a cabin. As there was a plentiful supply of children, her school was soon in a flourishing condition. This cabin was on the' ravine and it was thought to be too far out for the children. So the school was moved to another cabin on the southwest corner of Main and Allen. Later she built a cabin on what is now Crittenden street, between, Main and' Third. Here she taught until old age came on.

Prof. Scarborough First Teacher.

The first school for older children was built by the same man, Mr. Thompson. This was a brick building of one room on what is now Third street school grounds. It was built on the Hartford road, which ran along the southeast corner' of the Third street school ground, going diagonally across to the northwest corner down to Buzzard Roost road. It was built on a small hill and was entered by eight or ten steps. It had several names, the Daviess County academy, Daviess academy,

seminary, Baptist college and others. It had many teachers, among whom were Messrs. Woodruff, Gray, McIntire and Hart. The first teacher was T. Watkins. He furnished the room with desks, ink wells and shades to keep the boys from looking out of the windows watching for the boats and trying to guess the names as they passed.

He taught here until the house was struck by lightning, the roof was burned off. Then he built a palatial mansion, the wonder of all and called it Snowdon castle. It was located on the ravine and in later years was known as the McAlister place. It was a large square brick building. The Buzzard Roost road ran between it and the river; beyond the road, a large grassy plot which was the boys' playground, and here they would watch the boats go down the river carrying Gen. Zachary Taylor's troops to the Mexican war.

Mr. Hart taught in the academy until he built a house of his own on Daviess street just beyond Fifth. Here he taught, assisted by Misses Mattie Stewart and Lizzie Weir and Mrs. Singleton, until his health failed and he had to move to Texas.

Miss Stewart then opened a school for girls in a log house located at the northwest corner of Third and Allen streets.

Another school for girls was taught by a Mrs. Smith for a year in Main street. She was succeeded by Mrs. Raphael and her daughter, Hettie. They taught a very successful school until her daughter married Major Smith.

A boarding school was taught by Rev. Taylor in the Kennedy house, later called the Wandling house, at the corner of Allen street and the river.

A school was taught at what was called Bransford institute at Fourth and St. Ann streets, and Mr. Gray opened a classic school for boys on Bolivar, near Fifth street. Close by was the German-American school.

Mrs. Sue Phillips had a school for young women at Fourth and Walnut streets. It was known as Vaughn seminary. She was succeeded by Messrs. Mitchell, Wines and others, the last of whom were Mrs. Klinger and Mrs. Van Rensselaer.

Sermon by Rev. Lowry

Up to 1834, there were no church organizations in Yellow Banks. The first sermon ever preached here was by a Cumberland Presbyterian minister, Rev. David Lowry. The first prayer meeting was held by another Cumberland minister, Rev. Sam Calhoun. Most of the churches were organized and held their first services in the courthouse, which was built of logs, having a sawdust floor and plank seats.

The Baptists organized in 1839, with eight white members and eighteen colored. The colored members soon withdrew and built them a log house, on the ravine where their brick church now stands.

The Methodists and Baptists held a union, meeting, which was very successful; half of the converts joined the Baptist and half the Methodist. The Baptists built a church at the corner of Crittenden street and the river, just opposite where Broeker's mill now stands. They still have on their records where \$2 had been contributed to stop up the holes to keep the hogs out of the church. This church was of brick, a small Colonial building with a porch and, columns, and was entered, by steps at the ends of the porch.

The Methodists did not build as soon as the Baptists as the trustees could not agree as to location, some wishing to build at Fourth and St. Ann streets, where the city hall now stands; others opposed this saying it was entirely too far out of town. They finally agreed on a location and the church was built on Main, street between Daviess and Lewis.

Presbyterian Churches

Both Presbyterian churches organized in the courthouse, the Cumberland built on St. Ann between Third and Fourth, where the Troy Laundry has been. They had the first pipe organ installed in any church here. The Presbyterians built on Third street' between St. Ann and Allen, the building now occupied by the Central Trust Co. During the war the church divided and the Fourth Street Presbyterian, built at Fourth and Crittenden the small church in the rear of their present church. It is now used as an educational department.

The Catholic organized in the country at a private home. Their first church, St. Stephens, was at the corner of Main and Mulberry, now Cedar street. They had the first music used in any church in Yellow Banks.

The Episcopal church was organized in the Masonic lodge and held their services over Dr. Megill's drug store which was where Bates drug store is now, at Third and St. Ann. Later they bought a carpenter's shop on Frederica, near Sixth and worshipped there until they built on Fifth street near Frederica.

200 in 1830

In 1830, there were only about 200 inhabitants, and in 1834, according to Col. Holmes' notes, there were 229. The business part of the town was on the river front and extended out two blocks on Frederica. The first store was run by Mr. Morton. The stores were built of brick, as a kiln had been started, and it was the cheapest material obtainable, plank having to be sawed by hand. They carried most everything, dry goods, groceries, hardware, drugs and even whisky, which sold, at twenty-five cents a gallon. A broad campus extended all along the river front and where the levee is now was the old circus grounds where big, little, old and young were drawn by the glitter and tinsel of the passing show, which came through in wagons or down the river on flat boats.

The best known and most popular woman that ever lived in Owensboro or Yellow Banks was Mrs. Harriet Roberts. She was the daughter of Gen. John Daveiss who lived on a farm just above Owensboro.

The last buffalo in Daviess county was killed on the lot where the public library now stands.

First Court

The first court was held in a log house that had been a residence and was presided over by Judge Broadnax, of Hartford. He was very popular with the settlers and was rather old-fashioned. He still wore knee pants, with silver buckles at his knees, and his hair plaited and tucked up with a comb. His salary was from \$600 to \$800 a year, payable in corn.

The first will probated was In 1815, that of J. H. McFarland, whose second wife was the first white child born in the county. They were the great-grandparents of Miss Nora Kennady.

The first newspaper was the "Owensboro Bulletin", started in 1844. It was a Whig paper favoring Henry Clay for president.

The first railroad was built in 1826, by Robert, Triplett. It extended from his coal mine at Bon Harbor hills to the river, a distance of three-quarters of a mile. It was run by mule power. This was not only the first railroad in the county but the first in Kentucky and is thought to be the first in the entire west.

The first passenger railroad was not built until 1871. It was a branch of the L. & N. When the locomotive, which was named Joe Daveiss, arrived by boat, all Owensboro was at the wharf to welcome it, and it was a great day in Owensboro when an excursion on the new road was run in March. It went fourteen miles but in April another one went as far as Livermore.

The first bank was the National bank, established in 1850, as a branch of the Louisville bank.

Planters Hotel

The first hotel of any importance was the Planters house, built in 1846 of logs. It was heated by wood stoves, lighted with kerosene lamps and had a wash room containing a basin and roller towel. It opened with a great ball, to which tobacco buyers from Louisville, St. Louis and Cincinnati came. The guests named the hotel that night. It has entertained a number of notables in its time, among whom was Jenny Lind, who was on a boat going to St. Louis to give a concert. While the boat was here she came up to the hotel and was entertained.

Charles Dickens also visited Yellow Banks. He too was on a boat going to St. Louis to give a lecture. The boat was stranded opposite Yellow Banks and he with several other passengers came over to Yellow Banks and stayed while the boat was being repaired.

In Washington Irving's book, "Wolfert's Roost" the story "Early Experiences of Ralph Ringwood", is a story of this section. All the characters in the story were well known here at that time. Bill Smothers, John Miller, a noted hunter, friend, a neighbor of Bill's, Judge Broadnax, Peggy and Polly Schultz and others. The only fictitious names used was Ralph Ringwood, who was in reality William Duval. He was a personal friend of Washington Irving; and told him many times of his experiences as a young hunter in this district, living for a time with Bill Smothers and John Miller. Later he studied law, became a noted lawyer, member of congress, member of the convention that formed the constitution of Kentucky, and was appointed by the president as governor of the territory of Florida. He often returned to Kentucky and visited here and at Hartford, where he owned property.

Daviess county has added its quota of men to serve the government, among whom are Hon. T. C. McCreery, U. S. senator; Col. Charles Todd, minister to Columbia, S. A., and later minister to Russia; George Yeaman, minister to Denmark, and Ed. Rumsey Wing, minister to Ecuador.

Col. Joe Daveiss peculiarly was shown one cold day which was known as Cold Friday, because it was the coldest day Kentucky has ever known, by surveying a pond on his farm, Cornland, a few miles above Owensboro. This pond was afterwards drained and the first crop of corn raised on it caused a law suit which resulted in a duel between Phillip Thompson and Robert Triplett. This did not end fatally, however, and the men afterwards became great friends.

Industries started in the early days of Yellow Banks continue to be some of the leading industries of today. A brick kiln started in 1820, located at what is now Fifth and Seventh, St. Ann and Allen streets. This industry still continues although differently located.

Coal has been successfully mined from the earliest days and is still a thriving industry.

Tobacco a "First Crop."

Tobacco was one of the first crops raised in the county. The first factory was built in 1830, by Major Smith.

Whisky had always been made, more or less, but it was not until 1850 a distillery was built.

The Daviess county fair was first organized in 1850, as the Daviess county agricultural and Mechanical association. It held its meeting on Mr. Triplett's farm. An amphitheatre was built in

1853, about where Walnut street school now stands. Later it was moved to what was known as Paradise Gardens, on lower Main street. During the war these grounds were seized by the government for camping grounds. After the war it was reorganized under the name of Daviess County Fair Co., and grew in importance until it became the greatest fair in Kentucky and was looked forward to from year to year as the greatest event of the year.

In 112 years this wilderness settlement has grown into a thriving city of 25,000. It has not reached its present size and influence by any sky-rocket flashes but it has been a steady growth based on a firm foundation.



**Notes about the author
By Jerry Long**

Cora Lee Webb, daughter of David Webb (1825-1878) & Sarah Jane Ellis (1843-1870), was born 4 December 1868 in Daviess County, KY and died 27 February 1958 in Owensboro, Daviess County, KY. She was teacher in the Owensboro and Daviess County schools for over 50 years. She served as art supervisor in the Owensboro city schools.



Cora Lee Webb – In 1927 she was a member of the faculty of Owensboro High School

Miss Webb was a prominent member of numerous Owensboro social clubs, including the Owensboro Woman’s Club, Reading Club, Garden Club, Shakespeare Club and Art Club. She delivered many lectures on various topics and published several articles, including “Early Days of Yellow Banks” (1927) and a history of the Settle Memorial Methodist Church (1935).

Lee A. & Aloma W. Dew in their book, Owensboro: The City on the Yellow Banks (Rivendell Publications, Bowling Green, KY, 1988, p.209) reported that:

For many years some citizens of Owensboro had recognized the need for a museum. In 1923 Miss Cora Lee Webb, a teacher in the Owensboro public schools, founded an organization called the Green River Museum and Art Society. Several exhibits

were displayed in the Carnegie Library, but financial support was not forthcoming and gradually the project was abandoned except for a few cases of exhibits which remained at the library. An effort was made to resurrect the project in 1955, but it failed for lack of adequate financing.

The Owensboro Messenger announced Cora Lee Webb's retirement in its edition of 6 August 1937 (p.6):

Miss Webb Resigns

The resignation of Miss Cora Webb, who has been connected with the city schools thirty-five years, was accepted with regret. Miss Webb for several years taught in the elementary schools before being made teacher of art at the Senior high school and supervisor of art in the city schools, which she has held for many years.

Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 28 February 1958, p.1:

Miss Cora Webb Dies; Taught For Over Half Century

Miss Cora Lee Webb, 89, who taught school for more than half a century, died at 8:35 p. m. Thurs day at her home at 322 E. 3rd St., after an illness of several months. She had been bedfast with a stroke since May.

The daughter of pioneer Kentucky residents, she began teaching in the county schools when she was 17. She moved to the city system in 1893 where she taught until she retired in 1937.

She was the first supervisor of art in the city school system and was a member of the Settle Memorial Methodist Church. Surviving are cousins, Mrs. Nester Howard, Owensboro; Mrs. Milred Cronise, Montclair, N. J.; Rowland P. Ellis, Clearwater, Fla.; Mrs. Muriel Billings, Thruston; Louis Ellis, Owensboro, and several second cousins.

The body is at the Owensboro Funeral Home where services will be held at 2:30 p. m. Saturday with the Rev. Bedford Turner, assistant pastor of Settle Memorial Methodist Church, officiating. Burial will be in Elmwood Cemetery.

Shortly after her death Owensboro High School instituted the Cora Lee Webb Art Award that is granted at their annual honor's day ceremony.



Elmwood Cemetery, Owensboro, KY,
section C – Webb family lot

