

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BARAK NORTON
(Twice Told Tales)
(As told by Thomas Picklesimer in 1976)

When Joshua had led the Israelites out of the wilderness to the Promised Land, he told them to “look back over the way which your forefathers have come”.

I think it is good for each generation to study the life of their forefathers. By so doing, we might see where they made mistakes and do better in some things than they did.

I have always thought of my great-grandfather, Barak Norton’s life, as being one of the most interesting of anyone in these mountains.

He was born in eastern North Carolina in 1777 and come to Oconee County, South Carolina, with his family about 1790. His father, William Norton, bought several tracts of land on the Tomassee River. Barak and William each had grants from the state of South Carolina for 640 acres. Barak married Mary Nicholson, and they had 10 children.

The Indians had been driven from Oconee County and some were living in Whiteside Cove. They had a trail over the Chattooga Ridge that went by where the Nortons lived. This way led to where they went twice a year to get salt. They told the Nortons they lived under “Unaka” or the “White” Mountain, that could be seen from there.

Like all white men, Barak wanted all the land that joined his and he planned to go to the White Mountain. He was so busy raising a family that he did not come until about 1818. My Grandmother, Sarah Whiteside Norton Alley, was born in 1822 and was the first white child born there.

By studying the life of my great-grandfather and what he did in taking over 3,000 acres from the Indians here in the Cove and helping his son-in-law, Col. John H. Alley and his soldiers capture them and start them on the “Trail of Tears”, I do as a history of his life and not to judge him for what he did, as we are told “not to judge anyone and we will not be judged”. In defense of what he did, I will say that men have done what he did since before recorded history, and I do not see him as being different from any other man throughout the ages of mankind.

When Barak started from his home on his first trip to the Cove, what he carried is a world record. This is what he carried: a cutting axe, a broad axe, a bucksaw, one-half bushel of parched corn, salt, some fatback, “salted pork”, coffee, a fry pan, a bucket for making coffee, a rifle and one old quilt.

He left home before daylight, and it was late in the evening when he got to the Indian campground, near where the white schoolhouse stands. There were 20 wigwams. The Indians gave him a warm welcome. They were eating, and the Chief had him sit in his wigwam and served him all the corn mush and venison stew he could eat.

All his life, he told how hungry he was and how good this food was.

After resting, he walked on across what we call Norton Mill Creek and on the hill to the left of the Lombard Lodge road he made camp. Here, he built his first house. This house was build of chestnut logs that he cut to a thickness of six inches with a broad axe.

This first trip was made in August, as he “ringed” the bark around several acres of trees on the dark of the moon. Trees done like this on that time of the moon will never have a green sprout. I have done this to acres of land.

To have something to go with the parched corn and coffee, he set deadfalls to catch rabbits and caught trout from the creek each day. The first trip lasted a month. After gathering the crop at home, he came back with some slaves and his boys. They raised the logs and rived the boards and finished it before the snows came.

The next spring, he moved all the family to the Cove. With the slaves, they cleared the underbrush but let the ringed trees stand. The crops were light the first year, I am sure, for land like that never produces much the first year.

Barak was well educated for his time. He surveyed all the land which he entered. I have helped survey all the tracts with a modern compass, and they run close together.

Like all mountain men, he had a love of hunting. All spare time in the winter was spent getting meat for the family.

One day, he heard some strange dogs treed on the Chattooga Cliffs. He found a large bear the dogs had up a tree. Just as he shot it, the owner of the dogs came. He was Uncle Bobby McCall from Henderson County. He had been following the dogs for a week. He visited some time with the Nortons and like everyone who comes here, he fell in love with the place. Barak gave him 100 acres land to get him to move here, so he would have a neighbor.

Uncle Bobby was a great hunter and he and Barak tired to beat each other at hunting. They planned to go on a long hunt one fall and were to meet at the campground on Whiteside the first night. On the way Uncle Bobby killed a deer. Barak was not able to go until the next morning for some reason. Uncle Bobby hung the deer in a tree and slept close by. In the night he felt the breath of an animal. By the fire light, he could see a panther ready to leap in the tree. He raised his rifle that was by his side and killed it. When Barak came the next morning, he was skinning the panther. When he saw the deer and the panther, he told Uncle Bobby that he was the best hunter of the two and he would never try to beat him again.

It is interesting to know that Uncle Bobby had state grants to cover all the land in the town of Hendersonville. I have read these grants. In the 20's his grandsons had lawyers to

look at them. They told them it would be impossible to take the land from the people who lived on them. Uncle Bobby never went back to Henderson County after he moved here.

I have often heard my Father and Uncles and other men say they could not understand why this man, Barak Norton, left the rich bottom land he left in South Carolina and came here to stay the remainder of his life on the poorest land in the world. After living more years under Whiteside than Barak Norton did, I know why he stayed. Even though the white sands grow only small ears of corn, he always had, as I and everyone who has lived here has had plenty. For, like the Psalmist, we can “lift up our eyes unto the hills” and mountains and get all the help we need. I have always said that each time I look at Whiteside, my faith is renewed and I am glad it is as big as it is, because I have needed it all.

While the land was poor, there were so many good things here. The streams were full of trout, the woods were full of wild game, free range for the livestock and plenty of land to farm and above all, the peace and quiet and the beautiful mountains. I don't think that he could have found a better place to live and I know that I never have.

Searching for gold was more than a hobby for all the first settlers. Like me, they sure did not find any here. My great-grandfather Green, who bought land from Barak, worked “sluice boxes” with his slaves when they were not farming. All they found was “flour” gold. My grandfather Alley searched for gold all the time until he was too old and never found any.

Barak and his son, Ned, were panning for gold in Dahlonaga, Georgia, when the news came of the gold in California. Ned bought a team of mules and wagon and went with the first wagon train from Dahlonaga. He was gone over three years and came back in a wagon. His folks thought he brought back some gold but he was killed in the war and they never saw any of the gold.

My grandfather, Colonel John H. Alley, trained a company of men in Polk County and they rode to Texas and fought in the Mexican War. He liked the wild country so much, he signed up to take some Indians west on the “Trail of Tears”. He was sent here to capture the Indians. He stayed with the Nortons and fell in love with Sarah Whiteside Norton and came back to marry her after he had taken the Indians west.

Barak knew the country for miles around and he showed the soldiers all the rock cliffs the Indians were likely to be hiding in. I was never told how long the soldiers were here, but like the Indians in the Smokies, they were not all captured. When the soldiers were gone, they made a camp on Whiteside Mountain. After Colonel Alley came back, he talked them into going to the reservation at Quala. He rode horseback and they walked behind him to the reservation.

As Barak got older, he talked about what he had done to the Indians and said it was wrong. He showed the grandchildren where the stockades stood and how the hungry Indians would eat like animals when they were fed through the small holes. He walked

the road and showed them where the soldiers had whipped the ones who lay down and cried because they were leaving home, yoked two together, like oxen. "Here I watch the blood run from one bare back" and he marked a tree to remember each place by. I build this "Trail of Tears" and it started in my front yard" and the tears filled his eyes as he talked.

Before the war, he talked about slavery and said it was wrong for one man to hold another man as a slave. He said, "Don't ever do it, because there is no profit in it". He lost three of his sons in the Civil War and he said: "Now I know what Solomon meant when he said: "There is a way that seemeth right to a man, but the end thereof is death".

Barak lived 92 years and was never sick. He just ran out of time.

The most important lesson that I get from studying my grandfather's life and what I think is the irony of his life, is something he said one day as he sat in his rocking chair with a pencil and sheet of paper, on which he had listed each tract of land that he had possessed in South Carolina and North Carolina. He added the number of acres it all came to and added the number of dollars he had received from the lands he had sold. What he said was, "I have never been as rich as the Indian Chief was when he invited me into his wigwam and gave me all the corn mush and venison stew I could eat that first day I walked into Whiteside Cove".

And like the rich man who came to see Jesus in the night, he realized the land and money was not enough, for he could not take them with him.

Relationship to Barak Norton and Mary Nicholson Norton

Barak Norton

William Norton

Lou Norton Coward

Edna Coward Bird

Mary Elaine Bird Nichols

Judy Elaine Nichols Tayloe

David Joel Tayloe