MY HOMETOWN
AN ESSAY BY: JERRY HART

Cedar Bluff, Alabama, a late winters day in 1950 will be our new home. May’s crossroads and Howell’s crossroads communities have been our home since 1946. Both locations were nothing more than a country store, a cotton gin and two country churches. This is rural Cherokee County and every direction that you look there are cottonfields. Each community, they are about one to two miles apart, are home to Farmers. Each community consist of about 13 houses, home to a total of about 26 families. About two miles down the road is Newberry’s crossroads and about one mile up the road is the Alexis School community followed by Lindsey’s Store community. The house that we are moving from is big for a rental farmhouse. It is un-painted, and the wood has turned several shades of grey from exposure to the elements. The house was probably built in the mid to late 1800’s. There were no ceilings in the house. Look up, and you see the backside of the tin that covers the roof. Lights were wires hanging from rafters with a chain pull light socket on the end of it. A two-way socket was screwed into some of the light sockets, providing access to electricity for a radio and an iron. A light bulb was screwed into the two-way socket. The cook stove was wood burning. The heat was wood burning fireplaces or cast-iron heaters. The refrigerator, (called an Icebox), had its own electric supply wire. There was a big front porch and a big side porch. A well where we drew water and some big oak trees.

This brings to mind a funny story. My Grandfather was not a man with a sense of humor. Tractor tires would be filled with water and air. The water provided weight for better traction. In the winter the water was drained from the tires to prevent freezing. The valve stem core would
be removed, resulting in a stream of water that looked like it was from a high-pressure hose, would shoot fifty feet from the tractor. My Grandfather’s prized positions were his hat and his shoes, and of course his pocketknife. My grandfather was standing beside the well. The well was a hand-dug well with a wood box around it with a windless, a rope run thru a pulley attached to the cover or roof over the well. The rope was attached to a bucket. The bucket was lowered into the well and the full bucket was hoisted out of the well by cranking the windless that wrapped the rope around it. The opening for the bucket to pass thru was an opening about four feet by four feet. Now that you have the picture; there stands my Grandfather with hat on his head. My Uncle and a Buddy was letting the water out of the tractor tires. Out comes the valve stem, followed by a high-pressure stream of water that strikes my Grandfathers hat and knocks it off his head and down the well. My Uncle and his Buddy along with Me and the rest of the family erupt with laughter. My Grandfather makes a run for the back door, returns with his shotgun and takes aim at my Uncle and his Buddy, who are now running for their lives. They make it behind the barn just as a blast from the shotgun results in a chunk of barn wood being blasted away just as the two disappear around the corner. The water bucket was lowered, and the hat retrieved, sopping wet. The two culprits were not seen for the rest of the day.

Moving to Cedar Bluff was exciting for my entire family, consisting of My Grandfather, Grandmother, Mother and My Mother’s Sister and Brother. I remember one of the discussions among my family was the quality of the well water in the new location. Good water was very important and if the water had been bad, we would not have moved there. We would not actually be moving into the town of Cedar Bluff, but into the Cornwall community about 2 miles from the town limits. We rented a farm with about nine hundred acres of rich river bottom
land. The house we would live in was much better. It was painted white and the inside was sheetrock and painted. There was ceiling lights and electric base plugs. The house had a front porch and a screened in back porch. There was a big barn, a tractor shed, smokehouse and other storage buildings. The house did not have indoor plumbing; therefore, we would still be using an outhouse. The stove was the same wood burning one that was older than me. The heat was a big wood burning heater. It did have three bedrooms. My Mother, Aunt and I slept in one. My Grandfather and Grandmother in one and My Uncle in the other one. There was a big kitchen and a Livingroom. We ate on the back screened in porch in the spring, summer and fall. I think the house was probably built after WWII. We were very proud of it. After the first-year flowers covered the yard and it was the prettiest home place on the road. The road in front of the house was gravel and about three miles up the road, came to a dead-end at Cornwall Furnace. The furnace was used for producing pig-iron during the Civil War. The furnace is still standing today. We would live in this house until 1954, when after the death of my Grandfather we would move off the farm and into the town of Cedar Bluff. My Mother and Aunt had opened a Drive-In Café in 1953 and would continue to operate it until about 1958.

I was born in Rome, Georgia because that was where the nearest hospital was located. However, I had always lived on a farm until we moved into the town of Cedar Bluff in 1954. I consider Cedar Bluff my Hometown. The people of Cedar Bluff had a profoundly positive influence on my life from 1954 to 1965 and in some way continue to exert a positive influence in 2019.

In 1954, Cedar Bluff was a thriving small farming town, complete with, a bank, grocery stores, hardware, clothing stores, two restaurants, butcher shop, insurance co., barber shops, mechanics, three oil distributorships, a school (First – twelfth) and several churches. The
town began as an Indian Village, with the name of Costa. I have an impressive Indian Relic collection that I found as a child around Cedar Bluff. The population in 1954 was about 650. The town is located at the confluence of three rivers. The Coosa, Chattooga and The Little River. The distance from the Coosa River bridge to the Chattooga River bridge is 1.2 miles. In my childhood that was the town limits. The town was on the most direct route from Gadsden, Alabama to Rome, Georgia. Gadsden about 35 miles down the road and Rome about 25 miles up the road.

The first house we lived in was a concrete block house on the bank of the Coosa River about 30 yards from the end of the Coosa River bridge. It was not a good house. The interior walls were made of concrete block that did not reach the ceiling. The walls were about five feet high. There was no plumbing in the house. There was a water faucet in the front yard where we got our water. We filled buckets and carried it in the house. We still had the outhouse. We lived there for about one and a half years. I would ride to school with Mrs. Hazel Mobbs, the 5th grade teacher or I walked to school about half a mile distance.

The next house we lived in was across town, behind my best friend Mack Arnold’s house. It was in the edge of the black neighborhood. It was a big house with a porch that wrapped around the front and one side. The house had running cold water in the house but no bathroom. We were still stuck with an outhouse. You may wonder why I keep referencing the outhouse. I saw it as a big embarrassment. My friends all had indoor plumbing. It is the reason that I never invited any of my friends to spend the night with me. I also tried not to play with my friends at my house for fear they would need to go to the bathroom. The house looked ok inside and out, just no bathroom or hot water.
In 1958 we moved again. This time to a different part of town, but still close to the black neighborhood. A house close to the Black neighborhood in Alabama in the 1950’s rented for less money. Living close to the Black Neighborhood never bothered me. My family never mentioned the color of a person’s skin. They knew good people from bad people and their skin color had nothing to do with it. I ate at the table of Black neighbors and all I have to report is, the food taste great. This house was special. It had a bathroom and hot and cold running water. It had a front porch and a screened back porch. I slept on a roll-a-way bed in the corner of the living room. We never used the living room, so it was perfect for me. I was 12 years old and I finally had a bathroom in the house. You will not hear me mention outhouse again. The big negative for this house, was the only heat was coal burning fireplaces. Coal fires are nasty, ashes everywhere.

In late 1961 we moved about half a mile up the road. It was the best house that I had ever lived in. Gas heat and a great bathroom with a tub and a shower. It had a big deep porch across the front and a screened back porch. The windows in the front of the house went from the floor to the ceiling. A cool breeze always seemed to blow thru those windows in the summer. An Alabama Power Company, Hydro-electric lake was created in 1959. This house was relocated to the current spot. I truly liked this house. A big bonus was the houses located on the streets around it were where kids that I went to school with lived. It was a good place to live. This would be the last house that I would live in, in Cedar Bluff. My Grandmother died in this house in 1963. We would move to Centre, Alabama in 1964. I would continue to drive back to Cedar Bluff for a short time until I finished High School in May of 1964.

Now that you have a knowledge of my living conditions; I can tell you about the important part. The people of Cedar Bluff that were part of
my childhood. Most of them will never know the positive roll they played in the life of this little street Urchin. Most died before I reached my full potential. Today I live about 3 miles from downtown Cedar Bluff. None of the people that were so important to me are alive today. I have friends my age and two that are 10 years older than me that are still around. One lady, Sue Young, I will not tell her age out of fear; lives in the house I knew as a child. I visit her often. I tell her that her living room is the only portal left to my past childhood. She is the Town and School self-appointed Historian. I have known her and her husband since the 1950’s. Her husband, Hugh left us several years past. I will now get busy and introduce you to my heroes, hopefully I can do them justice.

The first is Mack Arnold, my first best friend. We were five years old when we met. His Dad, the Gulf Oil Distributor in Cedar Bluff, delivered tractor fuel to our farm in Cornwall. He brought Mack one day and introduced us. Mack and I remained best friends until his passing several years past. His Family welcomed me into their family. His Mother and Father and Brother and Sister were wonderful people. I ate lots of meals at their table and attended their family reunions. Only having a small family with no siblings or cousins; my involvement with the Arnolds was a true blessing. It introduced me to a normal functional family. They were the best.

Miss Leana Sue Neely was my first-grade teacher. She was a perfect person to introduce little kids to their first school experience. She loved me until I was a grown man. She never married and lived with her mother across the road from the school. I spent lots of days at her house just visiting and loving be around her. In later years I would visit her in the nursing home.
Another Teacher was Mrs. Hazel Mobbs, my 5th grade teacher. I rode to school with her when I first moved to Cedar Bluff. She had no children. She and her husband always loved me. She helped me sort out issues in my young life and we remained close all of her life.

My 6th grade teacher was Miss Thelma Slone. She never married or had children. She was super strict and did not spare the rod. I would ride my bike to her house and help her with chores. She was a very positive influence, always promoting my self-confidence. In the 1970’s I visited her. She had witnessed an auto accident. She found out she was going to be subpoenaed as a witness. She did not want to be involved. I smuggled her out of the county to her friend’s house in Birmingham. She thought we were Bonny and Clyde running from the Law. She stayed in Birmingham for about four weeks. I had to take her some clothes and check on her house. She taught until she was in her 70’s as did most of my teachers.

Mrs. Lenora McWhorter was a high school science teacher. She helped me get a National Science Foundation, College Scholarship. I don’t think that I could have gone to a major university without her help. She always encouraged me. She may be the most responsible for my excellent education. She put me in the game.

Mrs. Dixie Miller was a freelance writer. She wrote for the local county newspaper and the surrounding papers. She also wrote for some magazines. Her specialty was special interest stories about people. She would write articles about local historical events and some current news events. She had a son a year older than me. Lindsay, he was a very intelligent kid. He had three older Brothers who were athletic. Not Lindsay, he had a very good brain. One of his brothers, a good athlete became a Brain Surgeon. Lindsay also became a Doctor. I would sit and
watch Mrs. Dixie type stories and ask questions about writing until she shooed me away.

ED Arnold, Jr. was my coach and high school teacher. When I was headed down a potentially wrong path. He took the time to help me make the best decision for my future. He was Mack Arnold’s older Brother. We were close friends until his passing about 5 years ago.

All my teachers had a positive influence on my life, but the ones that I singled out saw my potential and took the extra initiative to help me.

The Rev. J.R. Akins was the pastor at the First Baptist Church in the 1950’s. He was the reason I became involved at F.B.C. He had a son 2 years older than me. They hunted and camped, and they took me with them. I have written about Brother Akins in other essays. He was a very positive influence and made sure a Fatherless little boy was involved in all the Father/Son activities. Lamar Stone, Gordon Hardin and Harold Cobia were church members that always showed a special interest in me. All the members of this church always had, a pat on the head or a hug for a little boy when I really needed one. They all set a great example with their deeds and actions. I was very lucky to be involved with those people.

Errol Davis was a man who owned and ran a service station/ grocery store. He also drove a school bus. He took an interest in me when I first moved to town. He had a Grandson about 5 years younger than me that lived in Atlanta. I became the son that he never had. He let me work in the store, work around his house and paid me for my work. He was an avid baseball fan. He would take me to Chattanooga, Atlanta and Birmingham to see baseball games. He loved to fish. He had a fishing Buddy, J.L. Norris. They took me fishing and taught me how to fish. We fished the rivers and Guntersville, Alabama Lake. It would take a book to tell all the important skills these two men taught me. They
did not drink or curse. They just simply loved me and treated me like their son. Mr. Norris had no children. His wife was always inviting me to eat with them. She was a great cook.

Woodrow Edwards taught me to train a dog, fish a gill net, trotline, limb hooks, make fish basket traps, catch turtles and knit a gill net. He taught me a lot about firearms.

Porter Money taught me how to make white oak baskets. It is a lot more complicated than it sounds. He was also a good storyteller.

Arthur Stroup was a cabinet maker and had a woodworking shop. He taught me woodworking and how to use power tools.

Watt Adams taught me about carpentry, brick and block laying.

Harold Cobia taught me about electrical work.

Mr. Spearman, the Postmaster let me hang out at the Post office and learn how that worked.

Hoyt Chrisler taught me about welding and auto mechanics.

Waylon Evans was the Agriculture teacher. He began teaching at Cedar Bluff when I was in high school. He was single and we became great friends that lasted until his death in the 1990s. He was always available for needed advice.

Because I never knew my Father, most people thought that was a big disadvantage for me. I never thought that at all. All the men in Cedar Bluff were like surrogate Fathers. I thought that was a big advantage for this reason. I received the men’s best part without having to endure their bad parts.

The Black Community was a place that I spent time. They had great story tellers. Tom Moten, a very old man when I was a kid, drove a mule and wagon. I loved to ride beside him as he scavenged for junk.
Pink Chapman and Tom Clifton were known for their Bar-B-Q. I would hang out with them on a Saturday while they cooked, listening to stories and sampling the Q. My Mother bought from them for her café.

John and Mary Hackett, a Black couple that owned a little store. I loved those two people. It was a small store with a wood stove in the corner. Mary would always have something good cooking. They were getting on in years in the 1950’s and I would sit with them and they would tell me about their lives when they were young. Some of the stories were difficult to hear. People can be so cruel to others for no good reason. John and Mary were very special to me. I have a picture of their little store and a picture of the two standing inside the store hanging in my house today. They had four grown children all of whom had college degrees and were involved in education.

Carrie Mae Reese was a Black Lady that lived two houses from our third house. She always had a big smile. She and my Grandmother would work together canning and freezing vegetables that we grew in our garden. She and my Grandmother were good friends. They would sit and talk about their “good old days “while I listened to every word.

There were about 30 kids around my age that lived in Cedar Bluff in the 1950’s. It was safe for all of us kids to roam all over town. We all had bikes and were free to ride anywhere between the two river bridges. We would play bicycle tag, organize ball games, fly kites, go swimming and just hang out and talk. The Baptist Church had a youth organization, the R.A.’s and G.A.s. We met on Wednesday night. We would play a game behind the church called, “Capture the Flag”. I really liked that game. We would go on swimming trips and camping trips. In the summer when school was out, we would go to Desoto State Park for the day. There we would swim in Little River and cook hot dogs and
hamburgers. All of us kids formed strong bonds of friendship that endure to this day.

All the adults, especially the stay at home Moms would keep an eye on us kids and would not hesitate to dish-out some correction when needed. Cedar Bluff was a close-knit community. The Churches and the School anchored the town, as it does today. Among the men of the town, the high school football team was the main topic of conversation year-round. Our football team was very successful in the 1950’s and 1960’s. We had one 5 year run without a loss. My best memories were that kids could just be kids. Cedar Bluff was safe. The people were friendly, and the kids were loved and cared for. The teachers at the school were good teachers. Most had been teaching for many years when I attended. They taught us more than just the three R’s. They taught us respect and manners. They taught us self-confidence and how to be successful adults. Times were changing, big time in the late 50’s and all thru the 60’s. Their job must not have been easy. However, they appeared to be happy doing it.

A big change began in 1958. Alabama Power Company began buying all the farmland along the rivers in preparation for a hydro-electric dam and lake. The lake would cover 44,000 acres of mostly farmland and virgin timber. The farmers took the money and moved away. With the move they took most of the commerce that supported the town. The lake was filled in 1959 and Cedar Bluff became an island with four roads leading in four different directions. The fields where I picked cotton were now under water. The riverbanks where I hunted were under water. The beautiful farmhouses were gone. The gravel roads where I rode a bicycle, a motor scooter and learned to drive a car on; now under water. The lake did not bring the promised prosperity, in 1959 nor today in 2019. Why you might ask? I am not sure. Maybe the lack of leadership with a vision. Maybe there was just no reason, no nucleus,
no successful destiny. Other than 44,000 acres of water what does it have to offer. Cedar Bluff has no manufacturing base, no job opportunity, no working population. Most of the working population have jobs in Rome, Ga. and Gadsden, Al. If you are going to work there, the young people think, it makes sense to live there. The setting of Cedar Bluff is beautiful. Low mountains and water surround the town. In the 1950’s and 60’s the town was neat and clean. A house might not be fancy, but there was no junk scattered around. The residents had high expectations and pride. That is mostly absent today.

The city park where I played as a child has been well maintained. I sometimes drive over and “sit for a spell”. In my mind I see a thriving little town. I see kids riding bikes and playing ball. I see people going in and out of stores with sacks in their arms. I see an old Black Man driving his mule and wagon. I see an old man making white oak baskets and an old man across the street preparing to run his trotline in hopes of a good catch. I see another old man leaving the Gulf service station, hollering for me to climb in the black 1946 Ford. “Hurry! Or we will be late”, for the first pitch at the Chattanooga Lookouts Baseball game in Chattanooga, Tn. About an hour’s drive.

I take long deep breaths of my past and I slowly breathe out a long stream of memories. All of those wonderful people may now be gone from Cedar Bluff, from the houses and the streets, but I have them safely stored in my heart and mind. They may never know how much they helped a Little “Fatherless Boy”, who once roamed the streets of their town, ate the food from their tables and remember their stories. I thank them one and all from the bottom of my heart.