

The following is a copy of Chapter V of Ben Green's book, "A History of Tuscaloosa, Alabama 1816-1949" This chapter tells about the "Big Gully" and "the Big Ravine". This was scanned by Doster L. McMullen.

Chapter V - 1885-1910

On the night of June 6, 1866, Tuscaloosa was deluged with the heaviest rainfall in the history of this community and she bore the scars for 44 years. They might remain with us today but for the vision and courage of four men, William C. Jemison, George W. Simpson, Walter C. Harris and Frank G. Blair. The first three mentioned stood personal surety for the project that tamed the Big Gully and the fourth converted a big ditch into a select residential section 25 years later.

The heavenly downpour of 1866 tri-seated the war-depressed town of that time, cutting her principal street (Main Street, now Broad and University Avenue) into three ragged parts and very nearly drowning a number of her citizens.

Many residents were caught in the rain and for hours fear was held for their lives, but no fatalities were reported. The Warrior River rampaged for days, sweeping the lowlands many miles.

Those scars of 1866 were the Big Gully which ran beyond the spot on which the Alta Apartment now stand (22nd Avenue and Sixth Street) to a point below that where a service station is situated (Broad Street and 21st Avenue); and the Ravine which was later developed into the Pinehurst and Audubon Place real estate properties.

Born as natural drainage ditches in the early history of the city, it remained for the rain of '66 to give the Gully and Ravine their capital letters. The Gully was transformed from a small bridge spanned ditch into a yawning space 30 feet wide, 14 feet deep and more than two blocks long. Prior to 66 it had shown some signs of widening and the mayor and aldermen of 1863 had asked the legislature to designate a

manner of financing a retaining wall to prevent this encroachment. Only a bridge was employed and it left in the big washout.

A small foot bridge was immediately placed over the 30-foot cavity but for some time wagons, carriages and horsemen wishing to dare the ride were forced to slide down one side and rush up the other. An easier and less hazardous route was to circumvent the Gully by crossing back by what is now Seventh Street. The Ravine half-way from town to the University was successfully bridged for the time being and later a trestle was placed over it for the dummy line.

Bridge and brick were the fighting weapons that the City of Tuscaloosa threw at the Big Gully for the next 20 years. Thousands of dollars were sunk in these futile efforts and much of the debts which later threatened the city's credit were accumulated in the one-sided fight. Two Irishmen Zack and Tom Jones laid the first brick retaining wall, but they proved to be only good bricklayers and the job required real engineering.

That engineering skill was applied in 1885 after a new washout when Mayor W. C. Jemison requested Colonel W.A. Hardaway, engineering professor at the University, to suggest a remedy for the problem. The colonel and his son, Ben H. Hardaway, just graduating from the engineering school at that time, filled a role similar to that Dr. George Jacob Davis later took as advising engineer to the city in the great waterworks and wharf projects.

Colonel Hardaway declared that the only solution was an exceedingly heavy brick retaining wall, a conduit running the length of the gully, and the whole thing filled in. The son, Ben H., was at once selected city engineer to manage the project.

But the city had no money. Her credit was not good for the amount needed on this job. It appeared certain to require some thousands of dollars and the city received only a few thousand each year in taxes and licenses. Mayor Jemison, later a wealthy man for a time, vainly sought a loan for the city. Finally- he was informed that one of the banks would grant the loan if three members of his board would give

their personal endorsement. Jemison immediately went to Walter Harris and George Simpson, who readily joined him in the step which placed their personal property as security for the debt of a city which was already in financial straits.

Thus Broad Street in its present form, stands as a perpetual monument to this triumvirate. Mr. Harris, the last surviving member of this trio, later lived within 100 feet of the spot where the Big Gully was the widest.

Ben Hardaway did his job well and unnoticed it stands today, as it will likely stand for ages to come. He directed the work which was done by R.C. McCalla & Co., contractors who took a large crew of negroes, a few white men as overseers and literally plowed, scraped and graded with the surplus dirt filling in the Gully on top of the conduit. Previous efforts to fill the bit ditch had failed to include the water tunnel and the streets had not been graded.

The bridge which had extended for more than 100 feet, was discarded and the entire Gully section was made a part of the street, at that point. For years afterward small boys and some not so small had much fun wading in the slimy water of the brick walled lumber-floored conduit which runs for two blocks.

The brick abutment, against which this fill rested, was laid three feet thick at the bottom and was graduated toward the top, where sections of three brick each were deemed sufficient. This brickwork could be readily seen several years ago, before the fill was made on the corner next to the old Y.M.C.A. building. Its basement was really a part of the Big Gully.

Now the Gully was filled but she was not paid for. The city sought some means to protect the interests of these three gentlemen who had pledged themselves on the project. On May 26, 1888 a bond issue of \$10,000 was authorized to meet this need. Three years before an issue of \$4,000 was voted to pay Major S. B. Burman for an earthwork fill that gave way in 1887. A permanent brick project

had been proposed by Colonel Hardaway but the city rejected all bids because it could not finance the plan.

In view of the fact that Tuscaloosa would today be a distorted, viaducted town with a creek near the heart of her business section, this may well be called the most important single non-revenue bearing project in the history of the town. The great waterworks, electric, lateral sanitary sewer and similar enterprises have their revenue characteristics which would permit their development as private projects but such an improvement as making Broad Street was a matter only for the city itself. The 9-mile main sanitary sewer line to the U. S. Veterans' Hospital and serving half the town might well take a place beside the Gully project.

Apparently the Big Gully never became a political issue of note. It was a case of Man against Nature and Man cooperated to the utmost, a somewhat rare occurrence for that time when full-hearted cooperation was a pretty scarce article. The factional fight then breeding later burst into the open with the prolonged political dual between two banks. This duel has long since happily disappeared.

Ben H. Hardaway later became a professor at the University and subsequently achieved southwide prominence in the engineering profession, handling a number of major railroad projects and other construction work. He erected the steel superstructure for the \$40,000 M. & O. railroad bridge across the Warrior River here in 1898. His lengthy service in Georgia ended with death two years ago, after a brief illness.

Of course there were other gullies, ravines and gulches and plenty of mud holes in this community's streets, which had no semblance of storm sewers to prevent such an occurrence today-. The sandy soil was easy digging for ditches but was also easy for rain to distort these ditches and shoot them off in the moat unlooked for angles. When 'water fell in quantities, it immediately sought the lowest level and sped toward the river.

This natural drainage system left gullies which cut crosswise into most of the principal streets, making ditching almost impossible except where bridges were available. One of the larger gullies appeared on the edge of the University where the Union Building, Bibb Graves Hall and the Gorgas Memorial Library now stand. Another large and troublesome gully raged near the belt line tracks on 25th Avenue.

But the Ravine at Pinehurst was second only to Big Gully in its complications. True the property through which it coursed was not considered valuable or necessary as that cut by its companion. A small section of the Ravine may be seen today just to the left of the home of Dr. Alston Fitts.

A long bridge crossed the Ravine and satisfied the needs for years. When the horse car line was built to Lake Lorraine, the bridge could not carry the horse cars so the railway line was laid out Eighth Street, and crossed back in University Avenue at a point beyond the Ravine. Thus Eighth Street was originally a street car track and property lines were adjusted for the narrow strip which remains today, one of the narrowest paved streets in the community.

In 1887 when the dummy line was established by the Tuscaloosa Coal Iron and Land Company and Belt Railway, the line placed a trestle over the Ravine, sinking long pilings into the gulch which was 40 feet deep at points. This trestle was located on the south side of the street with a fill and footpath south of it.

The Ravine met its fate in 1910, the street fill and the Pinehurst fill being accomplished simultaneously. The Pinehurst Co. was composed of its president, the late Frank G. Blair, Dean Charles H. Barnwell of the College of Arts and Sciences and Dean B. Kay of the Engineering School at the University. Professor Kay, a man of rare engineering and artistic ability designed the 'lay-out' of Pinehurst. Mr. Blair chiefly financed the project which called for a considerable outlay of money. The Ravine extended to where 17th Avenue now runs. The columns at the Pinehurst entrance were placed then filled around, and extend deeper in the ground than they do above it. For some time most

people laughed at 'Blair's Folly'. But these gentlemen showed it was no 'Wildcat Scheme' by building their own homes in Pinehurst as the first step in its residential development.

Subsequent events proved the money was well invested. As the Pinehurst private project took form, the city street fill also gained momentum. This was in the last year of the mayor and alderman form of government here, with Mayor Zimri Shirley and eight aldermen representing four wards. W. H. Nicol was city engineer at that time, a position he has held almost without interruption for 30 years. The interruptions were chiefly when the city decided to economize, abolishing the position of city engineer until new public projects forced re— establishment of the office.

The dummy line tracks was placed in the center of the street, the old trestle was removed and the entire passageway was filled in with a culvert to prevent washouts such had occurred in the Big Gully years before. Cement sidewalks and curbs were laid at this time but the street was not paved until a later date.

Audubon Place, another real estate enterprise, was developed shortly thereafter by Mime P. Jemison, father of M. Torrey Jemison. For many months Mr. Jemison went before almost every meeting of the City Commission asking that a storm sewer be laid through the properties which then were occupied chiefly by negro shacks. Finally this request was granted, the sewer extending from the present Junior High School Building to the present ravine at Pinehurst. Protest of this action was made by owners of McEachin Bottoms, from Queen City Avenue to 16th Avenue. They contended that their irrigation facilities would be destroyed,

The taming of Big Gully and the Ravine opened a new prospect for the City of Tuscaloosa. Everyone had expected the University to prove the ultimate eastern boundary of the city for many years to come. Streets were numbered starting with First Avenue just east of the University, so that plenty of numbers would be available for the western development of the city. How far from correct this judgment proved is shown by the present trend.

This lengthy discussion of two public improvements is included in this series because the projects were public ones and have done so much to make the city what it is today. They were in no sense political.

But there were plenty of politics in the 'old days' of 1890 and their heat was sufficient to put the present-day campaigners to shame. The Henry B. Foster-William C. Jemison election of 1890 marked the end of a 10-year regime in the biggest ballot battle in the history of Tuscaloosa. It will be treated in detail in the next article.