

Mineral Mound Remembered

A Way of Life Reminiscent of the Old South

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Until the coming of the railroad in the 1880s, western Kentucky was culturally closer to central Tennessee than it was to the rest of Kentucky. This came about not only because it was from Tennessee that most of the first permanent settlers of the area emigrated, but also because the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers, early highways of trade, brought the two regions together for commercial reasons.

Mostly we were poor relatives of the more prosperous region around Nashville during reconstruction following the Civil War, but there were exceptions. A few affluent families in Lyon county managed to hold on to some of the elegant charm of southern living as late as the 1940s. Mineral Mound, the mansion that was situated on a hill overlooking the Cumberland river, half way between Eddyville and Kuttawa, immediately comes to mind. For 30 years, until it burned, it was the home of the R. S. Mason family. Within its walls the Masons enjoyed a life style reminiscent of the ante-bellum south.

Because I was a frequent visitor to Mineral Mound—my mother's sister, Nora Bell (Bradshaw), was Mrs. R. S. Mason—I was able to observe, close at hand, what an attractive way of life they lived. That way of living is virtually impossible today even if the family is wealthy. It is not possible because attitudes about the status of individuals in society have changed, for both white and black. In the 1930s and 1940s, I saw the last of a way of life that most today associate with plantation living before the Civil War.

Before the Mason's lived at Mineral Mound, two other wealthy families, the Machens and Catletts, called the place home.

Willis B. Machen built the original mansion in the 1850s. Raised on a farm on nearby Lick Creek, he was first an unsuccessful merchant, but later made a fortune as a turnpike and bridge contractor. After an accident curtailed his physical strength he studied law and became a successful attorney. In 1850 he purchased the farm on which he would build Mineral Mound. In time he would enter politics, first as a State Senator and later as a member of the House of Representatives in Washington. During the Civil War he was elected to the Confederate Congress. After the Civil War he spent, with his family, three months in Canada until he was pardoned by President Andrew Johnson. He returned to Mineral Mound and served as a U.S. Senator from Kentucky, first by appointment after the death of Senator Garret Davis and then for his own elected term in office.

It was Machen who built the core of the mansion that would be added to by two succeeding owners.

Because of a large Confederate flag that Machen kept flying on Mineral Mound in the early years of the Civil War, the mansion was fired on and damaged by a cannon ball from a Union gunboat going upriver to support the siege of Fort Donalson. Until the mansion

was destroyed by fire eight-six years after this incident, every owner would proudly show visitors the scar on the brick wall where the cannon ball entered Machen's living room.

After Machen's death in 1892, George Catlett, from Eddyville, bought Mineral Mound. During the 25 years Catlett lived on the farm he developed a large dairy herd and introduced many practices that later became known as scientific farming. Under his enlightened management the farm became a show place. He also added porches to the front and side of the mansion and did other remodeling.

Following Catlett's death his widow sold the place to R. S. Mason in January 1917. Mason made additional improvements, including another porch that connected those built by Catlett. After Mason's improvements, there was a continuous 15 foot concrete porch around two sides of the house that cousin Dotty Mason and I found perfect for roller-skating. Mason also added Corinthian columns to the porches and improved the formal entrance door. (This latter improvement may have contributed to the loss of most of the furnishings during the fire that consumed the place in 1947. See below.)

In its final form the mansion, though hard to assign to a school of architecture, was impressive, not only because of its size and style but because of its unparalleled location. It was situated on a limestone bluff, on its southern side, that overlooked the Cumberland River, and it faced rich river bottom farm land on its eastern and western sides. A grander site for a home would be hard to find.

By the time I began to visit my cousin Dotty Mason, granddaughter of Nora Bell and R. S. (I called him Uncle Sanders), in the early 1930s, they were in their 50s. All their children were married and the busy child raising and social time of their lives was just about over. I did not see the most dynamic period when there were parties held for any occasion. Never-the-less the Sunday meal extravaganza that I observed must have been similar to the meals of earlier years.

The meal on Sunday came after Sunday school (of which R. S. was Superintendent for 48 years) and church at the Eddyville Methodist Church. The guests and family were called to the meal by Double T (W. T. Harris) walking through the house ringing a silver bell. With much good natured loud talking, everyone assembled in the large dining room and took their seat around an enormous table that was covered with several overlapping white table cloths. There were many silver containers on the table and in front of each plate were a perplexing number of spoons and forks to be used, from my standpoint, for an unknown purpose. R. S. was at the head of the table, ready with his benediction, and Nora Bell was at the other end of the table, near the kitchen so she could intervene if something went wrong in that quarter. Servants were continually coming and going from the kitchen. Finally, after everything seemed to be in place, a quiet settled over the table and all eyes went to R. S. With a gravity sufficient for the occasion he began the prayer of thanksgiving. It was not long, but it was long enough to suggest that it was important. This completed, it was now time to dig-in.

On those occasions, during my early visits, my biggest problem was to know what to do with all the eating utensils. Nora Bell helped me with this and in time I learned what to eat with what fork and spoon.

The meat on the table was from the farm. R. S. was especially proud of his country smoked ham. I do not remember all the things that were served, but I do remember there was a generous choice of sweet things, such as pies.

After the meal it was all right to take a nap if you were so inclined.

The kitchen, just off the dining room, was in its own separate building that was connected to the main structure by a covered breeze way. There were three women that were usually in the kitchen, Lexi, Double T's wife Zulla, and another woman whose name

I cannot recall. I have heard that at one time there was another summer kitchen below the regular kitchen, but I do not believe it was in use in the 1930s.

Behind the kitchen, across a drive way, was a building housing a smoke house and a storage shed with a root cellar. Behind that was an orchard, and behind that was a heavily fenced area where boar pigs were kept. We children were warned to never, never go in the boar pig enclosure. There were also two tenant houses near the great house. Double T lived in one and I believe Lexi lived in the other. All outside buildings, and their arrangements relative to the great house, reflected country living in the nineteenth century. There was one exception. Two motor car garages had been shoe-horned into the complex. Between the garages Nora Bell had her dahlia garden. (My mother's specialty was roses, so there was no competition from that quarter.)

On the north side was an extension to the porch under which visiting cars could discharge their occupants when it was raining without the need for an umbrella. The driveway forked half way up the hill and in the area between the drive ways a formal garden was maintained. This had gone to seed by the time I was a visitor.

On the knoll to the east of the great house was a tennis court. It was grown up in weeds and the backdrops were falling down by the early 1930s. This was another sign that things had been more active at Mineral Mound when the Mason children were growing up.

On the second floor of the great house was a long hall flanked on both sides by rooms. As I recall, there were three on the south side and five on the north side. One of the rooms on the north side housed William Bransford's mineral collection. A graduate mining engineer, he had collected hundred of specimens of minerals on summer tours to the west as part of his university courses. During one of my visits Dotty talked me into displaying, in the mineral collection, a most unusual mineral trophy I had found in a truck load of river gravel. My trophy was what we called an Indian bead, but it was really part of a fossilized stem of an ancient water plant. Most large collectable Indian beads were about half an inch long and about a quarter inch in diameter. My specimen was three times as large. No one had ever seen one as large. I finally consented to display it in the rock museum, and after a few weeks I forgot all about it. Only after the mansion burned, about thirteen years later, did I remember it. I suppose, along with everything else, my Indian bead was also consumed.

There was another side to living at Mineral Mound. It was Lyon Counties closest approximation to living in a castle with all the heating problems that brings to mind. Built before anyone thought about such a thing as central heating, it was impossible to heat from one source. In cold weather, when a wind was up, cold air whistled along the downstairs central hall in a most frightening way. R. S. had folding glass paneled doors built into the hall to reduce the draft, but it was only marginally successful. When a cold wind was blowing everyone sought comfort in the setting-room that had its own heat source. The fireplaces or stoves in the bedrooms were recharged by a servant before bed time and then banked so they would be warm through the night. (Bats also lived in the house. Dotty and I once poked one out from behind a wall mirror in the central hall.)

It may have been the downstairs central hall that contributed to the rapid spread of fire that destroyed the mansion. The hall probably acted as a flu, providing a draft that spread the fire quickly through out the house.

During the fire most of the valuable old furnishings of the place were lost because the large table from the library, the first piece of furniture to be removed, became temporarily stuck in the outside door way. This blockage was long enough to stop all other rescue efforts. When it was finally unstuck, the fire had spread so rapidly that it was too late to save anything else. That table, the only sizable object saved, is now at the home of the late Dotty (Mason) Joiner in Princeton.

R. S. made his money in the fields of manufacturing and mining, but he was, by interest, first a farmer. He was raised on the 1,350 acre farm of his father, Judge William Newton Mason, in Rutherford County, Tennessee, some fifteen miles south-east of Nashville. It was there that he acquired the taste for plantation life. He lavished much thought, and frustration, on his farm that surrounded Mineral Mound. As the depression drew to a close, his greatest problem was finding reliable help for the farm. Society was already beginning to change in such a way, even before World War II, that farms such as Mineral Mound found it difficult to make farming pay using unsupervised labor.

After selling the Whip and Collar Company in the early 1930s, R. S. needed another challenge. He ran for Congress in 1932 and 1936, being sponsored by then Senator (later Vice-President) Alvin Barkley. About this time Barkley and his wife visited the Masons several times at Mineral Mound. I am sure the place was used to advantage during those visits.

It was R. S. Mason's money that supported the way of life at Mineral Mound, but his wife Nora Bell (Bradshaw) Mason was a necessary link in maintaining it. She was born at Owensboro, Ky. to a family that lived a life style that, while not so opulent, was also reminiscent of the ante-bellum south. Educated at Saint Vincents Academy at Morganfield, Kentucky, she was a lady of culture and a most big hearted person.

All who have called Mineral Mound home at one time in their lives are now dead with the exception of Robert Sanders Mason III, Dotty's younger brother. He now lives in Cincinnati, Ohio. Dotty (Mason) Joiner died last year.

Captions

Mineral Mound in the early 1940s. It burned in 1947. Original picture from Dotty (Mason) Joiner.

Business office of Kentucky Whip and Collar Factory inside Kentucky State Penitentiary at Eddyville as it looked in 1907. At that time the company was owned by Gery and Dudley Hardware Co. of Nashville, Tenn. In 1909 R. S. Mason acquired the company. The business was sold to Howard Day in the 1930s. Left to right: Manager, Robert Sanders Mason; son, Robert Sanders Mason Jr.; bookkeeper, Robert Ramey. Original picture from Corinne Whitehead.