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THE PORTER FAMILY OF BUTLER COUNTY
FROM 1736 to 1950

FOR
BURT FEINTUCH
INTRODUCTION TO FOLKSTUDIES

RESEARCHED
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FOLKLIFE ARCHIVES
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This paper deals with the origin and heritage of the Porter family in Butler County, Kentucky. It begins with the first Porter of this line that moved to America from Belfast, Ireland to the first Porter to Butler County and through the Porters that settled Eden, Kentucky.

The objective of this paper was to document the oral history that has been passed along for many years in this family. And to rediscover exactly who these people were and how their lives influenced the growth and indentity of the communities in which they lived.

The reason for this certain topic was a strong personal desire to find out who my forefathers were and what they were like and how they lived. In doing so I hope that I will attain a deeper understanding of who I am as well as who I might become.

JOHN PORTER I

He came to Pennsylvania from Belfast, Ireland in 1736. In 1740 he moved with his wife Mary Polly Anthony to Prince Edward County, Virginia. In 1759 they had a son, John Porter II. John I died in Virginia in 1782.

JOHN PORTER II

He served in the Revolutionary War at the age of 17. By the end of the war he had been made a Colonel. This title would follow him the rest of his life. For his military service he received 2,666 Acres of land that he could homestead. In 1796 or 97 he and two brothers, Lant William Porter and Captain Francis Porter came to what was then Logan County on the Little Muddy Creek to a place called Sugar Grove, this is now in Butler County (est. 1810). Colonel John and his wife, Sarah Clark already had their son Oliver Cromwell Porter when they came. Colonel John and Sarah had eight children, 5 boys and 3 girls. Colonel John was a community leader. He along with Thomas Carson and George Wilson were appointed commissioners with the duty of lay-out of the county seat Morgantown. Colonel John also owned a flatboat that he traveled on to New Orleans to sell crops and farm products. He would bring back tools and goods that people needed. Colonel John had as many as 20 slaves. In 1803 he had a son, Benjamin Porter.

In 1833, Colonel John Porter II died and was buried on his own land in "Porter Cemetery". His farm is presently owned by Erthra Belcher.

OLIVER CROMWELL PORTER

He moved up the Green River to a place in Ohio County which was called Porter's Landing. Later the town moved up the hill and is known now as Cromwell, Kentucky named after Oliver C. Porter.

BENJAMIN PORTER

He was Oliver's youngest brother also moved up the Green River past old Moore's Landing. He bought 500 Acres of bottom land near Indian Camp Creek. This is known as the Girlie Smith Farm now owned by Don Dunn of Franklin, Kentucky. Benjamin built a log house that was two story, three rooms with two dog trots downstairs and two rooms upstairs. This house still stands and is owned and lived in by Paul Deweese. Benjamin married Mary Proctor. They had one son, Clark Thomas Porter, in 1822, who was named after his grandmother, Sarah Clark. Shortly after his birth Mary Proctor died. Benjamin remarried Matilda Wilson in 1824. In 1846 Benjamin and his family packed up their belongings and children and moved west, eventually to Texas by way of river boat then by wagon. They settled Porter's Prairie which is outside of Houston.

Benjamin had also been a "flatboater". He was also a school teacher when he was young. He left his farm to his oldest son, Clark who was engaged at the time of Ben's departure. Ben and his family would keep in touch by writing and Ben would also return for a visit once before he died in 1870.

CLARK THOMAS PORTER I

After Clark's father had left for Texas, Clark married, Amanthis A. Herrald. They had three daughters. In 1852 Ananthis died. Clark remarried to Margret Ellen Austin in 1857. They had seven children, three boys and four girls. Clark moved to a house close to the river on the farm. He also ran the county poor house which was located close to his farm on the west side. He moved to the bottom house because

he ran a store boat on the river and the house was close to the landing. Clark's oldest daughter married Jasper Berry. They moved in to the upland house. When Clark decided to move to Morgantown he gave the upland house place to Jasper. Clark moved to the house where Clay Forsythe's widow now lives on North Main across from Smith's Funeral Home. He was the manager of the Richmond Hotel, he later ran for County Jailer and was elected. He moved to the Helm place on South Tyler Street now owned by Don Share, this is where the old jail was.

Clark became a very well known man in town. He was a very lively person to be around and everyone liked him. According to the late Mrs. Annie Forsythe Eberman, in 1953 "There was never a party nor social event that occurred that Clark Porter wasn't invited to, he was always the life of the party". Clark died in 1887.

ROBERT BENJAMIN II

Robert Benjamin II was born in 1862, son of Clark and Margret Ellen Austin. As a young man Ben travelled across the Green River to Logansport Kentucky where he learned the trade of a blacksmith. This would be his lively hood for a greater part of his life. He married Guiruda Plum House in 1888. She was from Walnut Grove, Ky. (now Eden).

In 1891, Ben bought the Walnut Grove School House. He tore the school down and used the logs to build his own home. The logs were so large it took four pair of oxen to move them. There is a large oak tree in the front yard of the homesite. When the logs were being put in place the oak which was just a sapling then was bent over. It took three years before it became straight again. The oak now gives a visual reference as to the age of the house.

In 1893 Ben bought some more land from Thomas Elmore for \$20.00 dollars. On this land he built a very large modern blacksmith shop. It was the largest one for several counties. The shop contained a grist mill for grinding peoples grain, a supply room for wire of all kinds, building lumber, steel, a mill for planeing lumber. A forge room that could house many wagons, farm implements, buggys along with a massive work bench. In 1899 Ben built on a new addition to the shop, in this he put a general store and a post office. He was the appointed postmaster so it was up to him to name the community. He called it Eden because he thought, "It was such a nice place to live".

This became the official name of the community. In his store he sold many different things, medicines, eye glasses, hardware, groceries, shoes, dry goods, and also farm implements. He also aquired many vocations, for example he was a doctor for many common ailments, he was also a crude pharmacist in that he would prescribe or recommend many patent medicines. He was a veterinarian, he advised many on their animal health problems, he was a midwife and he delivered many many babies.

He was an optomitrist, he checked people for seeing difficulties and ordered them the proper glasses. He was a banker. This was one of his most accomplished vocations. He was lending money and taking mortgages on a daily basis. Practically everyone in the community borrowed money from him at one time or another. He co-signed on almost every farm around. It was this unending generosity that caused him to loose all that he had during the depression. He would not forclose on anyone and gave away all that he owned except his house and shop.

He was also the treasurer for the Mutual Telephone System. He collected phone bills and the Treasurer for the Common School District Number 35. He collected school tax. He was a field correspondent for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He was also a farmer. He owned and rented many acres of bottom land. He hired the labor to work the farm along with his son's Clark Thomas Porter II and Burna Ray Porter. At one time he owned 22 muleteams that he used to plow and harvest with. He was also a builder. He built many homes in the community for other people. He was also contracted to build the new Eden school house in 1891. It was finished in 1893. He built it on his own land and gave the rights of use to the school district as long as they held school there afterwhich the building would belong to him. This building was used until 1953. All of Ben's children and most of his grand-children attended school in this one room school house.

Ben was also involved in politics. He was not considered a politician because he never ran for any office ,~~however,~~he was always nominated for office and was never beaten. The community wanted him to be their majistrate, which at that time there were only two majistrates for the entire north side of Green River in Butler County. His district included Aberdeen, Eden, Flenerville, Welches Creek and Hunt town. In 1909 he was also elected as Justice of the Peace. Until 1982 he was the only elected democrat in Butler County on record.

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Ben's primary vocation was the blacksmith. This is the trade that he showed an uncanny expertise for. He could do more things with a piece of steel than most people could even imagine. He was highly admired and respected for his craftsmanship. His business grew to be more than one man could handle so he taught his oldest son Clark the trade and expanded his business even further. Clark seemed to have the same natural ability to work with fire and steel as his father had. Together they had a reputation that extended from Bowling Green to Beaver Dam and from Leitchfield to Mulenburg County. People would bring their wagons, buggys, plows, disks and all other machinery to R B Porter's and Son. Ben continued his trade until he was 77 years old in 1939. He worked every day but Sunday. He had closed down the store and the post office in 1936. After years after he retired he got his leg broken when a mule fell on him. He was in a bed for 6 months but he never called a doctor. He set the leg himself and recovered completely. He died in 1950 at the age of 88, eight years after Guiruda had died. While he had lived he had been responsible for 11 children and the founding of a community. When he died the biggest part of the community died with him.

After completing my research I put all my notes in a briefcase and sat it in the corner of my room. I then began to reflect on all the stories and tales that I had heard in the past three weeks. I started to put together the bits and pieces of a puzzle that had always been a mystery to me. It was a puzzle that involved the thoughts and deeds of my forefathers and the type of world they lived in. I have always had no trouble in seeing how my life was different from theirs because there are so many material changes that have come about.

My true ambition has been to find something or some idea that was shared by my forefathers and myself. My home is in the same area as their homes were. Growing up I had eagerly listened to the stories told to me of my great grandfather and the community of Eden. As a young boy I was so proud to be from Eden, but as I grew older I discovered that fewer and fewer people recognized the name of Eden when I answered their question of where I was from. I always had to say it's just beyond Aberdeen past the left fork in the road so they would know where I was talking about. I realized that Eden's significance as a community was dying. It was still very alive, however, in the minds of some of the old men at the corner in town.

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To hear of Eden's fame all I had to do was mention that I was the grandson of Clark Thomas Porter and the old fellows would joyfully start reminiscing of days gone by.

For these reasons I began asking questions and this is what I have learned. Eden was not considered a community until my great-grandfather Ben established his business there in 1893. This does not mean that there weren't any people there until then. There were really many people there, about ten different families, all of which were quite large. There wasn't really anything to bind them as a community though. They had to travel to Aberdeen to buy supplies or anything else they needed. The post office was there. The closest bank was in Morgantown which was 5 miles away and across the river. There was a church there. Walnut Grove Methodist and a school Walnut Grove School, but that was all. Ben's shop and store became a vital part of the people's lives. It became as much a place to socialize and share the news as it was a place of business.

Ben's personality was one that attracted people. He was always being visited by someone from far away. He was such a very intelligent and progressive man that people came to view him as the community leader. His reputation spread as far as his area of commerce and even further. Any serious politician always came to Eden to meet R B Porter because he knew that if R B would vote his way that the rest of the community would also.

The community continued to grow through the turn of the century. Most of its growth was internal in that the same hub of families intermarried and settled close to home. Eden was primarily a farming community except for R.B.'s shop. It was located on the high ground over looking river bottoms. There wasn't really any natural resource or commercial opportunity to attract or sustain anything but farming. After the depression had taken its toll in the 1930's there wasn't anything to hold the next young generation, consequently they left home and Eden's days were numbered.

Ben's son Clark worked with him in his blacksmith shop until 1931. Clark by that time was married and had a family. Clark went into business for himself sawing lumber with a portable saw mill. This left Ben alone in his own shop. Ben was getting old and could not run the store and the shop both. So he closed the store and the post

office in 1936. When this happened the community no longer had any identity other than a church and a school. There were but few new people moving in and by then a good road was being built from Morgantown to Beaver Dam, Highway 71. People were starting to own cars and Morgantown was becoming just a short drive down the road. These are the factors that lead to the rise and fall of Eden.

As I looked over the entire family tree I began to see a pattern other than just one of life and death. I saw that there has been a distinct quality or trait in the personality of each father of each generation from the first to the last. That trait is one of community founder as well as leaders. Of the first five Porter's in my line there were five different communities in which they lived. Each one had a major roll in its founding and prospering.

The questions that this observation brings up is whether this trait of community building was one that was passed from father to son or was it just each generations need to start something new for itself. I believe that I could argue for either side of this question and do a good job. Another observation that I have made is that each generations father had a well known reputation for being first of all honest, along with intelligence, hardworking and unconditionally generous. I do feel that these traits were passed from father to son. And in my growing up these traits were passed on to me. It is in my discovery that I have found my bond with my ancestors. It is our ideas and attitudes about life that we share. I now feel strongly compelled to do my best to maintain that same admiration by others that each of my forefathers held. And my hope for the future is that I can continue this tradition of ideals by instilling it into the next generation that I will create.