

# 'They Lived Closer To The Will Of God'

**Editor's Note:** The following description of the family portrayed in the photograph was written by Miss Myrtle Reynolds, 658 Lee St., the great-granddaughter of Matthew Clay Wells, the bearded patriarch in the old tintype. Miss Reynolds' interest in her own roots and the simple way of life of her ancestors prompted her to write this quaint essay.

This picture of Matthew Clay Wells and eleven of his twelve children was taken in 1875. He owned and operated a farm in the community of Grady in Pittsylvania County along Turkeycock Creek.

Those standing in the back row (left to right) are William Addison, Peter Thomas, Old Delin, Tobitha Gabrilla and Sallie Frances. Sitting in the front are Charlie Wesley, Joseph Sidney, John James with Robert Lee standing in front, Matthew Clay with Minnie Kathryn standing in front and Excie Clay. His daughter, Mary Henrietta, and his wife, Mary Jane (Shorter) Wells, were absent at the time. He and his wife were married February 21, 1853.

The picture takes us back to a time when the people did for themselves instead of depending on the government for handouts. They spun the thread to knit their socks and weaved the cloth to make their clothes. It was a time when part of a child's training was to learn the skills of his forefathers. My great grandmother taught her children and some of her grandchildren how to spin on the spinning wheel. She taught my mother to knit socks turning the heel and the toe at the age of nine.

Almost everything they ate was

raised on their farm. They raised cattle and had a great variety of vegetables, fruits and meats. When they wanted a change they would go hunting. Partridges, ducks, rabbits, deer, turkeys, sourwood honey and the like were plentiful in those days. About the only thing they bought for the table was coffee.

Matthew Clay Wells served four years in the Civil War, and he had five children when the war began. The oldest was about eight. He told of some horrible things that happened during the war, that I had rather forget than to revive. His wife had to work and care for the family while he was away. There was no such thing as state or federal aid or welfare programs. In those days there were no nursing homes. The children cared for their parents and next of kin when they became disabled.

When he returned home from the war and told his slaves they were free, not one of them wanted to leave. So they were allowed to continue to live on the place. This is proof that some were treated well. On the humorous side, one of them carried some wheat to the mill and he saw the miller take his toll as he ground it. He came back and said, "Marse Matt, when he wasn't looking I wopped back two bushels for every one he took."

As the boys married, five of them built their homes and settled on the homeplace and continued to farm. He raised all twelve children to adulthood, and as the others married some had to settle elsewhere because they didn't have land enough. In 1890 his son, William Addison, worked for the U.S. Internal Revenue at Elba for two



dollars a day. One hundred years ago land was selling for about two dollars and a half per acre.

Those days neighbors were neighbors indeed. The men enjoyed getting together for a wood-cutting, building a house or raising a barn and etc. The ladies enjoyed getting together and cooking for them on these occasions, or having a quilting or whatever. The church was a part of their life. A time for worship was set aside in most every home. Some recreations of the 1870-90's included serenading, square dancing and baseball. The riding tournaments

and the getting together of family and friends to renew their ties and fellowship together were of special interest to this family.

Though the people some hundred years ago did not have the conveniences of today, and they worked more and harder, I truly think on a whole they were happier because they were not faced with many of the heart-breaking things, or the fear that we are experiencing today. Why the people were happier then than today can only be accounted for by the fact that they were living closer to the will of God.