

## **Elk River's Busy Bend**

### **Daddy's New Chevy, Bell's Mill, and the Willie Partin Family**

Jackie Layne Partin

We were late getting it; what with my parents buying a small house, having a new baby every year, and Daddy going off to fight the Nazis, we had to be patient for it to become part of our family. Once it did, we tried so hard to take care of it, the brand new, blue, 1948 Chevy pick-up truck. It was the first vehicle my parents, Cleveland and Clara (Meeks) Layne owned. Daddy worked for Jim Reed Chevrolet Company in Nashville soon after his time in Chattanooga where he better learned carpentry skills after WWII with the help of the GI Bill. He knew the Reeds quite well. They owned two homes on the MSSA grounds in Monteagle where he later as a carpenter did much of the Reeds' repairing or remodeling. Soon after the war it became possible for Daddy to acquire the vehicle and pay for it as he drew his weekly salary. After all, how would he, his brother, Bonnie Rowen Layne, and sometimes his youngest brother, Alex Benson "Dude" Layne, drive to Nashville, TN, in the wee hours of every Monday morning and back home to their families in Monteagle on Saturday afternoons without a vehicle?



**Summer 1948 with the new Chevy; left to right: Freddie, Clara (my mother), Larry and David Layne**



**Easter of 1949 with Daddy's beloved Chevy; left to right: Johnnie Maxine, Freddie, David and yours truly, Jackie Layne; baby Larry had passed away in December 1948.**

My parents were far from being rich, so instead of paying for water flowing through a meter, or tediously drawing water from the well, sometimes my father

loaded us all in the back of his truck, drove down to the Elk River ford near Crossroads, and dumped us out like coon dogs ready for the chase. The water was perfect for driving the truck right out into the ford of the river where he and Mama began the washing. We small children got to play in the shallow water at that spot without Mama fearing one of us might hold the other down long enough to cause a drowning. One of my brothers and me did not always see eye to eye about much of anything, and we warranted good oversight.

Everyone had fun; Daddy and Mama shared good times in their short weekend together, and the truck shined bluer. The trip back up Highway 41 usually took forever behind the big trucks that excited us kids, especially when a driver sounded his loud, truck horn for our amusement. Most of the highway was guarded closely with rails because of the no-shoulders and treacherous mountainside. The grade was so steep and the curves were so numerous and sharp that traffic was slowed to a tortoise climb. At times the truck drivers thought they would never get to the top. Shucks, every driver was aggravated, especially in hot weather. The truck drivers gave in to standing with the left foot on the running board, one arm and hand on the rolled-down window, the other on the steering wheel, and the right foot holding the “pedal to the metal.” The heat was tremendous in those trucks, and the drivers used every method at hand to cool down on that steep climb. Lots of small things along the way kept us little ones entertained. And one could bet that our tiny hands were full of small fresh water mussel shells, little bits of souvenirs from our trip. It took so little to excite us.



**Hwy 41 – Greyhound Bus ascending the plateau at Monteagle, TN  
There was no I-24 in those days.**

There might have been a few weeks between visits to Elk River for a truck washing. Now that I am scores of years older, I realize that I had waded in historically interesting waters. Within sight was **Bell's Mill** perched right out over the river wherein Daddy had driven his little truck. Just maybe this ford of water was the same one known much earlier in the 1800s as the **Stoneford Mill** that Lucinda "Cinda" Martin, Billy and Sally McCoy and ancient Jane Cawthorn took their corn to be ground. They basically abode by themselves in what became known as Summerfield. We read in the book, *John Gamp*, of their tedious trips to the mill.

*"Thar was one store in Pelham an' Stoneford Mill, in the valley, where we-uns had to git the meal ground. Hit tuck two days to come and go. Thar warn't no railroad here in them days, you see, fer to fetch up provisions."* At first, I misread Cinda's name for the mill. I thought her wagon loaded with corn went to the Old Stone **Fort** in Manchester. After giving much thought to it, I decided that it would have taken more than two days to make that trip there and back. A suggestion is placed before the reader that Cinda went to the same **ford** in Elk River as the Bell men did years later. The trip she spoke of was before **1857** because the railroad came through Summerfield around that year. The ford was immediately downstream from where Bell's Mill later stood.

Could it be possible that the McCoys, Cinda and Jane delivered, waited, and picked up their cornmeal at the same mill location as the Bell men built upon years later? That would really be historical! Daddy's new Chevy could have taken its pose a hundred years later where the ancient ones cleaned themselves from their trip, prepared their old, blackened coffee pot, placed it on the campfire, sipped coffee while chatting about the trip back home on the morrow, and rested overnight. Possibly they walked where wagons, some probably built by John Hiram Lain, Jr., wagon maker, awaited the ground meal that was to be loaded the next morning. I'm not trying to make up history but attempting to make history fit.





**1977 – Remains of  
Bell's Mill in the  
Crossroads Community in  
Pelham Valley**

**(Photo courtesy of *The Grundy  
County Herald*, Jan. 27, 1977 via  
Lanny Bell)**

A dam was built on the river; the water pressure was pertinent for the turning of the millstones. Some local folks did not necessarily like the damming of the river, so there was trouble at times. The mill housing stood on wooden columns high above the water to avoid the often heavy flooding.



**Bell's Mill sluice area with the water entrance and exit clearly seen**





**One of the millstones from Bell's Mill on Elk River; both still safe in private care**

Elk River served many church groups as a baptistry. In the photo below, one can see Bell's Mill in the background. The dam appeared to be wooden logs and sawn slabs, possibly filled with clay and soil to help hold the water back. The onlookers on the right are standing on what later was used as the "beach" of sorts. Most of the men placed themselves on the top of the dam and under the mill housing so as to have a clear view of the wonderful religious event of being buried with Christ in baptism.



**Baptismal Ceremony Downstream from the Mill**

The mill got its name from James Franklin “Frank” Bell whose son, Joseph Sumner Bell (*and possibly Charles Franklin Bell*), operated it as early as 1913. I suppose one might say that Mr. Harrison “Harris” and Rachel (Laxson) Bell, parents of James Franklin, started the whole Bell story in Pelham Valley: Bell’s Cove, Bell’s Cemetery, Bell’s Mill, Bell’s Cove Road, etc. Charles Franklin Bell, who lived in Alto, gave his time to the ministry on the Pelham Circuit appearing to leave him out of the milling work somewhat. However, I actually found Joseph Sumner Bell called a “miller” on his WWI Draft Registration. Without doubt, Charles Franklin did his share of baptisms in the waters at the mill. He may well be in the crowd or in the water in the photo above. I laughed a little within, thinking that Sumner was grinding corn while Charles Franklin was baptizing the lost farmers who sought salvation and cornmeal.

There are hundreds of stories in the photo above, but they are lost to us forever. As a child, it would have been these waters that I waded in and picked up my little shells. Of course, in the summer time, the river was lower with more shallow water, and the dam was reduced to pieces of wood. But had I known about the historical mill, I could have viewed it with my childhood eyes and stamped it in my memory forever.



**Left: Harrison “Harris” and Rachel (Laxson) Bell**

In 1913, Effie Eugenia Bell, J. W. White and Sallie (*Sara Bell*) White, J. F. (*John Francis*) Bell and Annie L. (*Lara Bell*), Charles H. (*maybe F.*) Bell and Annie Bell sold land bordering the Elk River, known formerly as the old **Mill Tract**, to their brother/brother-

in-law, J. S. Bell/Joseph Sumner Bell. Sumner's father owned the land; now he and his children were selling their inheritance at the **Mill Tract** to their brother, Sumner. The keywords here are **Mill Tract**. This indicates that a mill, not necessarily the one that became known as **Bell's Mill**, predated Joseph Sumner Bell's entry into ownership of a mill.

A portion of a deed made in 1914 appears to sell to J. S. Bell, at an auction, land for \$260.50, one tract beginning at the "east bank of the Elk River just above the *mill*." From this we can say that the mill was built before 1914. Bringing this short story up to more recent times, we will contribute to Joseph Sumner Bell the ownership of the mill at the time William Harrison "Willie" Partin was hired to operate it during the mid **1920s** up through **1938**. "Sumner" Bell (as he was better known) and his family were living in Chattanooga during part of the **1930s** while Sumner held a job there. On June 5, **1917**, Sumner Bell registered for the WWI Draft and noted that he was a farmer and **miller**. When Sumner lost or quit his job in Hamilton County, the Partins moved out of the Bell house making it easy for the Bells to move home. The Partins then went down to Ikard Road/East Roark's Cove Rd. and lived in a two-story frame house for a short period of time. This area was where the Partins had their beginning when John and Anny (Reid) Partin moved into the area in the early 1800s. The progenitors are buried in Partin/Dotson Cemetery nearby.

Willie and Tavy (Goodman) Partin firstly moved into the Sumner Bell house around 1924 and used the Bell barn while they worked the mill. They also raised crops to sustain the family and to sell to the public. Wrenn's Nest and the MSSA in Monteagle were faithful buyers of Willie's wares. Charlotte "Lottie" (Partin) Bell mentioned the river and mill several times in her diary which was written during the period that she and her brother Grady started their own business in William "Bill" Aylor's store at Crossroads. **Saturday, Jan. 02, 1937:** *Rained in morning, very gloomy and muddy. The river was up the highest in ten years. Emily and John were water bound, but John and Grady came through, and the car went dead; Grady got out in the water and cranked the car.* **Friday, Jan. 08, 1937:..** *I went down home a few minutes at Bells Mill.* **Tuesday, Feb. 9:** *Very cold. I went down home the first time in two weeks. Mama and family were all doing fine. I came up here with Effie Bell as she was afraid the creek was too full to cross.* **Monday, March 01, 1937,** *Grady got stuck in mud at mill. We got worried about him and about 11:30 got Uncle Elbert to get out of bed to go see about him.*

**Read a transcript of Lottie's diary at:**

[http://www.grundycountyhistory.org/03\\_Ind/Diary/Diary%20of%20Lottie%20Partin.pdf](http://www.grundycountyhistory.org/03_Ind/Diary/Diary%20of%20Lottie%20Partin.pdf)

Octavia Belle "Tavy" (Goodman) Partin and her children, Grady, Lottie, Ruby, Douglas and Roy (*Tavy lost a set of twins during her childbearing years; had they survived, she would have happily been the mother hen to seven children.*) had their trials with the river when trying to get across the rising water for school attendance. For those of us who remember "Tavy," we must express our exhilaration, or maybe it was shock, that such a tiny, quiet, tender-hearted lady, slightly comical to behold because of her humble appearance, could take on the care of Queen, the mare, five children, (*at different ages in their schooling*), and herself as she stood like Moses against the Red Sea, unwaveringly, determined to get her brood across Elk River and to school on time.

**From Ruby's Partin's memoirs:** *"We had a mare named Queen. She was a wonderful little horse. During the winter we would ride her to school sometimes. Daddy would rent a stable in Pelham from Mr. Leif Henson. Three of us rode – my brother (Douglas) on front, I would be in the middle, and my sister (Lottie) who was a little older would ride sideways on the back. I don't know how she stayed on. When we got off at the barn, our feet would be so cold we could hardly walk. My sister's feet got frostbite, and she still has trouble with them when they get cold... It was only about a mile to Pelham School from where we lived if we crossed the river and went through the woods. We had a neighbor boy and girl who walked with us, so we really enjoyed the walk. I sometimes wonder how we ever got to school on time. We would look for wild flowers, berries, or anything new. Seems like it rained more back then, and there would be ice all winter, so we would always find places to skate as we went along."*

**Read a transcript of Ruby Partin's memoirs at:**

[http://www.grundycountyhistory.org/03\\_Ind/Jackie/Memoirs%20of%20Ruby%20Partin%20Long.pdf](http://www.grundycountyhistory.org/03_Ind/Jackie/Memoirs%20of%20Ruby%20Partin%20Long.pdf)

I want to insert this note about the Pelham School that was sent to me by Janelle Taylor: *"The Greenwood School is mentioned in a deed. I believe it was the one in which Alexander Edgar Patton gave land for the school next to the Old Baptist Cemetery. Obviously there was a Baptist Church there too, probably the same building as the school. At any rate, the school was burned during the Civil War. There is a record of the U.S. government paying for the school being (**having been-jp**) destroyed. The next school, as far as I know, was on the location of the present Pelham School. This is, at least, the 3<sup>rd</sup> building on that site."*

Back to our little Partin children, like a little frog looking for the right place to jump into a pond, Tavy sometimes looked for the right log to scoot onto to cast her cane pole. Her special fishing spot was called Flat Rock which extended out over the water a little distance and was near the mill; she fished while Willie ground the corn. She was as quiet as a mouse and often caught black perch and trout. The water below the mill was shallow, cool and clean, so Tavy allowed them to play at times. Sometimes young Douglas and Ruby caught crawfish and kept her furnished with good bait. Lottie



watched over her baby brother Roy Elbert. Other family members giggered for frogs, killed ducks, and seined for fish. Willie and Tavy always served the frog legs to their small children. That's the way loving parents did and do.

The following excerpt was published May 2, 1974, by Jim Nicholson editor of the Grundy County Herald at the time.

*"It was about 1924 that the Partins moved to Grundy County, which has continued to be their home for the last half century. However, their first location here was not on the mountain but in Pelham Valley. Besides farming, Willie operated **Bell's Mill** at the foot of Cumberland Mountain. The mill was powered by the water of Elk River, and it was used to grind corn into meal. Feed was made ready for hogs and cattle. Also, if someone wanted whole wheat flour, Willie would grind the wheat. It is said that folks came from miles away to trade at Bell's Mill with Mr. Partin because they knew they would get a fair trade and the highest quality grain. He used only the best corn, and it had to be clean. Also contributing to the quality were the millstones, which were honed just right." (Let's add the word "dressing" as well as "honing" the stones." A good miller had to be educated in dressing the millstone for best results.)*



**Elizabeth Bell takes a wade in the Elk River ford. (2016)**





**With everyone's help, the Bell's Mill and ford area can return to its pristine and serene condition.**



**The Bend at Elk River on the Mill Tract of Land (2016)**

It was a favorite place to roast hot dogs and marshmallows and to meet friends after a long week at school or work. Around the early 1930s, more excitement presented itself for the Partin boys, Douglas and Roy, when one day they sat on the high side of the road across from Bell's Mill and viewed the passing of the U. S.



Cavalry. In front of their young eyes, they witnessed one of the soldiers being thrown from his horse and ending up with a broken leg. Quickly from out of the long line of horses, men and loaded wagons, one wagon came to carry him for help.



**Remnants of the shaft that carried the power to the grinding stones**





**History Exposed: more metal works found after the good work of Lanny Bell and his sister Elizabeth in removing the invading tree**

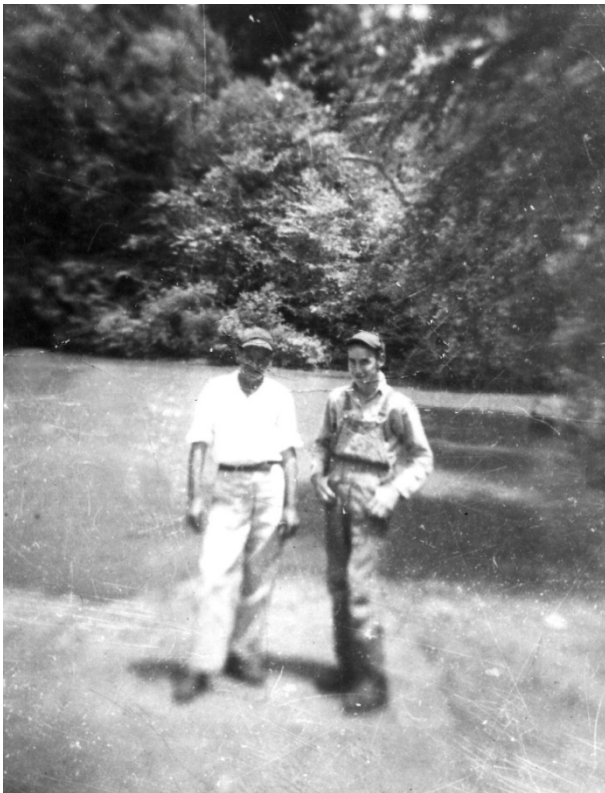


**Possibly a millstone remnant from earlier days used for filler**





**Left: Murphy and Audrey Frizzell in 1939 when Elk River was frozen deeply at Bell's Mill. The old barn in the background belonged to the Bell family, and later was owned by Judge Elston Clay. By this year, Willie Partin had moved his family to Tracy City where the whole family built Partins General Merchandise with gas station, Tracy City Furniture Store, Partins' Dairy Farm; plus, they owned a small coal company, raised farm vegetables and hogs. Earlier, they operated a rolling store. One might say they hit the ground *working on the plateau.***



**Left: Charlie Bradford Meadows and his son James Dewey Meadows at the Bell's Mill ford (ca. July 4, 1953)**

**Photo: Courtesy of Rosa Louise (Meadows) Edwards**

Irma Jean (Gipson) Rieder lived at Crossroads where her family owned a store and cabins for Hwy 41 travelers. The cabins still stand and were originally owned by Clyde and Elva Garner. She often visited the mill for wading and swimming. She spoke of the little children playing in the downstream waters below the wooden dam and older people swimming upstream above the dam. A short distance downstream

were some favorite fishing spots. Mrs. Rieder told me that the housing was used like a changing room for swimmers after the mill was closed down. Her memories are of fun filled experiences along the river, never a dull moment.



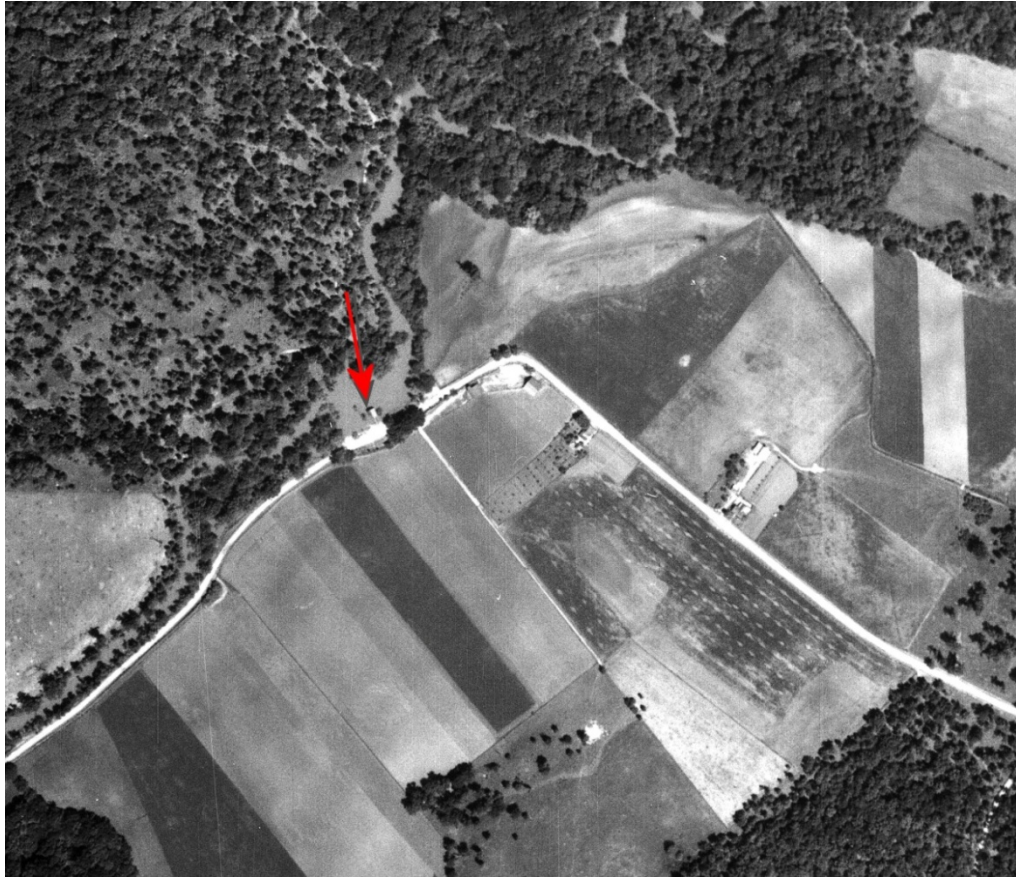
**Irma Jean (Gipson) Rieder at Bell's Mill**

**The runway had some water under it and appeared to be the path Sumner Bell and Willie Partin walked to enter the mill housing. Irma believes she was looking toward Bell's Mill Road. Wagons, and later, vehicles probably pulled alongside this ramp to unload their corn and later pick up their cornmeal.**



**L to R: brothers, Douglas and Grady Edward Partin at the Sumner Bell home near the mill.**





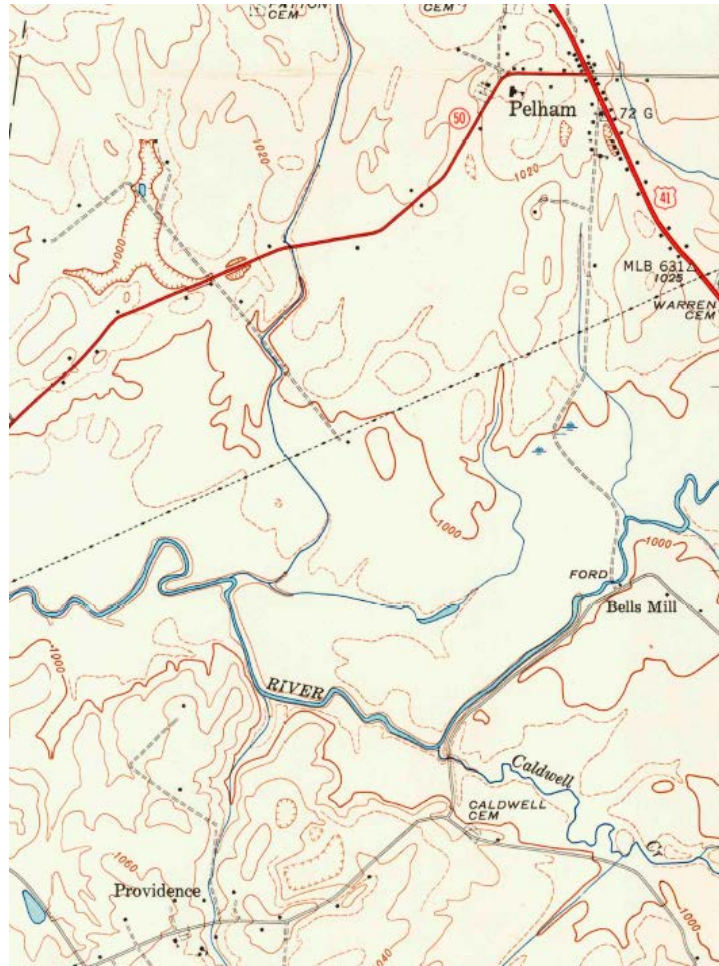
**A 1938 aerial view of the area the year the Partins moved away; photo courtesy of Ralph Thompson**

In the above view of the mill one can see the river take its almost 90° bend toward the north. The Sumner Bell house and barn can be seen inside the bend of the road. Although I am still “figuring” on the position of the mill housing and the dam, there is no doubt that the Partin family left a mill standing in 1938, so the tiny roof seen in the edge of the river is the mill. The white color is the housing of the mill and the tiny black spot on the north end is a shadow. Sumner Bell owned several tracts of land on both sides of the road bend, and after hearing for years about the work habits of Willie Partin, I believe that much of the farm work seen in the 1938 photo on the Bell farm was done by him.

**1947 Map of Bell's Mill  
to  
Pelham Area;**

**May be helpful for  
Envisioning our setting**

**Note; Bells Mill, the Ford,  
and the  
Old Road to Pelham**



In this 1947 map of the mill and Pelham area, one can see where the old ford trek left the river and made its way on up to the Pelham area near the school. It is quite possible that when the weather was dry that school children or those taking “short cuts” could walk the old wagon road. In wet weather maybe the side ridges of the road cuts were usually high enough to walk on and avoid the mud.

Years of human abuse and neglect, soil erosion, natural debris changes and water table changes left the mill area undesirable for wading, swimming, fishing or just viewing the serenity of the river at rest, or the excitement of it having a temper tantrum. Thankfully, some attention has returned to this spot and care is being given by Lanny Bell and his sister Elizabeth. The Garner families who own the land now have from time to time labored on the mill area hoping the public will catch onto the idea of keeping the river clean.





**Modern (2016) Google Earth view of mill area**



**William Harrison "Willie" & Octavia Belle "Tavy" (Patton) Partin with their children all grown up: L to R: Lottie, Grady Edward, Tavy, Roy Elbert, Willie, Ruby and Douglas (Sadly, all those in the photo are deceased. – 2016)**

The old **Chevy** left the home scene at a time when I lived far away. I don't know what happened to it, but my heart tells me that Daddy was sad to see it go. My sister, Johnnie Maxine, saw a young girl, Rachel Dyer, swimming and playing at **Bell's Mill** when both were children; the girl grew up to become one of her best high school friends at Grundy County High. **Partin** descendants still share stories handed down about life at the mill and on **Elk River**. One of the Bell/Goodman descendants became a doctor and has photos and diplomas of ancestors on his office walls. **I-24** took away the large trucks and most of the traffic from the narrow, winding **State Highway 41** which is still



a beautiful drive in the spring and fall. And some seventy years later this summer of 2016, I once again waded amongst the tiny silver fish imagining the history that lay below my feet.

I hope this little story will fit into the memories of those who want to snuggle with some of Grundy County's history.

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