

THE VOICE

of the *Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society and Cobb Memorial Archives*

THE PEOPLE BEHIND “SYRUP SOPPIN’ DAY” – LEE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society would once again like to extend an open invitation to attend one of our fine quarterly presentations on Sunday, October 22nd at 3:00 PM EST (2:00 PM CDT). Our presentation will once again be a live, on-site presentation held at Point University’s main campus, the Lanier Academic Center, in downtown West Point, GA. Our presenter for this upcoming meeting will be Dr. Jim Witte. Dr. Witte’s presentation will focus on the history and annual programs and events of the Lee County Historical Society (particularly “Syrup Soppin’ Day” in Loachapoka, where he has served as the Blacksmith for the past 20 years).

The well-known annual “Syrup Soppin’ Day” in Loachapoka, AL goes back to 1971. At a location in downtown Loachapoka, the historical process of harvesting Sugar Cane is recreated each year. This process, involving 19th century farming techniques including a mule, produces buckets of sweet, delicious cane syrup. As the annual festival grew, it also became a place for many local vendors to come and shop their wares for the residents of East Alabama.

Directly across Alabama State Route 14 from all of the vendors and the railroad tracks, one can also find “Pioneer Park”. This is where, on one specific Saturday every Fall, the Lee County Historical Society bring the past to life. The Society’s museum properties are open to the public (complete with all of their exhibits) and many live demonstrations by

historical re-enactors (like our speaker, Dr. Witte, who is the Blacksmith) take us back in time to the 19th century. Since Loachapoka was once a Creek settlement (meaning “place of the turtles” in Muscogee), there are also members of their community giving demonstrations of their lives and lifestyles as well.

Dr. Witte, with over 60 years of combined military and civilian flight experience, is quite an accomplished individual. A former Army Officer and pilot, he has experience with both U.S. military rotary-wing and fixed-wing aircraft. With a PhD from the University of South Florida, he has been at Auburn University in various capacities in the past 25 years. For the past four years, he has been the Director (and Professor of Aviation Management) for the Auburn School of Aviation. Dr. Witte spent extensive time in industrial training, developing programs of instruction ranging from sexual harassment, loss control management, Supervisor’s safety development, methods, and techniques of training, and Office of Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) compliance training. Additionally, He is an award winning bladesmith and blacksmith instructor.



The Blacksmith Shop at Pioneer Park was built in the mid 1980s in cooperation with the local chapter of the Alabama Forge Council. Photo from leecountyhistoricalsociety.org.

This presentation will be held at Point University in West Point, GA (address: 507 W 10th Street, West Point, GA, 31833). Visitors are encouraged to park in the west parking lot and enter through the western entrance to the building (several CVHS members will be there to help them find their way to the presentation room). The presentation will start at 3:00 PM Eastern (2:00 PM Central) on Sunday, October 22nd and will last approximately one hour (with time for questions at the end). If anyone has any questions concerning our presentation, please email our Program Chair Charlie Powers at ccpowers02@gmail.com for further information.

**THE CHATTAHOOCHEE VALLEY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY MEETING**

Sunday, October 22nd, 2023

3:00 PM Eastern (2:00 PM Central)

Point University, Lanier Academic Center, West Point

THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE *by Jason Williams*

In 2026, we will recognize the United States of America Semiquincentennial and the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. While our local Counties and Cities do not have that level of recorded history, there have been persons living in what is now West Central Georgia and East Alabama for thousands of years. We know Indigenous persons eventually formed into loose associations, including the Muscogee - Creeks in our area.

In the Treaty of Indian Springs, the Creeks ceded land in West Georgia and Troup County was created in 1826. By 1830, there were 5,799 residents in Troup that were recorded in the Census. The population boomed over the next ten years as 15,733 persons were recorded in the 1840 Census. In East Alabama, the counties that would become Chambers, Randolph and Tallapoosa would be created in 1832 with the Treaty of Cusseta. Chambers actually had more residents (17, 333) than Troup by 1840!

Most of my Ancestors settled in these areas in the 1830s to 1840s. My 3rd Great Grandfather, William (Wiley) Clements/Clemons, settled in Chambers in the 1830s. By

1840, he was recorded living near other pioneer settlers in that county. In nearby Tallapoosa County my 4th Great Grandfather, Abraham Marshall Bartee, was recorded in the 1840 Census...likely on the 79 acres of land he had earlier purchased in 1837. On April 4, 1843, he was appointed as a Justice of the Peace. Previously, he was listed in the 16th Land District Grantee List for Troup County, Georgia, in 1834; so, this was an example of how our ancestors migrated across Georgia into Alabama. My Griggs and Thornton ancestors settled in Troup in the late 1820s and early 1830s and my Lane - Jennings, Poer - Spencer, and Hatchett - Harper ancestors migrated to West Georgia and East Alabama in the early 1800s as well.

No matter if your ancestors have lived in America for 4,000+ years, 400 years (in Jamestown or came over on the Mayflower) or for the last few years, we hope you will share your family stories as we come together to celebrate our local, state, and national history in these exciting next few years.



PAST TIMES

JAMES STILL, AN ALABAMA WRITER

by Ron Williams

“Sometimes I tell folk, I was born in a cotton patch,” said the late James Still, beloved poet and author, who was born and raised in Chambers County, Alabama. His early childhood was spent around Lafayette. In his teen years, he lived in Shawmut Mill Village, and he graduated from high school at Fairfax. “I have many memories of that time and that place,” he once wrote.

Still, who was born July 16th, 1906, to James Alexander and Loney Lindsey Still, on Double Branch Farm, near Lafayette, was one of ten children. His siblings were Lois, Loree, Nixie, Lonie, Inez, William Comer, Tom Watson, Alfred and Don, his half-brother.

“Papa,” remembered Still, “was fair-complexioned, red-haired and kept his head full of hair until his death. His eyes were as blue as a wren’s egg. And he was a handsome man. One of my aunts kept reminding, ‘Too bad you’re not good-looking like your daddy.’”

Still’s father was well known in the Valley as a “horse doctor.” Dr. Still, as they called him, had attended Auburn for a few “short courses,” and he knew every horse in the county by name. He always waved to a passing animal; sometimes he tipped his hat.

continued on next page

The VOICE is a quarterly newsletter of the Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society, Inc., P.O. Box 718, West Point, Georgia 31833

Editor: Ron Williams (hopewellroad@yahoo.com)

Find us on Facebook and visit our website at <https://cvhistoricalsociety.org/>

MISSION STATEMENT: As a non-profit membership organization, the Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society seeks to preserve and promote the history and heritage of Chambers County, Alabama, West Point, Georgia, and the greater Chattahoochee Valley area. CVHS produces and sells historical books and media, publishes a quarterly newspaper, and presents programs with speakers on historical topics of local and regional interest.

VISION STATEMENT: Having been in continuous operation since its founding in 1953, the Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society strives to uphold the vision of its founders while posturing the organization for growth in the 21st Century.

JAMES STILL, AN ALABAMA WRITER - continued from previous page

One of James Still's earliest memories was of carrying a tiny homemade cotton sack behind his mother in the cotton field and hurrying his sisters to pick faster. A full bale that day would mean a trip to the cotton gin, and the young boy could tag along and probably get his hat sucked up in the suction tube.

On one day, when the summer sun was beating down on a seemingly endless row, Inez began to tell a story. The story lasted for hours and made the tedious work seem more bearable.

"When I learned it was a story she made-up as she went along, I was amazed," said Still. At that moment in my life, my horizon expanded beyond what I could see and experience and into the enchanted kingdom of my imagination. By her example, Inez had showed me that I could make up my own stories. And I did."

At the age of seven, the future writer started school at the old "College" in Lafayette. Miss Porterfield wrote his name in chalk on his desk. Using kernels of corn he outlined his name over and over. At the end of the day, he could spell his name.

From that simple beginning, from a home that contained only four books—the *Bible*, *The Anatomy of the Horse*, *The Palaces of Sin*, or *The Devil in Society*, and *The Cyclopedia of Universal Knowledge*, which had the back cover missing, James Still grew to be one of America's beloved writers and poets.

"... As a boy I read about distant places and I heard the trains blowing in the night and I yearned to go where they were going..."

Still did just that. He earned an undergraduate degree at Lincoln Memorial University near Cumberland Gap, Tennessee. He received his master's degree from Vanderbilt and a librarian degree at the University of Illinois.

Even with an education, jobs were hard to find during the depression. After a time spent "hoboing" he came upon a job at the Hindman Settlement School as a volunteer librarian working for room and board in 1931. He fell in love with the people of Knott County, Kentucky. He heard beauty in their quaint dialect and recorded a way of life that was quickly passing away.

In 1937 his first book of poetry, *Hounds on the Mountain*, was published. Two years later he came to the log house on Little Carr Creek to finish *River of Earth*, a novel set in Appalachia that chronicles the struggle of mountain people before the depression. Soon, Still realized that his tiny cabin "was the place I'd been looking for all my life."

It was hard at first to fit in. He was referred to as "the man in the bushes" by some, but slowly he became one of them. "You talk smart," he was told, "but you have hillbilly wrote all over you."

In 1940, *River of Earth* shared the Southern Authors Award with Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*.

Felt Still, "who we are, where we came from, what our ancestors did before us, and where we lived has much to do with what we compose in verse and story."

"I don't think I would have become a writer if I had stayed in Chambers County, Alabama," he once explained. "Although I've written almost nothing specifically about my native state, I nonetheless consider myself an Alabama writer—for better or worse—I brought Alabama with me when I came to Kentucky... Maybe a reason I've never written fiction about Alabama is that I felt too close to it, and I was pained by it..."

James Steele, the Alabama writer, "whose life and work were so deeply rooted in Knott County that it seemed he had been there forever," died in 2001. He was buried on the property of the Hindman Settlement School on a spot that he picked out. A boulder from the mountain that he loved marks the grave.

A poem, *Those I Want in Heaven with Me, Should There be Such a Place*, written in Still's last years is a tribute to those he loved in Alabama. He speaks of his parents, siblings, aunts, and uncles. He remembers his one and only love who died at 16, and "my dog Jack nipping at my heels."

"I want the play fellows of my youth," he concludes, "who gathered bumblebees in bottles, erected flutter mills by streams, flew kites nearly to Heaven, and who before me saw God."

"Be with me there."



Photo from James Still Collection, Cobb Memorial Archives, Valley, Alabama

Grit is celebrating its 141st year of publication. In the 1960s, I sold Grit, “America’s Greatest Family Newspaper,” in the Valley. My early introduction to Grit was from an elementary school classmate who sold the paper to workers during shift changes at Fairfax Mill. I bought my first copy of Grit by the mill gate.

I have fond memories of Grit because it was one of the first newspapers I saw that was not an Alabama or Georgia newspaper. It is easy to have fond memories of Grit. It was known as the “good news” newspaper. For me, reading and selling Grit was “important work” offering an “important newspaper” to “important Valley residents.” I admit I was a poor salesboy. I was too focused on reading the paper or looking at the photographs rather than selling them. Valleyans “circulated” Grit newspapers to barbershops, restaurants, and other retail stores.

The home of Grit was Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The paper was founded in 1882 as a weekly broadsheet newspaper. Its content was news, features, fiction, and cartoons. I recall its many “slice-of-life” stories from small towns in the Midwest. Early in its history, Grit printed color photographs and comics. Grit’s typical family features included “Twins: Twice the Fun for Mom and Dad,” “Old Grape Juice Provokes Barnyard Uproar,” and “Indiana Cop Uses Puppets to Solve Crimes,” mixed among recipes, dress patterns, and ads for Mail order products, farm equipment, and health aids. Grit offered products by mail to folks in small towns. It also allowed small-town folks to write to others in small towns.

Grit was distributed nationally. It was mostly sold door-to-door by paperboys on Sundays. Among those many Alabama salesboys was at least one famous figure.

According to the Alabama Journal, March 22, 1976, as a young boy Alabama’s future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo L. Black (1886-1971), born in Harlan in Clay County, sold Grit. In the article, ninety-year-old Barney Whatley, Black’s first law partner, shared his memories of Black with the paper. He said that Black was known for his “concentration on the activity at hand.” Whatley shared that Black “loved books, he sold Grit newspapers, and he wouldn’t loosen his grip on a melon once he had determined to steal it.”

Whatley also shared that Black, as a young man, was a Ku Klux Klan member. He said that as a lawyer “trying cases before a jury, Klan membership helped” in Alabama. Black was a U.S. Senator before President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed him to the U.S. Supreme Court. He served on the court from 1937 to 1971.

After years as a broadsheet newspaper, by the time I sold Grit in the mid-1960s, it had evolved into a weekly tabloid newspaper. By 1969, Grit had a national

circulation of 1.5 million subscribers. Today, Grit is a glossy bimonthly magazine.

In the July/August 2023 issue, Grit’s editor introduced a nostalgia column. If you want to share your memories of selling, reading, and sharing Grit, email Letters@Grit.com. This issue has articles on managing livestock, growing summer vegetables, and managing grasslands. Grit’s livestock photographs are excellent. Several pages are donated to folks who have farm crafts, including cloth dolls, for sale. If you’re lonely, you might find a rural pen-pal in Grit’s Mail Call column.

Ernest L. Dyess (1927-2000), was a World War II veteran and a columnist for the Selma Times-Journal. In 1994, he wrote the warmly funny “God, If You’re Real, Let the Cow Be in the Pen When I Get Home.” In the book, Dyess, a graduate of Auburn University, wrote that he sold Grit newspapers on Saturdays. Like me, he said Grit was among his “favorite reading material.”

As a youth Pee Wee Turner, a resident of the Nubbin Creek Road community in Clay County, sold Grit. He shared his selling experience with the Anniston Star, July 5, 1998. Turner had a nose for business. In the early days, Grit newspapers “sold for a nickel and cost me three cents,” Turner said. Turner went on to own a successful car dealership, Pee Wee Turner Motors, Inc., in Anniston.

Justice Black and Dyess had early exposure to reading via Grit. They both had successful and interesting careers. There is a lesson here about early reading. Early reading is important. Pee Wee Turner’s early experience with Grit gave him an appreciation for hard work and the value of a dollar. He became a successful businessman.

According to a 1982 AP story on the 100th anniversary of Grit, the paper’s paperboys and papergirls included astronaut John Glenn (1921-2017), actor Burl Ives (1909-1995), actor/singer Gene Autrey (1907-1998), orchestra leader Tommy Dorsey (1905-1956), and country singer Loretta Lynn (1932-2022).

By 1982, the paper’s circulation had fallen to 650,000. Its salesboys/salesgirls were hard to find. For Grit, changes were coming. The paper moved from Pennsylvania to Kansas. In its new glossy magazine format, Grit is sold by mail. Its website is Grit.com Newspaper delivery boys and girls have other “important work.”

Grit, in its 141st year, continues to celebrate rural America.

James Patterson is a life member of the Auburn Univ. Alumni Assoc. and a member of the Alabama State Society in Washington, D.C.



THE NICKEL BUS STATION *by Wayne Clark*

LANETT — One of the last surviving links to Lanett Mill and the CV Railway has gotten a new lease on life. The old nickel bus station that sits along Highway 29 on the Lanett Mill site has gotten some much needed rehab work. It had been looking pretty shabby in recent times but is now looking as good as new.

When asked about the former train station's new look, Mayor Jamie Heard credited the Chambers County Development Authority (CCDA) for giving this historic structure the needed improvements. "The Development Authority maintains the mill site," Mayor Heard said. "I asked (Executive Director) Valerie Gray if something could be done about the old station. She hired a contractor to get it done. We appreciate this. It looks so much better now."

The station, the mill's water tower and a guard shack next to Sandy's Service Center are all that's left of the once

mammoth Lanett Mill/Lanett Bleachery & Dye Works complex.

Before Highway 29 was four laned in the late 1940s, the CV Railway ran in front of the mill. The CV ran from 1895 until 1992, connecting the Valley towns by rail. There were stations up and down the line where people could wait for a train to arrive. The Lanett station offered shelter for people leaving the mill and heading back home. At one time, passenger service was provided by battery-powered electric cars. They could carry up to 50 people, and riders called them nickel buses because that's how much it cost to ride. One could travel from West Point to River View for five cents in those days.

The Lanett shelter appears in an ironic photograph from 1939. It's in the background and in the foreground is a car carrying President Franklin Roosevelt on a visit to the Valley on March 30, 1939.

continued on next page



A BIG CROWD FOR THE PRESIDENT — A enormous local crowd turned out to see President Franklin D. Roosevelt when he visited the Valley on March 30, 1939. His open car was passing Lanett Mill when this photo was taken. The mill and dye works are long gone, but that shelter in the background still stands. It's now in its second century and has recently undergone some rehab work which should allow it to continue on as a local icon for years to come.

THE NICKEL BUS STATION - *continued from previous page*

What's thought to be the largest crowd ever assembled for an event in Valley history took place the day. West Point Manufacturing Company President and CEO George H. Lanier wanted to make a big impression on the president. FDR rode in an open car from one end of the Valley to the other on that day. Seated with him in the back seat was Smith Lanier Sr., who had worked with the president's administration on some flood control measures to protect West Point. A levee was built on the north side of town to help deflect high water away from the downtown district. This can be seen as the first step in what would lead to the construction of West Point Dam between 1965 and 1975.

Cobb Memorial Archives has an itinerary of the president's visit to the west central Georgia-east central Alabama region that day. It was on a Thursday and started with him and his entourage boarding a train in Atlanta between 7 a.m. and 7:20. The train headed south and stopped in West Point at approximately 8:30 a.m. before continuing on into Alabama. At Chehaw Station, the president's party got off the train and had a motorcade to nearby Tuskegee for a visit to the VA hospital and to meet local officials. A widely circulated photo of FDR shaking hands with famed scientist George Washington Carver was taken at the Tuskegee stop. The president spoke to an assembled crowd at Tuskegee Institute. From there, Roosevelt and his party took the drive to Auburn, where he spoke to a crowd of students and faculty at Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now Auburn University). Everyone enjoyed a picnic lunch before the president and those accompanying him went to Opelika, where the president met with a group of school children. Then it was up Highway 29, where the motorcade would cross the Osanippa Creek bridge and enter Fairfax during the one o'clock hour. A new school to be known as Valley High was going up at the time.

This is where West Point Manufacturing Company, local schools and residents of the mill villages had turned out in a big way. Lines of people some three and four rows deep were on both sides of the road all the way through West Point. It was the first time a president of the United States had come to the area, and everyone wanted to make a good impression.

Photos taken that day show that it worked. FDR was in a jovial mood all along the nine-mile ride from Fairfax through West Point. He waved his hat to the crowds and smiled broadly all along the way.

A report in the Chattahoochee Valley Times noted that Col. E.W. Starling, head of the White House Secret Service, and several of his men had been in West Point for several days carefully planning the president's trip. West

Point Police Chief Reed Mobley filled them in on local details.

It was announced at the Wednesday meeting of the West Point Lions Club that all the mills and local schools would be closed during the one o'clock hour so people could turn out to see the president. West Point Mayor W.H. Scott asked all businesses in downtown West Point to be closed at 1 p.m. so people could line the streets as the president's motorcade came through the city. The president stopped briefly in front of West Point High and at the 10th Street School to speak to students. The motorcade then turned east toward the Little White House in Warm Springs, where FDR spent some of his happiest days.

"It was the thrill of many a person to see the president," reads the April 6, 1939, edition of *The Chambers County News*. "That's something that does not happen to most people in this country and something that may not happen here again for many years to come. It was a day we all felt very proud of. We thank everyone who had anything to do with his coming here. It was a great day for us all."

Roosevelt (1882-1945) helped the American people regain faith in themselves. He brought hope of a better life for people both black and white, something few, if any, political leaders can do today.

FDR was the only U.S. president who was elected four times. He led the country through the dark days of the Great Depression and through the dark days of World War II, when over 400,000 Americans lost their lives. The day President Roosevelt came to town was a bright spot for local people during an otherwise troubled period.

That little train station in Lanett has stood for more than a century now. If it had eyes, it would have seen a lot in its time, but nothing as memorable as the day President Franklin Roosevelt came to town.

It's a good thing it hasn't been torn down.

Chris Busby of the CCDA staff told *The Valley Times-News* that a recent inspection found the structure to be stable and safe but that some improvements were needed.

The land behind it may be due for some redevelopment. Some inspections have taken place to see if a Brownfields grant is needed. Brownfields cleanups take place on former industrial or commercial sites. If any contamination is found, it can be cleaned up. If not, it's ready for redevelopment. In either case, it's like having a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval that this is an ideal site for new development.



SAMUEL PORTER JONES

3 – The number of baby boys born in 1847 who would greatly impact the world. That year Thomas Alva Edison, inventor of the electric light, and Alexander Graham Bell, who patented the telephone, were born. However, Sam P. Jones, who was born on October 16, 1847, in Oak Bowery, Alabama, to John and Queenie Porter Jones, was to become “the most famous man in America.”

28 – Five-year-old Samuel stood up on recitation day at the one-room schoolhouse in Oak Bowery and recited a 28-word poem, which was very prophetic: “You’d scarce expect one of my age, To speak in public on the stage, With thundering peals and Thornton tones, The world shall hear of Sam P. Jones.”

8 – The age of young Sam when his mother died. She is buried in Oak Bowery. After her death the family moved to Cartersville, Ga, the place that Sam P. Jones would call home for the rest of his life.

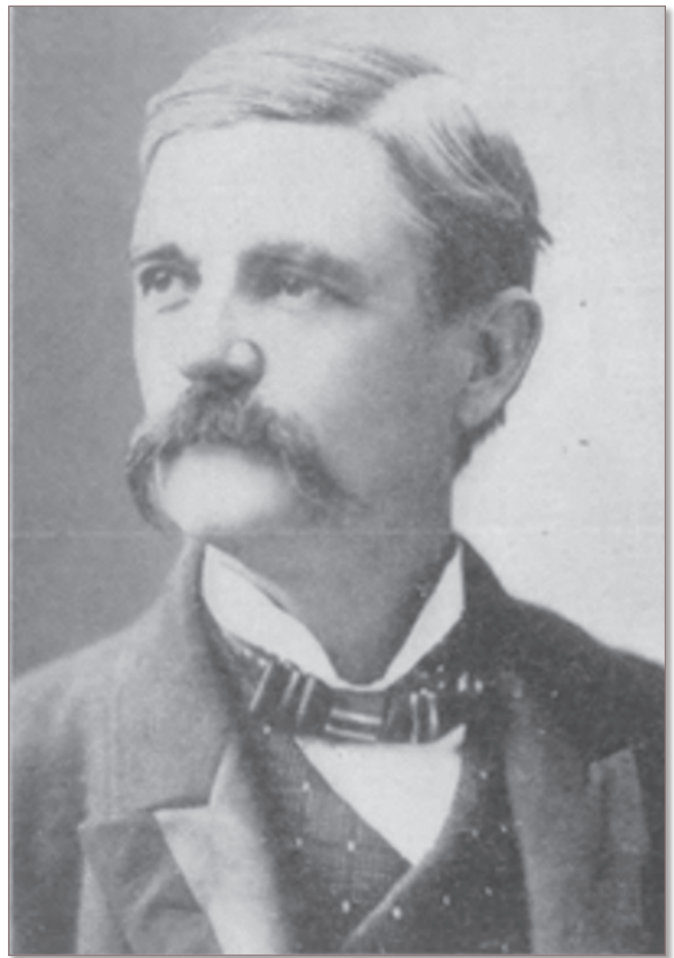
1872 – Year that Jones became a Circuit Riding Preacher. He was converted after a death-bed plea from his father. Sam P., previously a drunken lawyer, surrendered to the call to preach. He preached to millions in his lifetime.

3 – Three words were frequently used in Sam Jones’ preaching: “Quit your meanness!”

1 – There was only one difference between San Antonio, Texas, and Hell according to Sam P. Jones. The difference was simple: “San Antonio has a river running through it.”

10 – Number in feet where you could place a nickel to form a path. The evangelist stated that some rich men were so miserly that they would follow this path all the way to Hell.

1885 – The year of the Nashville Revival. According to Ray Hughes, “The most notorious saloon owner and river boat captain in the city came to the meeting one night to execute revenge on Sam for turning his whiskey drinkers and gamblers into ‘Bible thumpers.’ The loss of his clientele to some ‘rude preacher from Georgia’ was more than he was willing to tolerate. At the end of the sermon, the captain walked down the middle aisle and stated, ‘Sam Jones, I came here to whup you tonight, but you have whupped me with the gospel.’ The captain gave his heart to God and expressed his allegiance to Sam as a lifelong friend. He walked out of the tent a changed man, and then went to his saloon and rolled all the whiskey barrels down the street and into the Cumberland River. He also ordered all whiskey overboard on his 35 steamboats and



*Rev. Samuel Porter Jones, evangelist and Southern lecturer, in a 1905 publication. Southern Platform Department, conducted in the interest of the Lyceums of the South.
From Wikimedia Commons*

turned their gambling halls into floating missions.” Captain Ryman built an auditorium for Jones to preach in. This auditorium later became known as The Grand Ole Opry.

15 – The day in October 1906 that Sam P. Jones died. It was one day shy of his 59th birthday. He was laughing and chatting with the porter on the train at Perry, Arkansas, when he asked for a cup of water. Before he received the drink the voice that had preached to millions was silenced.

30,000 – The number of mourners who passed by the body of the man who hated sin more than any other person of his generation as it lay in state at the Capitol Rotunda in Atlanta.

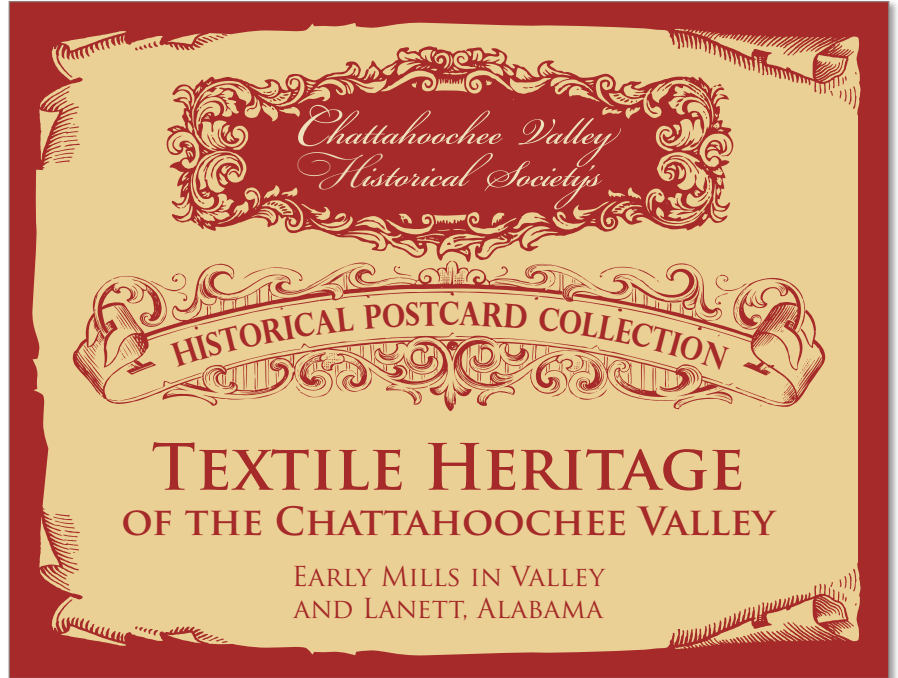
500,000 – It is estimated that he won over half a million people to the Lord during his ministry. It is said that no man influenced the mindset of 19th Century America more than Sam P. Jones.



**HISTORICAL
POSTCARD COLLECTION:**

*Textile Heritage of the
Chattahoochee Valley, Early
Mills in Valley and Lanett,
Alabama* (CVHS, 2016)

A collection of six reproduced images relating to the founding and development of Chattahoochee Manufacturing Company and Alabama-Georgia Manufacturing Company, forerunners of West Point Manufacturing Company. Includes images of early Lanett Mills, Shawmut Mill, and Fairfax Mill, historic photographs, and artistic renderings. **\$10** (shipping \$2)



Go to our on-line bookstore on our website to download the order form.
www.cvhistoricalsociety.org - click "Bookstore"



Follow the Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society on Facebook and on our website: WWW.CVHISTORICALSOCIETY.ORG



The Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society
P.O. Box 718
West Point, GA 31833