

HISTORY OF KEO, ARKANSAS



Many people supplied me with thoughts and memories in my attempt to recapture Keo in yesteryear. I thank them all, without your help there would only be a blank page. A special thanks to the following people.

Roy H. Smith
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Phil and Julia Cobb
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Aileen Ezell

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Keo is and always has been a place for dreaming.

Coming upon the town and its perfectly lined pecan groves, a blink could make Keo pass by the window unseen. But the charm of the town with its large plantation house standing alone near the pecan trees captures the eye and brings back the memory of yesteryear.

Plantation towns built during the heyday of King Cotton exist today in memory only....the general mercantile stores are gone, the line of mule drawn wagons waiting a turn at the gin is empty...wooden sidewalks have long ago rotted and disappeared...the sounds of children playing at the school have been silenced...the railroad tracks have been removed...but memories such as these cannot be erased as long as we remember.

The early settlers were brave men, courageous, and fearless. They worked against almost impassable barriers. These thousands of fertile acres of rich land were then covered with a vast forest of giant trees. It was a perfect wilderness; a veritable hunters' paradise, with deer, bear, panthers, and all varieties of small game in abundance. Scattered through the woods were small clearings, where some stouthearted pioneers were fighting the forest and the elements for a home. The brakes and bayous afforded ample breeding places for mosquitoes with the result that malaria and swamp fever were common sicknesses. The clearing of land and draining off the water never seemed to end. Only men of stout heart and firm conviction could have withstood the hardships of those early days.

Keo, that was known prior to 1880 as Cobb Settlement, was named after Keo Doolie, the daughter of Judge P. C. Dooley, owner of valuable land rights South of Keo who negotiated the name in exchange for a railroad right-of-way. The town of Keo was not incorporated until some twenty-five years later.

The first two families to settle were the Flannigans and the Dunhams. Mr. Dunham lived on forty acres later the location of the Keo Gin Company.

The first Post Office was located in the railroad depot station. Charley Brandt was the agent at the time. His salary was ten dollars a month, but he made a good living out of it because liquor companies would ship packages of liquor to him to be sold on commission. Myrtle Hilliard, R. A. Waller, Delores Neal, and Mary Williams followed Mr. Brandt as postmaster.

J. K. Brodie, president of the Bank of England, once owned the majority of the land that now forms the town of Keo. He supposedly bought the land as a business venture based on the possibility of the railroad coming through Keo. The purchase paid off as the railroad came in 1887. This road was known as the St. Louis, Arkansas and Texas, but was renamed after being rescued from financial difficulties by Samuel W. Fordyce. After again having difficulties, the line was reorganized in 1891 and at that time became the St.

Louis Southwestern, commonly called the “Cotton Belt”. The branch that came through Keo was on the Little Rock to Altheimer line.

The location of the railroad at Keo was a key factor to the demise of nearby settlements called Gumwoods and Surrounded Hill. As economic conditions spelled the end for many small communities such as these, Keo profited from the changing times. The coming of the railroad brought new people and new businesses to the small town.

J. K. Brodie built the first store, which he sold to W. N. Morris and Phillip Winston Lewis. It stood across the street from the present restaurant “Charlotte’s”.

A host of business interests operational between 1889 and 1899 were: Flanakin and Dunham, carpenters; Harris Brother, blacksmiths; Frank Harris, jeweler; J.J. Hollensworth, general store and hotel; David Jennings, general store; Moren and Adams, cotton gin; L. C. Owens and Company, general merchandising; W.N. Morris, general store and saw mill; and W. C. Acompleman, attorney.

In 1906 there were four stores in Keo. They were Flynn’s Grocery store (they had a gasoline pump in front of the store and also sold kerosene from a barrel in the back of the store), W.F. Coleman’s General Merchandise, Morris and Lewis Supply, and J. G. Hudgen’s General Merchandise. Later there was Barnett’s grocery and Beard’s store, which had a picture of an Indian, kneeling with bowstring pulled back, with the caption “We aim to please”. The stores sold anything one needed. Fresh meat was available in some of the stores with Mallory’s and Barnett’s carrying a good grade of beef and cutting it for you on the spot. Everything came in bulk and in most cases was weighed out in advance in brown bags to facilitate business, as in the case of sugar, flour, meal and the like.



Other businesses during 1906 through 1907 were: Columbus Bolded, restaurant; Cobb Gin; William Goelzer, feed stable; Harris Brothers, blacksmiths; William Ingram and Son, general store; Mickle and Dildy, general store; Morris and Moren, Keo's first cotton gin; and L. C. Owen and Company, general store.

Leakes' Drug Store was located on the corner of Main and Williams Street. D. J. Leake attended medical school at the University of Louisville, but did not graduate. He was always called Dr. although he did not graduate. Medicine was made and dispensed from this drug store until the 50's.

Saturdays were a busy time in Keo. The men would bring clean clothes and pay for a shower at the barbershop and get a haircut. Saturday nights were usually bath nights for the families too. Many families would put a #3 wash tub in the kitchen by the wood cook stove where it was warm. All the kids took their baths one at a time in the old #3 wash tub reusing the same bath water. This bath water was usually heated in the reservoir on the wood cook stove as well as on top of the stove.

One of the first barbers in town was Arch Mickles. He had hand clippers and from time to time would get your hair caught and yank out what seemed like large quantities of hair. Arch also had 5 gallon glass bottles buried in the floor and was the town's bootlegger.

The 4th of July always saw wagons loaded with families. Throughout the day everyone listened to politicians and had picnics.

A traveling tent show stayed all winter in Keo one year. Laughter could be hear at the stage shows and marveled at the silent movies. Mrs. Quillie Hilliard would get excited and yell out to warn the stars of impending danger.

In 1913 a fire destroyed the stores on the lower part of Main Street. The fire reached as far as the Sam Cobb house, which is currently Goodbar Lamp Shop. The house was moved to 2nd street and remained there for many years with L. A. and Julia Callis living there for the majority of those years. The house is no longer standing.

Mr. Davis had the first automobile in Keo. Most people drove Fords and Chevrolets. W. F. Coleman bought his first car in 1913. He was coming home from Little Rock and got to a fork in the road and yelled for the car to "WHOA". The car failed to respond to his verbal command and was waiting for him to hit the breaks. Mr. Coleman hit the tree.



In 1917 an act was approved by the city council to prohibit anyone from exceeding ten miles an hour within the city limits of Keo.

A visiting preacher in a boxcar held a revival on the railroad track. During the revival the men got interested and bought lumber from Morris and Lewis' lumberyard and built a Baptist church. The church was located on Main Street. Brother Crutchfield was pastor. The church was known as the "Arm of the Pecan Grove Baptist Church".

Prior to 1909 the Methodists of Keo worshipped with the Baptists in their building. One summer the Methodists wanted to have a revival conducted by a Methodist minister, but the Baptist minister, Brother Crutchfield, decreed that no building was big enough for "two families" so the Methodists began meeting at the home of Mr. & Mrs. J. A. Watts and organized their own church. The move to oust the Methodist from the Baptist Church had good results and concluded in the building of a congregation. For many years, both denominations were half-time charges. Services were arranged on alternate Sundays so members could attend a church each Sunday and in essence, enjoy the best of both services.

Mrs. Watts got the women of the church together and had an oyster supper. The proceeds from the supper were used as "seed money" to start the Methodist church building. The Methodist Church movement was helped by the donation of land by W. N. Morris, Sr. and a building was started immediately. This building was destroyed by a tornado in April 1917 and was rebuilt. This building is the main sanctuary used today. Originally a bell hung in the belfry and was rung fifteen minutes before each service. It could be heard for miles around. After the belfry was weakened by yet another storm, the bell was removed for safety reasons. Today mechanical bells chime three times a day and can be heard all over town. In 1916 a parsonage was built adjacent to the church and the family of the Rev. T.O. Rorie were the first occupants. In 1948 an addition was built across the back of the church, supplying classrooms and space for church dinners and other activities. This addition was removed and a new modern addition was dedicated in 1994. Yet another addition was added in 1998.

W. F. Coleman had a wooden general mercantile store located across from Hwy. 165 which burned in 1917. Mr. Coleman constructed his second store from brick in 1918. This structure still stands today.

Tuberculosis, a highly communicable disease of the lung, was a terrible disease during the 20's and took many lives. There was no real cure at the time.

In 1926 Keo suffered a major fire. The general consensus is that the fire started in the post office. The fire destroyed all the stores in the first block including the only hotel, which was owned by R.A. Waller's mother, Mrs. Edwina Bryant.

The original Baptist Church also burned in the great fire of 1926 and services were held over the next 15 years in the school. The Baptist Church held baptisms at Clear Lake

near England. In 1941 a new church was dedicated, located across from the school. Among the deacons was W. J. Bryant who had been instrumental in the forming of the Keo Baptist Church in the early 1900's. The church has undergone many changes and additions since 1941 and today stands as a striking brick building on the end of Williams Street.

In mid April or May of 1927 Little Rock received 8.3 inches of rain which caused the levy to break at Scott (the levy was located near the dam at Scott) and the water rushed upon Keo. One hundred twenty seven people and over 50,000 head of stock died during this flood. The people were afraid that they would have to leave their homes, and a few did. One family took refuge in the schoolhouse, and another family moved upstairs in the section foreman's house. They went to inquire about each other's safety in boats. Some tents were put up on high ground for farmers to live until the water receded. A baby was born to one couple during the flood. The baby boy was named "High Water". He went by the name of H.W. all this life. There had been another flood in 1903, but this did not compare to the flood of 1927.

The Masonic Lodge was organized in 1929. Principal officers of the Lodge were Dr. George Davenport, J. F. Coffman, and G. F. Barnett.

Settlers in any newly established community gave their first efforts to establishing churches for their spiritual growth and schools for education of their children and Keo was no exception. In the earlier days the center of both church and school was in the Cobb's community and were known as Pecan Grove Church and Pecan Grove School they were located off Hwy. 15 . They were constructed of wood and were imposing buildings; however, they are no longer standing. One report estimates the school was constructed in 1876. An early record shows that there was a school at Keo in 1892. Sam A. Perry was paid forty dollars a month for the months the school was in operation. Pecan Grove School was consolidated with the Keo School around 1920.

Another report tells of a one-room school being constructed on the lot across from the location of the gym, as we knew it. Miss Etta Hudson was the first teacher. Twenty years later the old school we knew was constructed. It is unknown if the 1892 school and Miss Hudson's school were one and the same, nor is a date given for her school. The gym was built in 1938 and was converted into a modern elementary school in 1950. At the time the gym was built it was the only school with a gym and let Keo apart from the other small schools in the area. High school students were sent to England. Our old school was torn down in 1968 and was not rebuilt. Today, all students attend England schools.

Children never started to school until after Labor Day. Everyone, including the children, had to pick cotton to be able to buy new shoes, overalls, and supplies for the school season. During the summer all children went barefooted and were excited to get new shoes for the school year for the old ones had been repaired many times by placing cardboard inside to repair holes in the soles of the shoes. The school was heated by coal and only the "good" children got to take a turn to go outside and fill the coal shuttle for

the big stove.

Leola Anderson Hagerman won second place in an essay contest. Her theme was on "Housing in Rural Arkansas". The prize was \$15.00 which allowed her to have her first perm at the beauty school and to purchase two pieces of material for dresses which her Mother made for her. Keo students enjoyed participating in contests such as this or examinations on basic school subjects, piano competition, and/or athletic contests. Everyone attended these contests and boosted self-esteem for the students, school and community.

Mr. Ashcraft, the school Principal, had a unique way of teaching the children about astronomy. The children would go out in the county and have a wiener roast. Afterwards, Mr. Ashcraft would point out the constellations with a flashlight.

The following is a list of teachers that taught in Keo over the years. (Hopefully, we did not leave anyone out.)

Sam A. Perry (or Penny) 1892

Pearl Webb

Lucille Sullivan

Ruby Mae Jackson

Lula Hull

Etta Hudson

Virginia Flynn

Margaret Allen Cox

Fern Vick

Finis Vick

Julia Cobb

M. L. Bailey

Mary Wilson

Norma Ruth Crow

Angie James

Frances Cobb

Natalie Webb

Charlie McKensie

Joanne Bryant Oliver

Annie Beard

Lottie Tackett

? Breashers

R. L. Ashcraft

Gladys Ashcraft

Charles McKnight

Juanita Brumble

Muriel Jones

Lila Faye Lyons

Elizabeth Cobb

Bonez Grimes

Ruby Jones
Rebecca Wroten
Evelyn Johnson Wade
Bennie Adams
Mildred Bell
Eloise Cobb
Madge Rickey
? Grounds

The school was a center of social life for children. Many of the students lived outside town on farms with no-radio, no-television, no-telephone, and no-electricity in existence. After chores, one had homework for recreation. There were no school buses at Keo and many students walked a long distance to attend class. Children found pleasures in the simplest of things such as skipping rope, swing on bag swings, rolling hoops, spinning tops, flipping jacks, chalked tic-tac-toe, shooting marbles, playing mulble-peg, flying dutchman, and hopscotch. Also, games such as crack-the-whip, hide-n-seek, Annie-over, drop the handkerchief, shooting marbles, horse shoes, and tag was played. Entertainment at night for children was to make diamond rings out of lighting bugs.

Kids were always looking for something to keep them occupied. Outhouses were always a target for boys wanting to pull a prank. One instance was remembered when Bill Barnett fell in one while pushing it over. Once a wagon was disassembled and put on top of the Drug Store reassembled for all to admire and marvel at the next morning. The same night some unnamed boys were pushing a fuel truck across the railroad tracks only to discover half way across that a train was coming down the tracks. The young boys in town also played on top of the cotton (against all orders). The object of the game was to fight off wasps with weeds and not get stung. Also, in marshy areas Snipe hunting was done by those with a stout heart.

However, the 1940's brought a new entertainment for young and old. It was called the radio. The radio had more to offer than just sports, news, weather, and music. The radio magically transported you to adventures with Capitain Midnight, I love a Mystery, The Shadow, Tom Mix, Jack Armstrong, The Lone Ranger, and Mr. Keane, Tracer of Lost Persons . Comedy shows were the rage with shows like Amos and Andy, Fibber McGehee and Molly, the favorite Lum and Abner. Lum and Abner was set in Pine Ridge, Arkansas and a lot of action took place at the Jot'em Down Store. Everyone talked about this show and could not understand that it was a made up place and really did not exist.



The town Marshall would keep a stove in the railroad depot going at night which was his unofficial office. There was a one-room jail built from 2-inch planks nailed flat on each other. It was located behind Mrs. Quillie Hilliard's house.

The first graduating class was in 1927 and there were two graduates, Ruby Mae Jackson and Susie Cagle. The class of 1928 included Eugene Cobb, Thelma Bryant, and Angie James. The 1929 class included Morris Flynn, Curtis Bowles, Glad Taylor, and Robert Lee McNeely. Students wishing to graduate from high school prior to this had to attend school outside the community. Mr. Carllee Cobb was a long-time president of the school board and maintained the interest of his father and other Cobb family members in providing educational opportunities for the community.

Most of the water supply around the Keo area was hard water. To be able to have good soft water to wash your hair and clothes each week rainwater had to be caught. People had cisterns (made from barrels, or large tanks of tin, or underground cisterns made of bricks). The cisterns had a pitcher pump to get the water out. A large drainpipe or pipes made of wood channeled the water from the roof into the containers when it would rain. If these containers were not available the hard water would have to be "broken" (meaning to make the iron go to the bottom of the barrel) with lye or ashes from the stove were added. If ashes were used as the ashes filtered to the bottom of the barrel the iron attached itself to the ashes. These were all thrown out when the water got down to the bottom of the barrel.

Washdays were usually on Mondays (weather permitting) and ironing the following day. It usually took all day because all clothes were starched and ironed. The water from the cisterns was heated in a black iron washpot and the real dirty work clothes were boiled in another wash pot. The clothes were then scrubbed on a washboard with lye soap that had been made with hog lard. The final rinse contained "bluing" in the water to make the clothes whiter and brighter. This bluing was bought in the form of a stick from the general store and was dissolved in water. Clothes were starched before being hung on the line to dry. Boiling flour and water and then diluting down with water for the right stiffness desired made starch. These items had to be "sprinkled down" and rolled up usually the night before so that the ironing job was perfect.

Although soft water was used for washing, the hard water was used for drinking. It was pumped from a pitcher pump. Many pumps had to be primed with water every time you wanted water. Later these pumps were piped into many kitchens. Once electricity was available these pumps were replaced with an electric pump on the well and salt was used to provide softness in the water.

We have had a number of doctors practicing and living in Keo. The first resident doctor was Dr. Zuber followed by Dr. Hicks, Dr. Tommy Murchinson, Dr. Harry Smith, Dr. George Davenport, Dr. John W. Lewis, and Dr. John G. Wilson. We have had other Doctors living in Keo in the later years, but none had their office located here. Although we had Doctors in town there were several home remedies that were widely used. Smoke blown in the ear could help to cure an earache. Gargling with saltwater could help a sore

throat. If this did work a spoonful of sugar with a little whiskey could help a sore throat. Caster Oil could cure Spring Fever. Leake's liniment was used for sore muscles (a few did drink it despite its warning).

There was a large American Elm tree used to grow in the middle of 2nd street. Wagons on the way to the cotton gin went on either side of the tree.

The Bank of Keo was organized on January 13, 1920. W. F. Coleman and Sam Cobb purchased the bank. They felt a town without a church, doctor, and bank could not survive. W.F. Coleman was president from its beginning until 1947. In 1932 President Roosevelt closed all banks. Many banks lost their depositors' money during this time; however, the Bank of Keo reopened with all its depositors' money. The safe from the Bank of Keo still resides in the old bank building currently Lemon's antiques.

There were three blacksmith shops located in Keo. Two were located on Main and Hwy. 232 and one was located east of the railroad tracks on Hwy. 232.

There was an empty building near the bank that was used for a while around 1938 as a youth center, organized by Rev W. M. Stewart, Jr. a Methodist minister.

Hiram Neal operated a gas station on the east side of Hwy. 165 and later built a new gas station across the Highway where Lisa's closet is currently located. He served the community for many years. In 1998 a new gas station was built a little farther down Hwy. 165 and is operated by Eric Ingram.

Mrs. Blanch Davenport ran a boarding house on Williams Street next to the school. Some residents lived there permanently, especially teachers who were from out of town. Mr. Noble, one of the barbers in town, lived here until his death. Salesmen in town for a day frequently stayed overnight and others only took meals there. Mrs. Davenport was an excellent cook and obviously was successful in this venture. She made the most wonderful rolls that you ever put in your mouth. Mrs. Davenport had a regular delivery route to sell milk, butter, and eggs to local residents.

Mr. Rube Blevins drove around in the county every Saturday carrying staples to the people living in the country who could not get to town easily. This was called a "Rolling Store" and contained items such as needles, thread, flour, sugar etc.



There was a wedding custom called a “Shivaree”. On the wedding night , friends of the bride and groom would provide a noisy serenade by banging pots and pans outside the couple’s bedroom. The shivaree led to the current custom of leaving immediately after the wedding for a honeymoon.

Fall meant ginning season and this meant nightlife. The cotton was taken to the gin each day after picking and the gin yard was a center of activity for those waiting their turn. The Gin separates the fibers from the seeds, dries and cleans the fibers, and then bales the cotton. Cotton sold for eleven cents a pound and a bale of cotton weighed 500 lbs. The gins had a big 1 cycle engine (big as a wash tub). To pull cotton they would drop a red hot iron into a hole to ignite fuel and then pull a 6 inch fly wheel by hand to start the engine. When the engine was started you could hear it for miles.



Years ago sorghum cane was grown in and around Keo. There were several sorghum mills outside of town. When the heads of the sorghum canes were heavy with seed, they were cut down and hauled to the sorghum mill. The mill consisted of two grindstones that crushed the juice out of the canes. A long pole was attached to the harness of a mule and to the grindstones. As the mule circled around the grindstones the pole made the grindstones rotate. The juice was taken a few feet away to the cooker. Most cookers were made of tin and were about 10 inches deep and 5 by 15 feet long. The long tray had dividers every 10 inches and an opening in each divider. The tray was mounted on top of an enclosed stand usually made from brick that held the fire to cook the syrup. Sorghum was poured into one end and would flow from one divider to another until it came to the end of the cooker and cooking was completed. As the syrup cooked foaming scum came to the top and was skimmed off and thrown away. The syrup was put up in old five-pound lard buckets or any metal container. It could be eaten with biscuits, cornbread, popcorn balls, or made into gingerbread. It was used in place of sugar in many cases. Sorghum syrup can be bought today at your local grocery store, but does not seem to have the same flavor as that processed years ago.

One man was particularly proud of his sorghum. He made a point of telling everyone that “this year’s sorghum was the best he had ever made”. As stated before the syrup was stored in lard cans with instructions to the kids to never leave the lid loose when they went to get a cupful of sorghum for their Mother. He raved all year about the wonderful

syrup that he had made. When the can was almost empty, he discovered that there was a dead mouse in the bottom on the can. Nevertheless, he still swore that this was his best tasting sorghum that he had ever made.

Many factors are responsible for the decline of Keo as it was back then. World War II (1939 – 1945) took our young men. A display of Veterans pictures resides at the City Hall. Other young men went away to find work, because of farm mechanization, college education for veterans, cut-back in cotton production, and the minimum wage bill. The farms that had once been little communities of their own disappeared and with that disappearance went the support facilities in the town. Today Keo exists because of its ability to change and adapt. Antique shops occupy some of the old buildings that once housed old general stores now and some buildings have been torn down. Alfalfa, corn, cotton, and sorghum used to be the predominate crops grown, however, today rice, cotton, and soybeans are the predominate crops grown. Sharecroppers and wage hands are disappearing. Machines and skilled workers are now being used instead of mule power and hand labor. The small farmers are becoming fewer and fewer as costs of farming excelebrate.

Although changes are evident the friendships and cherished childhood memories will remain and continue to flourish.

