

## Reflections and a Salute to a Town Called Jay

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Spain formally yielded possession of Florida to the United States in the year of 1821. Florida and the present day Jay became a territory in the year of 1822. Santa Rosa County was created in the year of 1842, which was three years before Florida became a state in 1845. The present day Jay was known in the early 1800's as Pine Level and sometimes was called The Cobb Old Field.

The town of Jay is located about 38 miles north of Pensacola, Florida, and 27 miles north of Milton, Florida. Jay is about 3 miles from the Escambia County, Alabama, state line. The town of Jay is served by two main state highways: State Road 4, running east and west and State Road 89, running north and south.

The elevation of Jay, Florida, and its surrounding communities is about one hundred sixty-five feet above sea level.

There is no railroad or bus service available to Jay.

Between the years of 1836-1837, a Pensacola bank issued and sold Railway Bonds to do a survey and run train tracks through the territory of present day Jay, Florida. Due to the Panic of 1837, the rails were never laid. The Alabama, Florida and Georgia Railway Company made this survey with Major Chase acting as the President of this Company.

During the territory days of Jay's history the main occupation of the people was lumbering. The people usually lived in one place just long enough to strip the pine trees from the land. Then most of the people would just move on to another uncut section in the territory. The territory of what became Jay, Florida, was about ten miles south from the Alabama state line and went west to Escambia River then east to Coldwater.

The Panic of 1837 caused the price of timber to bottom out. People who wanted to make this part of the territory their home began to try farming for a living. However, lumbering still remained the most important occupation until about 1890.

In the territory days of Jay, there were thousands of cattle, hogs, and sheep to be seen on the open range. The cattle were Spanish longhorns, which were originally brought to Florida from Spain. Our ancestors soon learned that the area of Jay had some of the richest farmland in the county of Santa Rosa.

The present day Jay, as in the early 1800's, is still considered to be the center of Santa Rosa County's agricultural activities.

Jay and its surrounding communities lay in the midst of some of the richest farmlands to be found in Northwest Florida. Jay and its surrounding communities are a fertile, elevated

plateau. The topsoil is about 4 to 4.5 inches and has a clay base soil which can hold the moisture. This is what makes the land so rich and fertile for farming. Most of Jay's agricultural activity today is based on cotton and peanuts as the row crops, but cattle are still the main livestock production. There is a considerable amount of acreage that is devoted to pastures and other small grains for feed crops.

Oil was discovered at Pollard, Alabama, in the 1950's. In about 1968, Humble Oil Company drilled a "wildcat well" near Flomaton, Alabama, about eight miles from Jay. This wildcat well was used to test the Smackover and Norphlet. The Smackover was a bust near Flomaton, but the Norphlet did yield natural gas.

The geologists buzzed around Jay, and the oil "fever" raised temperatures in our communities. The geology of the Jay's region then attracted the prospectors to put down a few shallow wells; nothing happened, but the people of Jay still hoped for the black gold.

Humble Oil Company, (now Exxon) was certain that about three miles below the surface was two geologic formations, the Smackover and the Norphlet, and they knew these same formations had yielded oil and gas elsewhere. Humble Oil Company obtained from Florida, a state permit, to drill one oil well at a depth of 16,000 feet. This 16,000 feet would be a much greater depth than the oil wells had been in Alabama.

The people of Jay began to strain their eyes and ears to hear any kind of reports on the test oil well. Days turned into weeks before Jay's lifestyle was interrupted with the news that a huge pool of oil was lying beneath the rich, fertile lands. Overnight, some of the lands around Jay and its surrounding communities became priceless.

The first well that "came in" was in June of 1970. This first well was called a discovery oil well and was owned by a corporation of business people. The second well was drilled on Mr. J. T. Jones's land. A few of Jay's approximately 650 residents became millionaires.

Others sold out cheap to speculators before oil was confirmed on their land. Some of the people received little or nothing because they owned only small amounts of property or their land was just outside the oil field. The fact that paper companies own vast tracts of land in the area also decreased the number of people benefiting from the black gold.

Virtually everyone in Florida, however, benefited in the black gold that came from Jay and the surrounding communities because the state reaped millions of dollars in severance taxes. Local governments also, collected taxes and earned royalties on the oil beneath Jay's public property. It was not long before the "Christmas Trees", the unique value combinations that holds the oil in check until the oil production can begin, were every where, dotting the landscape.

Oil officials reported that Humble Oil and Refining Company and Louisiana Land and Exploration Company completed the first oil and gas producer in the Florida Panhandle; a 15,500 feet Smackover well and that Jay's discovery was the first Jurassic producer in the

state. The oil officials also stated that the Jay oil fields were some of the biggest on-shore finds in the "lower 48 states", except for Alaska, and Hawaii, in over a decade.

The quiet lifestyle of Jay and the surrounding communities still goes on just like before the black gold was found. The only difference, it seems, is there are a few more new homes and the oil wells have now taken their place in the little farming communities' fields, along with the cotton, peanuts, and, of course, the cattle.

The Jay area has shared a history that intertwined with the Creek Indians before and after Florida became a territory. The Creek Indians Confederacy covered the lands of what is now Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, parts of South Carolina, also Southern Tennessee, and, of course, our own Northwest Florida. At one point in history, the Creek Indian Confederacy was one of the largest ruling nations. A Creek Indian burial ground was unearthed at Mims' Island near Jay several years ago.

Jay and the surrounding communities have had several famous outlaws: Reuben Houston Burrow, Brown Bowen and John Wesley Harding, just to mention a few of the bank and train robbers that lived in the area for a while. John Wesley Harding was born in Northwest Florida just a few miles down the road from Jay.

A Confederate Camp of soldiers was established at Camp Pollard about two miles northeast of Pollard, Alabama. Many of our ancestors served in Company "E", 15<sup>th</sup> Regiment Calvary and were captured or died at the Battle of Pine Barren in Escambia County, Florida. Camp Pollard was captured by the Union Army not long after the skirmish at Pine Barren Bridge.

The year was 1902 when the little farming community in Northwest Florida finally got its name of Jay. A committee was selected to think of a name for the thriving community. Mr. James Thomas Nowling sent the name Pine Level to the Postmaster General. This name was declined because Florida already had a post office by this name. Mr. Nowling was requested to submit another name. He conferred with several of the citizens of Pine Level in an effort to select a name that would be suitable for the new post office. After a delay of a few weeks, a new name was submitted. The new name was rejected also, due to the new name being too long.

Mr. Nowling had been requested by the post office to submit yet a third name. Before he was able to send the third name in, the Postal Department named the new post office "Jay" from the first letter of Mr. Nowling's initial and sent him supplies and equipment with a request that he should open the post office immediately.

Mr. Nowling owned the only store in Jay in 1902. The size of the store is reported to have been 16x20 feet and made of very rough pine boards. Mr. James T. Nowling became the first postmaster of Jay, Florida. He began sending and receiving mail on September 24, 1902. The mail was brought from Pollard to Jay because there was no bridge that spanned between Jay and Century at the Escambia River. The mail was brought and delivered on horseback in two saddlebags.

At this time in Jay's history, there was a road and bridge between Pollard and Jay. This road was just north of Jay. Even today, the road is still called the Old Pollard Road. Some of the pilings of the old bridge can still be seen today.

Mail was delivered three times a week to Mr. Nowling's Post Office. Mr. Nowling would put the mail that he had received into stacks, and he would then sift through the stack each time someone came into the little post office to check for mail. Mr. James T. Nowling owned and operated the first cotton gin and sawmill in Jay. Mr. James T. and his wife Mary Nowling raised 9 known children.

Mr. James Thomas was the son of William I. and Mahulda (Johnson) Nowling who were also piney woods pioneers of this area in 1867. He was the grandson of Frederick Nowling and Charles B. and Rachel Johnson.

Sources:

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