

McNeece: Sarepta was a very busy town in its day

Going back in time at the Sarepta Schoolhouse

I think I was among many who surprisingly learned last week that the old Sarepta school and gymnasium are still standing. Carolyn Bryant, of the Shady Grove Community near the Lafayette County line, alerted me to that fact early last week. She explained that Chad Clark had clear cut the area around the old school exposing it for the first time in years.

Soon after, I made the drive to Sarepta, located 11 miles northeast of Bruce, to see it for myself. I came around the dusty, dirt path

and there it stood high on a knoll. Billy Van Clark warned me to keep an eye out for snakes, but I couldn't take my eyes off the history.

Walking up what was left of the moss-covered steps I felt like I was stepping into a time machine. I stood in the doorway and looked around in all directions trying to imagine what it must have been like attending school at Sarepta in the 1940s and earlier.

Sarepta is one of those Calhoun County places that has always been a source of fascination for me. For starters, there is the name. It's one of a kind. But the tiny place is also abundant



in history. It was first settled in 1836 and had its own post office by 1838. It was a part of Lafayette County at the time as Calhoun wasn't formed until 1852. The post office closed in 1986.

Dr. Andrew Roane and his family moved to Sarepta in 1840. His father, Archibald Roane, had been the second governor of Tennessee. Gov. Roane is noted for appointing Andrew Jackson general of militia for the Volunteer State.

The first known birth in Sarepta was Dr. Roane's son Judge Archibald Roane in 1841. He reportedly served with Nathan Bedford Forrest in the Civil War.

Sarepta's most famous individual wasn't so admirable. I think I learned of the "Ballad of Dock Bishop" my first week in Calhoun County 20 years ago.

"Sarepta has lived down a bad name acquired during the 1880s when the swaggering backwoodsmen of the vicinity had the habit of coming to the village and taking the law into their own hands," reads one historical account. "The memory of one infamous son, however, is kept green in the 'Ballad of Dock Bishop.' The ballad, telling in endless, mournful verses of the crimes, the trial, and the hanging of Dock, is sung by the people at neighborhood parties. In Calhoun, these neighborhood parties are not only an institution but are in a large measure responsible for the perpetuation of the ballad here. Neighbors from miles around gather in front rooms of some farmhouse where the biggest feather bed is decked with the family's prize quilts and standing around the organ entertaining themselves with ballad and hymn singing and eating."

I didn't do any singing or eating on this morning, but as I walked down the long hall of the old Sarepta schoolhouse I wondered how often Dock Bishop's story was told in those classrooms.

The height of the ancient gym ceiling was stunning and the wooden floors, with

just a little sweeping, appeared ready to host a basketball game that day.

The significance of seeing the old school and gym for me is amplified because the rest of the historic village is mostly gone aside from the Baptist Church. Sarepta is largely identified today with a mere sign on the highway, but once upon a time it was home to several stores. Reading through some of the history Carolyn shared with me, much of it written by Jesse Yancy Jr., another of Sarepta's most famous sons, it noted that many of the stores were built up in the front so wagons could back up and load their goods more easily. Sarepta had a photo studio, two drug stores, three churches

a very good school that attracted students from other areas. Many local families hosted students in their homes so they could attend Sarepta's school.

A report from the old Calhoun Monitor newspaper said a massive fire destroyed most of the town in March of 1915. The fire reportedly started in the big frame storehouse belonging to the Sarepta Mercantile Company.

I tried to imagine what downtown Sarepta would have looked like in its prime. I've never been able to truly envision it until touring the old school grounds. It was a marvelous trip into the past that makes the present more entertaining.