

## Happy Bottom, Tracy City, Tennessee

by Jackie Layne Partin

Does it not lift one's spirit to hear the word *happy* no matter how grim the situation really is? Maybe that is why the residents of this area let it be called Happy bottom. As early as the slaves were freed and began to look for homes for themselves, "happy bottom" communities began to pop up in the South.

These little settlements weren't part of some Home Owners' Associations. They probably were not even owned by the occupants, but the flat land, usually near a creek with tiny board houses, sparsely placed, was a much better place to call home than the slave cabins of a plantation. If we knew the truth, there probably was little happiness down in the flats, but one would not have known it by listening to the singing voices of those living there. At sunset and on toward bedtime, spiritual hymns and songs made up while working the fields could be heard over the farmland and even in the towns.

Tracy City, in the immediate years after the Civil War and on into the twentieth century, had its own section at the back or northern part of town that became known as Happy Bottom. For clarification, the front, or main portion of town, was on the east with Railroad Avenue accommodating the business section. At the back of town, Colyar St. ran parallel to Nathurst St., (either hardly in any condition to call streets); both intersected a creek. Behind Mr. Frank Brawley's parents' old home place on Altamont St. is a low field with the creek flowing from the north making its way to the Fiery Gizzard, visiting the whole town on its way. Above the creek and field is a recently planted stand of pine trees. Frank Brawley was always told by his parents that it was in and around that section where the pines grow that the black citizens had their homes. The creek was useful in many ways, but it was a demon during rainy periods often covering the roads, the fields, and coming up near any houses. The residents needed the creek, but they steered clear of being washed away by its occasional disruptive rages.



Stand of pines on left of Nathurst St. looking northward – probably area where the residents of Happy Bottom lived in meager housing



Flat land, creek and pines on former Happy Bottom

Why was the area called Happy Bottom? I'm going to use a little common sense to answer this question. The land lay low, thus bottom land; it was near the town, but obviously at the back of the sections that held large, beautiful, houses mostly painted white. The newly freed black inhabitants of Happy Bottom were the cooks, housekeepers, baby sitters, gardeners, or servants for the more financially fortunate citizens of the town. These folks who lived at Happy Bottom were not part of the convict labor force used in the coal mines and coke ovens in those days in Tracy City. What did the word "Happy" have to do with anything?

One of my father's sisters, Patricia Ann "Patsy" (Layne) Harris, told me that when she was a young girl, her father worked off the plateau in Pelham Valley. He labored at the dangerous job of digging hand-dug wells for some valley farmers. Her mother took her to Pelham to see her father on the weekends. At times, little Patsy begged to be allowed to stay with her dad for the weekends. She told me of the evenings sitting next to her father on the porch of an old farm shack and listening to the old songs far across the field; the songs were the Negro spirituals sung by some of the field hands of the land owners. She couldn't understand why they were so happy at that time of evening. Everyone's body and mind should have been ready for sleep, not singing. Going back to the slavery days, one can study just a little and realize that the Negro covered his or her hurt, pain, unhappiness, bitterness and loneliness by singing spiritual hymns or songs put together themselves as they worked in the fields. This reality can be seen and felt today (2019); *sing out, clap your hands, be happy*. Thus, Tracy City had formed in its midst "**Happy Bottom.**"

**June 09, 1884** — *"The Daily American, Tracy City, June 8 – Early last night, Henry Cook, a quiet, inoffensive negro, was shot and instantly killed by Abner Street. The killing took place in the thicket between that part of town known as **Happy Bottom**, where the negroes live, and the business portion of town. The body of the dead man lay where he fell until this morning, when it was found by some negroes. As soon as the body was found, the Coroner was notified and proceeded to hold an inquest. Warrants were issued for the arrest of James Nunly, a boy of about 15, and Abner Street. Nunly was arrested first, and from information given by him, Street was soon found and after some maneuvering, arrested. Nunly's testimony before the Coroner was in substance that he and Street had started home, but were returning to look for a lost knife when they met the negro, who was going to the store for supplies. Street halted the negro, spoke a few words to him and shot him through the heart. There had been no previous difficulty, and there seems to have been no provocation whatever. Street's preliminary examination is set for 10 o'clock, tomorrow, before Squire W. J. Thomas. Street is quiet when sober but desperate when drinking. There is considerable excitement"*.

*The Daily American – Oct. 15, 1887, Tracy City News: Bob Teague and three other prisoners escaped from jail at Altamont last Wednesday night, knocking down the Jailer and breaking down two doors. They were seen in “Happy Bottom” at about 2 o’clock Thursday morning, but made themselves scarce before the officers could get them.*

Let’s go back to Colyar Street and talk about Happy Bottom from that viewpoint. If one has ever driven through the small town of Tracy City, then likely as not, your vehicle crossed a creek that flowed under Colyar St. Today the creek meanders passing near the Dollar General Store and The Lunch Box. I never knew the name until I found a small newspaper clipping published in **1924**.



“...and a bridge was ordered built across Happy Bottom creek intersecting with the pike from Colyar street at Tracy City.” This view is from The Lunch Box toward the Dollar General Store

July 13, **1924** – *The Daily American; Tracy City, Tenn., July 12 – County court met at Altamont and a bridge was ordered built across **Happy Bottom** creek intersecting with the pike from Colyar street at Tracy City.* Of course, the current bridge is a modern one, but this

quote gives us a date when the residents took the little creek seriously. It is not always a gentle little creek, but sometimes roars up and over the bridge. I figure that the creek furnished the low land in that area with water for the happy evening singers. It's time that the city puts up a sign reading, *Happy Bottom Creek*. All of us should remember our history, even the little creeks that flow from the back side of our towns.



Happy Bottom Creek leaving Nathurst St. on its way to Colyar St.