THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BARAK NORTON

(As told by Thomas Picklesimer in 1976)

Barak was born in eastern North Carolina in 1777 and come to Oconee County, South Carolina, with his family about 1790. His father, William Norton, bought several tracts of land on the Tamassee River. Barak and William each had grants from the state of South Carolina for 640 acres. Barak married Mary Nicholson, and they had 10 children.

The Indians had been driven from Oconee County and some were living in Whiteside Cove. They had a trail over the Chattooga Ridge that went by where the Nortons lived. This way led to where they went twice a year to get salt. They told the Nortons they lived under “*Unaka*” or the “White” Mountain, that could be seen from there.

Like all white men, Barak wanted all the land that joined his and he planned to go to the White Mountain. He was so busy raising a family that he did not come until about 1818.

By studying the life of my great-grandfather and what he did in taking over 3,000 acres from the Indians here in the Cove and helping his son-in-law, Col. John H. Alley and his soldiers capture them and start them on the “Trail of Tears”,

When Barak started from his home on his first trip to the Cove, he carried: a cutting axe, a broad axe, a bucksaw, one-half bushel of parched corn, salt, some fatback, “salted pork”, coffee, a fry pan, a bucket for making coffee, a rifle and one old quilt.

He left home before daylight, and it was late in the evening when he got to the Indian campground.

There were 20 wigwams. The Indians gave him a warm welcome. They were eating, and the Chief had him sit in his wigwam and served him all the corn mush and venison stew he could eat. All his life, he told how hungry he was and how good this food was. After resting, he walked on across what we call Norton Mill Creek and on the hill to the left of the Lombard Lodge road he made camp. Here, he built his first house. This house was built of chestnut logs that he cut to a thickness of six inches with a broad axe.

This first trip was made in August, as he “ringed” the bark around several acres of trees on the dark of the moon. Trees done like this on that time of the moon will never have a green sprout. I have done this to acres of land.

To have something to go with the parched corn and coffee, he set deadfalls to catch rabbits and caught trout from the creek each day. The first trip lasted a month. After gathering the crop at home, he came back with some slaves and his boys. They raised the logs and rived the boards and finished it before the snows came.

The next spring, he moved all the family to the Cove. With the slaves, they cleared the underbrush but let the ringed trees stand. The crops were light the first year, I am sure, for land like that never produces much the first year.

Barak was well educated for his time. He surveyed all the land which he entered.

Like all mountain men, he had a love of hunting. All spare time in the winter was spent getting meat for the family.

One day, he heard some strange dogs treed on the Chattooga Cliffs. He found a large bear the dogs had up a tree. Just as he shot it, the owner of the dogs came. He was Uncle Bobby McCall from Henderson County. He had been following the dogs for a week. He visited some time with the Nortons and like everyone who comes here, he fell in love with the place. Barak gave him 100 acres land to get him to move here, so he would have a neighbor.

Uncle Bobby was a great hunter and he and Barak tried to beat each other at hunting. They planned to go on a long hunt one fall and were to meet at the campground on Whiteside the first night. On the way Uncle Bobby killed a deer. Barak was not able to go until the next morning for some reason. Uncle Bobby hung the deer in a tree and slept close by. In the night he felt the breath of an animal. By the fire light, he could see a panther ready to leap in the tree. He raised his rifle that was by his side and killed it. When Barak came the next morning, he was skinning the panther. When he saw the deer and the panther, he told Uncle Bobby that he was the best hunter of the two and he would never try to beat him again.

It is interesting to know that Uncle Bobby had state grants to cover all the land in the town of Hendersonville. I have read these grants. In the 20’s his grandsons had lawyers to look at them. They told them it would be impossible to take the land from the people who lived on them. Uncle Bobby never went back to Henderson County after he moved here.

While the land was poor, there were so many good things here. The streams were full of trout, the woods were full of wild game, free range for the livestock and plenty of land to farm and above all, the peace and quiet and the beautiful mountains.

Searching for gold was more than a hobby for all the first settlers. Like me, they sure did not find any here. My great-grandfather Green, who bought land from Barak, worked “sluice boxes” with his slaves when they were not farming. All they found was “flour” gold. My grandfather Alley searched for gold all the time until he was too old and never found any.

Barak and his son, Ned, were panning for gold in Dahlonega, Georgia, when the news came of the gold in California. Ned bought a team of mules and wagon and went with the first wagon train from Dahlonega. He was gone over three years and came back in a wagon. His folks thought he brought back some gold but he was killed in the war and they never saw any of it.

As Barak got older, he talked about what he had done to the Indians and said it was wrong. He showed the grandchildren where the stockades stood and how the hungry Indians would eat like animals when they were fed through the small holes. He walked the road and showed them where the soldiers had whipped the ones who lay down and cried because they were leaving home, yoked two together, like oxen. “Here I watch the blood run from one bare back” and he marked a tree to remember each place by. I build this “Trail of Tears” and it started in my front yard” and the tears filled his eyes as he talked.

Before the war, he talked about slavery and said it was wrong for one man to hold another man as a slave. He said, “Don’t ever do it, because there is no profit in it”. He lost three of his sons in the Civil War and he said: “Now I know what Solomon meant when he said: “There is a way that seemeth right to a man, but the end thereof is death”.

Barak lived 92 years and was never sick. He just ran out of time.

Barak, one day as he sat in his rocking chair with a pencil and sheet of paper, he had listed each tract of land that he had possessed in South Carolina and North Carolina. He added the number of acres it all came to and added the number of dollars he had received from the lands he had sold. What he said was, “I have never been as rich as the Indian Chief was when he invited me into his wigwam and gave me all the corn mush and venison stew I could eat that first day I walked into Whiteside Cove”.