

The Saline

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Traskwood Business District 1940s

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A Publication of the Saline County History and Heritage Society, Inc.
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Traskwood – Back in Time

By: H. Lynn Mobley

The town of Traskwood, Arkansas, located at the southeastern corner of Saline County, has a proud and varied history and is the home of my youth. It has, of course, changed greatly over time into what is now mostly a bedroom community, a quiet, generally peaceful place, called home by long-time residents and newcomers alike. Many of the younger generation work in Benton or Little Rock or in other surrounding towns, and return to Traskwood in the evenings for rest, peace and solitude.

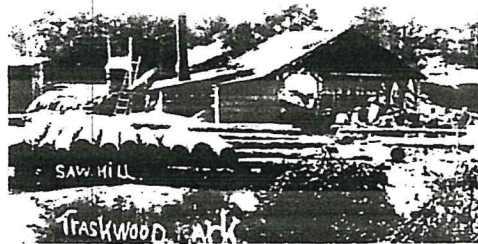
The old town itself was established in 1873, nearly 150 years ago.¹ About that time a railroad was under construction by the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railway Company, linking Benton and Malvern and points beyond, including St. Louis, Missouri, to the north and Texarkana, Arkansas, to the south. The story goes that two railroad surveyors, a Mr. Trask and a Mr. Wood, viewed the area—one of hills and trees and lush growth—to be an attractive place in which to settle. Soon thereafter a railroad depot was built, and the area became known as Traskwood.² Twenty seven years later in 1900, Traskwood

was incorporated with a population of 256 residents.³

In the meantime, several of the railroad construction crew members—as well as others—began settling in the area. Farms began to spring up, timber harvests were plentiful, and as early as 1873 an early settler, Henry Taylor Collat, opened the first small store in his family home.⁴ Mr. Collat had moved to Saline County from Georgia along with his family in 1853, and began farming land adjacent to the Saline River.

By the early 1900's Traskwood began to grow into a thriving community, eventually supporting as many as three general stores (Cunningham & Hilliard, Sanders General Merchandise, and Winters Brothers) and a small cafe (Couch). Farming and timber-related businesses provided a sound economy. Shipping and transportation options via the railroad were numerous.

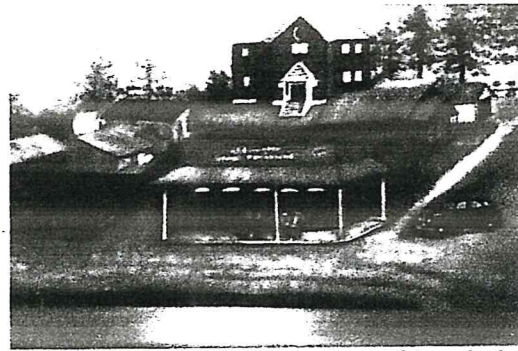
In addition to the general stores and cafe, Traskwood at its peak was home to three, sometimes four, churches, a cotton gin (John Cunningham, owner), blacksmith shop (Walter Mobley), sawmills (Bailey Co., Fred Laufketter, Sam Sanders),



Sawmill at Traskwood—probably early 1900s; Traskwood has been home to several sawmills over the years. This is believed to be either the Sanders or Laufketter mill, likely destroyed by fire in the early 1900s.

peach orchards (Mr. Newcomb, Fred Meyers, Mr. Carter), cotton warehouse, sorghum mill (George B. Martin), a grist mill and highly-regarded public school. It also had a hotel/boarding house, saloon (licenses granted freely in the 1870's⁵), dance

hall, barber shop (Bert Gatlin), an ice cream parlor (in the Sanders store building), and on the outskirts of town was a sizeable minnow farm and hatchery built by Vivan Williams on the site of the 1880's Bailey's sawmill.⁴¹



(L) 1940s Traskwood Business District, looking north from the railroad crossing. This painting, and the companion painting next to it, were painted from memory by Captola King McDade Henry, a native and lifelong resident of Traskwood. Beginning in the lower left corner of the painting and proceeding clockwise, the structures are as follows: The first depot, Winters Store, Couch Café, Post Office, Sanders residence, Sanders Store, and the Methodist Church. Along the right side of the painting, beginning at the top right: Cunningham residence, Mobley Blacksmith Shop, and the community water pump. (R) 1940s Traskwood Business District, looking south from the railroad crossing. Beginning in the center of the painting and proceeding uphill toward the upper right corner, the structures were as follows: Cunningham's Store, a private residence, the canning kitchen, with the Smith-Hughes building in the far distance. In the top center is the two-story Traskwood School constructed in about 1910 or 1911. To the left of the school was the Webb residence, an unknown warehouse, and other unidentified buildings.

The Railroad and Local Economy

Construction of the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railway (StLIM&S) through Traskwood was completed in 1873, about the same time as the town began to form.⁷ The community became flag-stop-only for

the next nine years until 1882, when a depot was built and passenger service began.⁶

The Traskwood community, it's residents, and local businesses quickly benefitted from the ability to ship its products—lumber, pulpwood, cross-

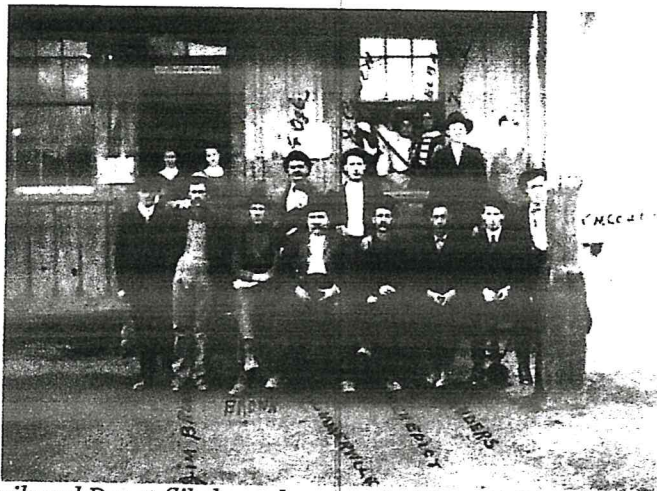
ties, cotton, cotton seed, bolts and staves, potatoes, cattle, chickens, eggs, hides, fur and more—to both nearby and distant markets served by the railroad lines.⁴²

Incoming rail deliveries of dry goods, seed, household supplies, tools, and other products allowed local merchants to meet consumer needs, while maintaining adequate inventories.

In addition to the main track, two rail sidings were available, one to allow trains heading in opposite directions to meet and pass each other; the other for positioning of freight cars at loading and unloading docks. Alongside the docks was an enclosed, lockable warehouse and loading shed, owned and operated by a Mr. Null. The warehouse eventually became the

Boy Scout hut for many years, beginning in the early 1950's.

Once passenger service began in 1882, routing was to Malvern and beyond to the southwest and Benton and beyond to the northeast. A depot was constructed about that time, to include passenger ticketing, two separate waiting areas, and mail and freight shipping and receiving. Passenger service was eventually discontinued in the 1950's, possibly because of dwindling rider numbers, and likely influenced as well by a rash of minor personal injury claims and frivolous lawsuits. In the meantime, StLIM&S merged into the Missouri Pacific Railroad in 1917, and Missouri Pacific, in turn, eventually merged into the Union Pacific Railroad in 1982.⁸



First Traskwood Railroad Depot (likely early 1900s.). (Front L-R) Unknown, Jim Brown, Jargo Brown, Jim Bob Summerville, Artie Benedict, Sam Sanders, unknown, and Hugh Couch; (Second Row, L-R) Frank Ogle (with little boy), Jason Couch, a Mr. Tull, and unknown; Women in doorway and window are unknown, other than one named Elba; (The sign on the wall says, "Pacific Express, Money Orders for Sale Here, Good Everywhere." The sign above the door says, "White People.")

The larger depot was torn down and replaced, probably in the 1940's, with a small building primarily used for lock-up of freight packages and parcels arriving by rail. The new depot

building was accessible only to train conductors and to the nearby postmaster. Catalog mail orders were commonplace in that era, especially from companies such as Sears

Roebuck and Company, Montgomery Ward, and Spiegel.

Following discontinuation of passenger service, incoming mail would be tossed to the ground in sturdy canvas bags from fast-moving passenger trains. Outgoing mail would, in turn, be placed in the canvas bags, positioned on a trackside rack, snatched by train personnel and pulled into the mail car as the train sped by at full speed.

Historically, the post office was always within 100 yards or so of the depot and tracks. The first post office, established in 1874, was in a small building on the south side of the tracks near the Webb residence/boarding house. It was later relocated to the north side of the tracks into space inside the Sam Sanders General Merchandise store. About the time the depot building was replaced in the 1940's, the post office was again relocated to a newly constructed building close by. (Traskwood's present-day post office is about a mile north of town on State Highway 229.)

Geography and the Area

According to excerpts from the *Benton Courier* newspaper in 1913, the Traskwood countryside had much to offer, well beyond the 1870's praises of Messrs. Trask and Wood.⁹ Plentiful to the area were hundreds of acres of fine land, numerous running springs, excellent growths of timber, gravel and sand deposits readily available for construction and farm use, undeveloped clay deposits, flat lands adaptable to crop production, ridge lands ideal for fruit orchards and berries, easy access to the Saline River and tributaries, and more. (Surprisingly, despite all the positives unique to the area, Traskwood's

population has increased only modestly since the first recorded population of 256 residents in 1900,¹⁰ growing to 358 in 1970 and finally to 518 in 2010.)

Physicians and Medical

During the early years, Traskwood benefitted from the services of local medical doctors, beginning with Doctor D. N. Fisher (1847-1885) in the 1800's. Subsequent medical needs were addressed by other physicians in residence, including Doctors J. A. Graham, Boulanger Gwaltney, Charles Prickett, and James Wyatt Walton (1863-1928). Dr. Walton's nurse, Mary Cox, was known to oftentimes immunize local children on the grounds of the Methodist Church.

Doctor Walton was born in Saline (now Grant) County in 1863, the son of James and Angelena Walton who migrated to Arkansas in 1860.¹² He began his medical profession in 1889 following the study of medicine at the Arkansas Industrial University at Little Rock. He also operated a small farm. Incidentally, Dr. Walton's father, James, was killed in Civil War hostilities near Atlanta, Georgia in the 1860's.

Doctor Walton was joined in his Traskwood medical practice by Dr. D. N. Fisher in 1889.¹³ Dr. Fisher, a native of Illinois, came to Saline County in 1873.

Prominent Farmers Back In The Day

In addition to successful merchants, businesses, medical services, and community leadership, equally crucial to the community was the significant economic contribution made by area farmers.

One of the earliest known farmers in the area was John L. Collat (1838-1856).¹¹ He and his family relocated from Georgia in 1853 and established a farming operation on the Saline River in the Traskwood Township.

Other notable farm families included the Callahan's, Covington's, and Hardin's, along with many others.

Birthplace of Noteworthy People

The apparent quality of early Traskwood schools may help explain why several natives—whether or not they fully navigated the local school system—went on to become notable successes in life. For example:

1. Francis Irby Gwaltney was born in Traskwood in 1921 to a town doctor.¹⁴ He earned his high school diploma after returning from WWII, then earned bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. Mr. Gwaltney became an accomplished novelist, authoring ten published novels and numerous Hollywood movie and television scripts along the way. After a very successful career as a novelist, he returned to teach English at Arkansas Tech at Russellville.

2. A second success story was that of Clifton Williams, born in Traskwood in 1923.¹⁵ Mr. Williams subsequently earned his high school diploma in Little Rock, then earned college degrees at Louisiana State University. He learned to play piano, mellaphone, and French horn, eventually becoming a prominent musician and composer. Mr. Williams wrote dozens of concert and symphony compositions, was winner of the American Bandmaster award and other prestigious recognition for his work, and later taught music and

composition for many years at the University of Texas and at Miami University.

3. And then there was Alva B. Winters, born in Traskwood in 1905.¹⁶ He played college football at the University of Arkansas from 1926 to 1928 (probably not a bad achievement considering that Traskwood schools never sponsored organized football). Mr. Winters' mother Rose, a memorable and prominent citizen in her own right, was herself an 1890 graduate of Ouachita College at Arkadelphia.¹⁷

4. Another noteworthy Traskwood native was George W. Winters (1847-1929).¹⁸ Mr. Winters, like the previously mentioned James Walton and John G. Shepard (discussed later), served in the Confederate Army during 1862 to 1864. He enlisted at 15 years of age, mustering with the 11th Arkansas Infantry Company 'D' in front of the M. A. Winters Store at Traskwood. He was eventually captured and imprisoned in St. Louis, Missouri by the Union Army, later being included in an exchange of prisoners between Confederate and Union forces, and subsequently being released. While attempting to rejoin his military unit, he was injured by enemy gunfire in Saline County. Upon his recovery, Mr. Winters resided in Hot Spring County until his return to Traskwood in 1888 to become owner and operator of a general merchandise store. The store acquired by Mr. Winters had previously housed a dance hall on the second floor, an area that he soon converted to Sunday school use, an act promptly leading to the founding of the Traskwood Methodist Church.

Churches and Cemeteries

The community's religious needs were historically addressed by active local houses of worship, including the Methodist Church¹⁹ (founded 1889), the Baptist Churches, and the Assembly of God (Pentecostal) Church. A Church of Christ (Camelot) was also active in the early years, as were occasional 'brush arbor' services (described as being temporary outdoor church gatherings).

The original Baptist Church was destroyed by a tornado in July 1933. It was soon replaced on the same site by a new frame building, then eventually replaced again in the early 1960's by a larger brick building that is in use today.

Church grounds and facilities were often the focal point of the community, and served as the site for many gatherings, luncheons, weddings, reunions, singings, funeral services and other events and activities.

Baptisms oftentimes were held at the Saline River at what has long been known as the Summerville Ford, a shallow water area used by farmers to cross over to their farm lands.

Community Services, Town Government, and Organizations

Electric power was not widely accessible in Traskwood until the early 1930's, likely around 1934 or 1935.²⁰ A community water well and pump situated near Winters store was available to persons not having wells or who were otherwise in need of additional water.

During the WWII presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, a community canning kitchen operated locally to benefit those needing access to canning equipment, supplies and

assistance.²¹ Beginning in 1943, many processed foods were rationed because of tin shortages resulting from the military's need for metals to produce war-related equipment and supplies. Citizens were encouraged to plant 'Victory Gardens' to provide for personal food needs, hence the increased need for public canning facilities. (These same facilities were also used at times for mattress production.)

For many years, ending in the 1950s, roundtrip public bus transportation was available twice-daily between Traskwood and Benton. The Couch Cafe was the local bus stop.

In the early days, a prominent resident active in community affairs was John G. Shepard (1833-1912), who served as Magistrate beginning in 1878.²² He was very involved and conscientious in matters pertaining to local schools and recognized the importance of quality education. Mr. Shepard had relocated to Saline County from Tennessee in 1860. He served in the Sixth Arkansas Infantry from 1862 to 1865, participating in Civil War battles at Helena and Jenkins Ferry.

Still another prominent person who made significant early contributions to the community was A. P. Mitchell (1845-1893).²³ He was a well know postmaster and merchant. Mr. Mitchell relocated to the Traskwood area from Tennessee in 1851. He was appointed Postmaster in 1881, having held a position as deputy postmaster since 1874. Additionally, Mr. Mitchell was active in general merchandising, cotton ginning, and various farming pursuits, as well as in church and public educational matters.

Finally, John O. Hill of Traskwood Township was appointed

and served as Apportioning Justice in 1885 and for some time thereafter.⁴³

Civil government in Traskwood today consists of an elected mayor, a police/fire chief, recorder/treasurer, and a six-member town council.²⁴ The community has a town hall, a combination volunteer fire department/community center, and a small park, picnic accommodations, and playground with recreational equipment for children.

Other Community Activities

Traskwood has long enjoyed its' share of recreation, entertainment and fun. Many of those activities—such as pie and cake walks, chili suppers, skits and plays, bingo, talent shows, and other gatherings and parties—were mostly centered around the school. The local adult string band, an entertaining group indeed, performed at many of those functions. Churches, too, often held singing conventions,

homecomings and other community events.

Traveling movies made appearances from time to time. And there were occasional tent show performances of one kind or another, not the least of which were stopover performances by the circus when traveling through the area via railroad. Entry to many events was a bag of vegetables or other garden produce, rather than the normal five cents cost of admission.

The community was long the home of active branches of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the Ladies Home Demonstration Club, and other organizations.

Traskwood also supported and enjoyed men's summertime baseball for decades, well into the 1960's. Oftentimes the local team was extremely competitive and met with much success in the central Arkansas area.



1940 Traskwood Baseball team -- 1940 Saline County Champions. Players pictured from L-R: Ahead of first row: J. D. Burkes (bat boy); First Row: J. D. Couch, Raymond Rice, Verd Hambrick, Doyle Mobley, and Melvin Brown; Second row: Pete Hambrick, Buster Doddridge, unknown Buie, and Luke Hambrick; Back row: Strawberry Shellnut, B. J. Martin, Delmar Gatlin, and W. G. "Dub" Carver. Manager Bud Cunningham does not appear in the photo; taken at Lamar Porter Field in Little Rock.

Notable Happenings

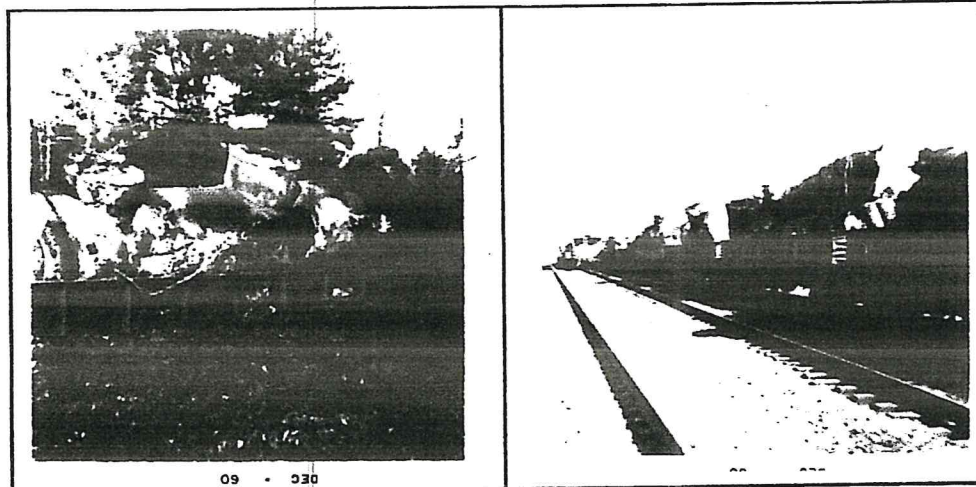
Despite its' small size and rural setting, Traskwood has seen its' share

of newsworthy incidents and events over the years...some good, some not so good. For example:

1. On February 6, 1938, a fast-moving Missouri Pacific passenger train crashed into a motor vehicle stalled at the Cunningham Spur crossing near the Benedict Switch. There were six fatalities, including three train passengers and three railroad personnel.²⁵

2. In December 1960, nineteen tank cars and four boxcars of a 96-car train derailed on the eastbound outskirts of Traskwood.²⁶ Those cars contained ammonium nitrate, liquid fertilizer, nitric acid, fuel oil, gasoline, petroleum oil and lube oil. Several cars ruptured and reacted, including those containing nitric acid and fuel

oil, resulting in a spectacular explosion and mushroom cloud and in the spread of chemical material and metal fragments over a large area. Residences, the local school building, and other structures up to a mile or more away were damaged, and the explosion was felt as far away as Little Rock.²⁷ The community was evacuated for several hours pending assessment of the circumstances and potential additional risk to citizens and property. Curious observers were not allowed near the incident site until the area had been deemed safe and the wreckage had been cleared.



Railroad Explosion near Traskwood - December 1960. Removal of some of the wreckage from the site of the derailment, tank car ruptures, reaction of spilled chemicals, and subsequent violent explosion.

3. The peace and tranquility of the small Traskwood community was shattered by a single, domestic-related, homicide in 1937,²⁸ and again by a double-homicide in 2010.²⁹ In both cases, the perpetrators were arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced.

4. On October 6, 1916, both of Traskwood's largest general merchandise stores, those owned and operated by messrs. J. A. Cunningham

and W. W. Winters, were burglarized before business hours.³⁰ Explosives were used unsuccessfully in attempts to open the stores' safes. And on at least one other occasion, gunfire was exchanged between store personnel and persons attempting to break and enter during non-business hours.³¹

5. Internal disagreement surfaced at the Traskwood Landmark Baptist Church in the 1960's, eventually resulting in the split of the

two disagreeing factions and in the establishment of a second Baptist church.³² One side contended that the preacher at the time was not acting in accordance with accepted church doctrine, and was in fact preaching heresy. The other side did not agree. The dispute became inflamed to the extent that one faction filed suit against an opposing deacon and against the controversial preacher, the lawsuit eventually reaching the Arkansas Supreme Court. Afterward, one faction withdrew from the Landmark Baptist Church and formed another church. Two Baptist churches exist today.

Not-So-Newsworthy Events

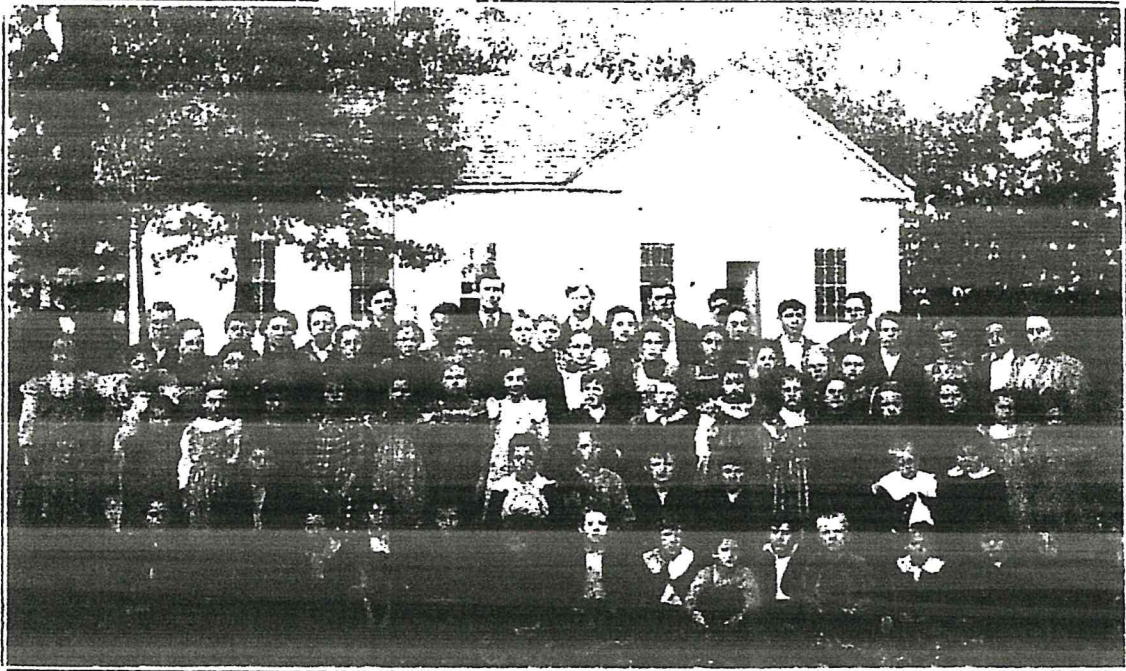
Traskwood, like every other small country town, has always had its share of mischief. Over the years, there were a few chicken thefts⁴⁴ and the usual midnight watermelon patch raids and collard snatchings. There were reports of homemade liquor being distilled...and consumed. And some Halloween celebrations resulted in the temporary disappearance of farm wagons, in soaped windows, in

smashed pumpkins, and in outhouses being relocated to store rooftops (or left standing in the middle of the street). Generally, those incidents were infrequent and considered harmless.

Traskwood Schools and Educators

The first school was established in 1880 by a man known as Professor W. P. Johnson, along with the assistance of other community leaders. According to the American College and Public School Directory, published in 1888 by C. H. Evans & Company, St. Louis, Missouri, a recognized teacher at Traskwood was Mr. E. H. M. Nall.⁴⁵ That first school, a one-room building, was built on what had previously been a sawmill site. Unfortunately, that school building was destroyed by fire in the early 1900's.³³

An existing two-room building was put into temporary service as the replacement school. It was on the back side of the hill that eventually became the site of two later school buildings.³⁴ The two-room building was described by some as having been a hay barn.



GROUP PICTURE OF TRASKWOOD SCHOOL

About forty years ago, Jack Bagby and Miss Anna Suggs were teachers

Photo probably from the 1890-1900 era, which would be about forty years prior to publication in the March 1937 Benton Courier Centennial Edition.

About 1910 or 1911, a much larger, 2-story, red brick school building was built at the top of Traskwood's highest hill. That building, stylishly furnished with wood-burning stoves (and obviously without air conditioning), included three classrooms on the ground floor, two more on the second floor along with a kitchen/lunch room and vacant

space that could be converted into an assembly room.³⁵ Students in grades 1 thru 10 attended school in this building, with students in grades 11 and 12 moving on to high schools at Benton or Harmony Grove or Glen Rose. History says that the Arkansas General Assembly established a special school district for Traskwood in 1911.³⁶

THE BENTON COURIER, Monday Evening, July 23, 1984—Page 7



Traskwood School reunion

The old two-story, red brick school at Traskwood, pictured above in about 1920, no longer exists, but is fondly remembered by those who will attend a Traskwood School reunion at 6 p.m. Saturday at Brown's Country Restaurant. A program will follow dinner, and will include a memorial service and recollections of school days at Traskwood prior to 1947 when the old building was used. A photograph from the 1918-19 school year includes, front row, from left, a Mr. Stutz, principal, Marie Hearn, Duffie Searcy, Ina Massey, Leona Benedict, Grace Henry; back row, Agnes Sanders, Lucile Winters, Jerrine Hilliard, Florence Anderson and Edna Gallin. The photographs are from correspondence-postcards furnished by Shirley Parson Coppeck.



A newspaper story in a March 1913 issue of the *Benton Courier* is quoted as follows: "The splendid brick high school building is the pride of the [Traskwood] township, having been built more than a year ago at a cost of more than \$6,000. It has three class rooms and an auditorium. School is in session six months of the year, and the people never fail to vote the limit seven mill tax."³⁷ (In those days, the school year was divided because of the need for seasonal farm labor. Children were counted on to help with the crops.)

Another early 1900's *Benton Courier* article described Traskwood School as "...one of the best institutions in the county, and an

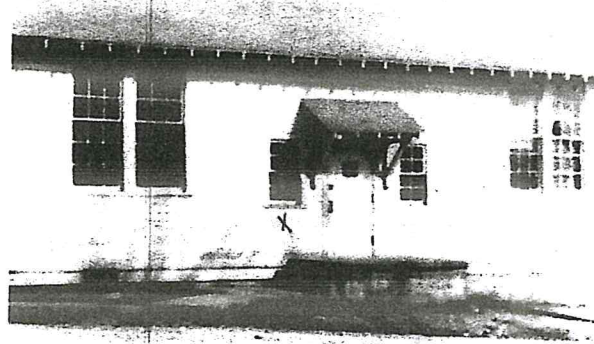
important factor in the development of educational affairs."³⁸

The two-story school building was eventually torn down in about 1948, and replaced by a more modern single-story building that housed five classrooms and an auditorium. During construction of that building, classes were held in the old Smith-Hughes building, which eventually became the lunch room. ('Smith-Hughes' was a 1917 congressional National Vocational Act providing federal funds for promotion of vocational education in agriculture, trades, industry and homemaking.)

This new (and last) school building served the community well until about 1982, when all students

were absorbed into Glen Rose schools. The building was demolished soon thereafter, replaced by what is now the community center and volunteer fire

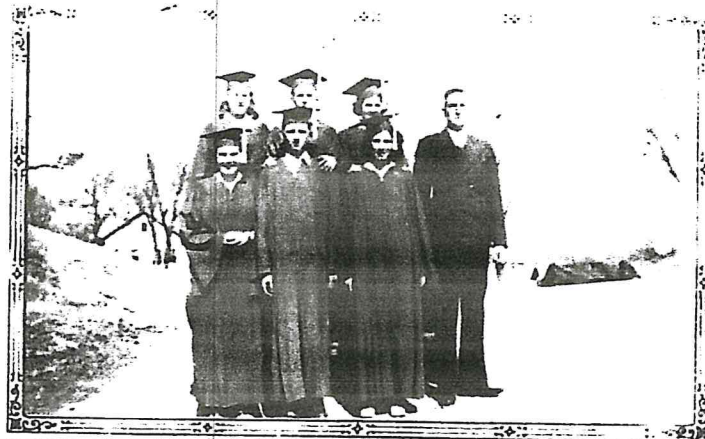
station. The old Smith-Hughes building still stands, but has been shuttered for decades.



Smith-Hughes Building - Traskwood 1940s. Likely built in the 1920s in accordance with provisions of the congressional National Vocational Act. Used for school vocational education until about 1948, when traditional classroom studies were moved into the building temporarily during construction of a more modern school building. Thereafter, the building served as the school lunch room until about 1982.

Traskwood benefitted greatly from the many notable and excellent educators who taught in the local school, and the differences they made in student lives. In addition to Professor Johnson, several other

memorable teachers included brothers Roy and Fred Cathcart (1940's), and Horace Beckwith, W. W. 'Bill' Mills and Katherine Burgess (1950's), to name a few.



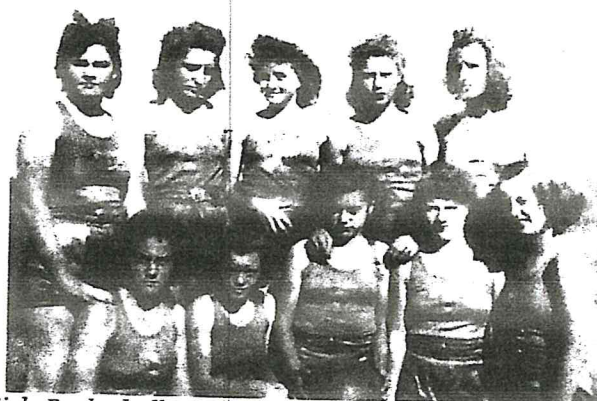
Graduating Class 1942 - Traskwood. (Front, L-R) Mary Lee Traylor, Royce Martin, and Anita Sanders; (Back) Glenna Mobley, Varneli Brown, Thelma Summerville, and Fred Cathcart (teacher).

It should be noted that Traskwood schools existed for more

than a century, but it's gymnasium was always 'open air'. That is, outdoors

with a gravel surface (later 'upgraded' to asphalt in the 1950's), with homemade wooden backboards attached to hand-cut wooden poles.³⁹

Despite those meager facilities, quite a number of exceptional men and women athletes came from Traskwood schools.



Traskwood School Girls Basketball Team - (likely early 1940s). (Front L-R): Merelene Gatlin, Captola King, Joyce Cunningham, Vergie Gatlin, and Aleene Webb; (Back L-R): Tookie Norton, Mary Cunningham, Ruby unknown, unknown, and Billy Hodson.

Students competed as well in study-related competitions—such as in history and public speaking—with other area schools.⁴⁰

Summary and Personal Remarks

Those of us who grew up in Traskwood, Arkansas, should consider ourselves to be very fortunate. Everyone knew one another. And newcomers, as seldom as they came, were welcomed and quickly merged into the community. There always seemed to be a sense of unity, fellowship and civic pride. And people had little reason to lock their houses or cars, as there was little theft or crime.

Many of us probably were poor growing up, but simply didn't know it. We had the essentials. Gardens were everywhere, canning and preservation was common place, so no one went

hungry. We sometimes wore hand-me-downs or clothes made by our mothers from flour sacks, but trips to the Little Rock department stores (or even to the Gingles stores in Benton) were seldom necessary. We had roofs over our heads and fireplaces and stoves to keep us warm in the winter. (OK, so maybe the summertime could get a little testy without air conditioning.) And walking from one place to another, including to the school, church, stores or post office, wasn't all that bad.

Count me as one native who is proud to say that he grew up in Traskwood, Saline County, Arkansas in the 1940's and 1950's. Wouldn't trade that experience for anything in the big city.

NOTE: Throughout this narrative are facts, remembrances, opinions, and photos provided by long-time, knowledgeable residents and former residents of Traskwood

and Saline County. Many thanks to those folks, and also to the Saline County History and Heritage Society who made invaluable reference materials available.

- H. Lynn Mobley, Houston, TX, July 16, 2019

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