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FRONTIER IDENTITY IN CULTURAL EVENTS IN HOLMES COUNTY, FLORIDA

A Thesis
Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts
In the Department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by

TYLER D. KEITH

May 2011

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ABSTRACT

Holmes County, Florida plays host to several cultural events that perpetuate a frontier identity for its citizens. These events include the dedication of a homesteading cabin, which serves as the meeting place for other “pioneer days” events; “Drums along the Choctawhatchee”, an event put on by a local Creek Indian tribe that celebrates the collaborative nature of pioneer and Native Americans; the 66th annual North West Florida Championship Rodeo; and a local fish-fry. Each of these events celebrates the frontier identity of the county in unique and important ways. Using the images of the frontier created by William “Buffalo Bill” Cody’s Wild West show and the ideas championed by Fredrick Jackson Turner in his famous essay “The Importance of the Frontier in American History” as models, Holmes County constructs its own frontier image through the celebration of these combined cultural events. I attended each of these events, conducting interviews with residents in order to find out how and why Holmes County chooses to champion the frontier identity embodied in these collective celebrations.

In addition to the narrative presentation my thesis also includes a visual and audio-visual component. The film, *In the Pines: Stories of Violence in Holmes County, Florida*, demonstrates how stories of violence shared by community members help shape the communities identity as a “wild west” or frontier place. The photo book, *The Sweet Water Country*, presents visual images of many of the cultural events discussed in the thesis paper and also documents the rural and wild nature of the landscape. These three parts of the thesis work together to provide a comprehensive portrait of Holmes County

and its rich cultural heritage, highlighting its image as a frontier place and examining the process which it creates this identity by constructing a useable story from its memories.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the people of Holmes County, Florida, especial my Grandfather, James Vernon Keith. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my father, George Keith, who introduced me to many of the people that I met and interviewed in Holmes County, and to my mother, Rosie Riley, for her constant support and encouragement.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

KCF	Keith Cabin Foundation
NWFCR	North West Florida Championship Rodeo
TwHP	Teaching with Historic Places

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I. INTRODUCTION

I first visited Holmes County, Florida in 2007. I went there with my father to interview residents about the murder of my great grandfather, James Perry Keith. Perry Keith had just been released from the chain gang where he served a year for stabbing a man in a fight, when he was killed by his brother-in-law, Albert Harris. People who tell the story of the killing say that Harris was paid five dollars for the murderous act by Dan French, who reportedly had designs on Perry Keith's wife, Gippsie. Twenty years later a shoot out on the Choctawhatchee River between a notorious revenuer known as Pistol Pete and a group of local moonshiners. According to the locals, Pistol Pete had been on a murderous campaign to rid the area of moonshine runners. The stories of these events, all of which happened in Holmes County, are still told today.

As I spent time in Holmes County and met the people of the community and spent time there I became interested in the county on a wider scale, beyond the initial interest in its history of violence. I attended a few cultural events and photographed the events for future use. Increasingly, I wanted to understand how stories are passed down from one generation to the next and, in particular, how the people of Holmes County view themselves and their community.

Many people that I interviewed described the area as a "wild west" type of place. The area was originally settled by homesteaders after the Civil war. Groups of families

moved to the community where many still remain, living next door to the cabins and houses that their homesteading kin built. I was interested in how the community kept the frontier image intact and used it to create memory and identity.

When conceiving my thesis project, I decided to include a documentary photography book, a film on violence and storytelling, and a written account of my own experiences attending cultural events combined with oral histories and historical analysis of the meaning and genesis of those events. The point of the thesis would be to provide a portrait of a place using the stories of the people of the community.

The portrait that emerged was of a community that identified itself as a frontier area. The film, *In the Pines: Stories of Violence in Holmes County, Florida*, which can be viewed as an attachment to the paper, presents stories of violence and examines how those stories perpetuate a frontier or “wild west” image, along with the legacy violence creates. The paper deals with four cultural events that I attended the history of the events, the history of the celebration of those and historical analyses of both. The documentary photography book, *Sweet Water Country: Glimpses of Holmes County, Florida*, visually documents the events discussed in the thesis paper while also providing snapshots of the county’s landscape. The photo book is available for viewing at the J. D. Williams Library on the campus of Ole Miss.

Holmes County is located in the Panhandle of Florida between Pensacola and Tallahassee. It is bordered on the west by Washington County, on the east by Jackson County, the south by Walton County, and on the north by Alabama, near Geneva. The Choctawhatchee River runs north to south through the center of the county, effectively splitting it in half. Holmes County is and always has been rural. According to the 2010

census, the population is 19,927(www.census.gov/2010census/, April 11, 2011). E.W. Carswell, a native of Holmes County and author of *Holmesteading: The History of Holmes County Florida*, describes the people of Holmes County as follows: “Most of us were members of large families, and our homes were in communities inhabited by many of our kinsmen. It was nearly a classless society. Status was seldom measured by material wealth, since few families had any wealth to measure. We felt a sense of security and a wealth of warmth that radiated from a love of family and a feeling of community” (Carswell 6).

These are obviously words of an insider with deep roots in the community. Carswell’s book constructs the history of Holmes County. Each chapter ends with an editorial section, perhaps a leftover habit from his days as a journalist with the *Holmes County Observer*, that comments on the historical events described in the chapter. His rationale for editorializing is the fact that he either lived through or heard stories of these events from others who had lived through them, and that fact gives him an insight on the community’s past that an outside observer could not possess.

Anna Paget Wells’s account of Holmes County, *Heart and History of Holmes County with Glimpses of the Panhandle*, is mainly a collection of oral histories “drawn from the memory of those whose past is a sweet dream” (Wells, foreward). She addresses the county’s lack of written history by describing the lives of those who did not write it down. She writes, “We find that the pioneers of this county cared little for written history. They were too busy at first providing the necessities of life to write incidents by the wayside” (Wells, foreward).

Both Wells and Carswell invoke a frontier identity for the people and communities of Holmes County. When community members speak of a historical event, they often reference Carswell. Many people participated in Wells' book by giving their oral histories. These facts are important in understanding how the community constructs its history and image from community memory. In *Heart and History*, Wells explains that most of her oral histories are with elderly people in the community. The facts provided in those interviews, she explains, "may not always be relied upon, yet they are valuable in tracing the few written records. There is some legend, some tradition, and some documented facts from the written records." It is important to note what Wells values as important source material for the viable construction of community memory: "memories of the oldest citizens of the county, some legend, tradition and some documented facts" (Wells, foreward).

In his introductory essay to *Where these Memories Grow*, W. Fitzhugh Brundage insists that to find meaning in characterizations of Southern memory "attention must be given to what kind of history Southerners have valued, what in their past they have chosen to remember and forget, how they have disseminated the past they have recalled, and to what uses those memories have been put" (Brundage, *Memories* 3).

These passages clearly identify the "kind of history" that Wells and Carswell value most: "memory of the oldest citizens, some legend, tradition, and some documented facts." There is more to history, however, than the sources one values. As Tiya Miles states in *Ties that Bind*, history consists of "arranging and rearranging those elements into story lines (Miles 5)." This process is what Brundage calls a "genealogy of identity (Brundage, *Memories* 4)."

Brundage illustrates this process with the example of Cajun identity. He notes that French settlers evicted from British Canada carried with them “a collective identity rooted in the trauma of expulsion.” In the same way the trauma of expulsion left its mark on the Cajun identity, the trauma of migrating to a wilderness and the hardship and poverty that the early settlers of Holmes County encountered forged their identity as a frontier community, uniting the community and separating it from other parts of the South. This frontier identity is at odds with the “Lost Cause” image of Vicksburg or Natchez, places where the past is often nostalgically romanticized as a once prosperous South of mansions and gentility. Although gentility and manners exist in Holmes County, its genealogy of identity does not descend from the same family tree. In Holmes County, more refined markers of identity have been pushed aside in favor of such qualities as self-reliance and honest talk. Hard times and deprivation are actually looked upon fondly by many in the community, as is evident in the oral histories collected in the Wells book. Many of the older people I interviewed also describe growing up in Holmes County in the same manner. Gladys Keith described her youth in the county by saying, “Everybody was poor, but everyone seemed happy.”

Holmes County resident Ralph Harris described his childhood in the following way:

You got up before school and went to the field, and worked. Then you washed off and went to school. After school, you got a biscuit and some meat and went back to the field... We hunted and fished for our food, and everyone thought we were well off. We didn't know any different.

In “Gone are the Simple Things,” the last chapter of *Holmesteading*, Carswell writes:

Some students of sociology contend that the ‘good old days’ were actually harsh difficult days. They say sentimentalists have romanticized the past, forgetting, like old soldiers, that which is repelling or unpleasant. If that’s true, I’m glad. It is only the pleasantly meaningful things that are worth reliving in memory (Carswell 345).

Things that outsiders may regard as backward or unimportant may nevertheless be central to the identity and historical story of a specific community. Brundage calls this process “a social history of remembering (Brundage, *Memories* 3).”

Written and oral histories are not the only way for a community to construct its history or its memory. According to Brundage “Remembering, consequently becomes implicated in a range of activities that have as much to do with identity, power, authority, cultural norms, and social interaction as with the simple act of conserving and recalling memory.” (Brundage 4) Holmes County plays host to several annual or semiannual events that celebrate the history of the area. These events include the dedication of a Florida frontier cabin as a national landmark, a Native American event called “Drums along the Choctawhatchee,” and a Confederate re-enactment ceremony.

Other, non-historical events also have implications for the community memory. These include the annual North West Florida Championship Rodeo (including two days of parades), an all night gospel sing, and the Holmes County Fair, livestock and car show. Other events, like the commonly observed family fish-fry, hold implicit meaning: even the food eaten at such an event holds historical value since fish-frys have taken place in the community for generations.

The celebrations, dedications, and re-enactments contribute to the process through which the community upholds its traditions and champions its heritage. These events, from the cabin dedication to the fish-fry, help the community remember its past and create a community identity as distinct and powerful as that provided by written history—possibly more so. As Celeste Ray states in *Highland Heritage: Scottish Americans in the American South*, “Heritage and ethnic celebrations are exercises in remembering that remind people to consciously stand together as a group apart” (Ray, Introduction).

These events in Holmes County celebrate self-reliance and frontier identity in a place where outsiders might see little to celebrate. The cabin dedication honors the hard work and courage of the early settlers. The wilderness and sacred nature of the land is implicit in the Native American event. The North West Florida Championship Rodeo celebrates the agricultural and frontier elements of the community with its parades of residents on horse-back and in horse-drawn wagons. The all-night gospel sing celebrates the community’s commitment to the Christian faith. These events serve to remind the community of the importance of hard work, Christian values, and the unique beauty of the local landscape.

Communities often select things from their past that champion their ideals. As Ray states in *Highland Heritage*, “The tradition and perspectives of the past that we select and celebrate as heritage are those that have a moral, instructive, emotional, or intellectual appeal and those we therefore find good to remember” (Ray, Introduction).

The cultural events of Holmes County provide a backbone of identity for the community. This identity is important both for setting the community apart from the rest

of the country and for connecting it with the self-sufficient image of the pioneers and frontier settlers. At times when the nation and the community are facing rapid change in culture, identity, and economic shifts, heritage celebrations are often seen as protecting the community from the social disruption and unease associated with change, by shedding light on the struggles of the past and unifying the citizenry under the umbrella of shared history.

Written history cannot provide the same degree of protection as memory and ritual. As Rodgers Lyle Brown explains in, *Ghost Dancing on the Cracker Circuit: the Culture of Festivals in the American South*, “Whereas ‘history’ is a representation of the past, memory and remembering are the actual phenomenon at work in the everyday world, and they are the combination of the individual and social circumstances” (Brown XV).

Certainly the county has had its share of change over the years. Holmes County was once a booming logging area which contained valuable, long-leaf yellow pine. Communities such as Hagarman, Aycok, Aberdeen, and Longpine sprouted up during the boom and quickly disappeared when the yellow pine was exhausted. Naval stores that once sold turpentine for use in ship building came and went with the trees. When the trees were gone and the sap to make the turpentine with it, so were the jobs. Where there had once been so much work that laborers were shipped in from outside the county, farming became the only real way to make a living. In the 1950s and early 1960s, many young people left the county for college or work in cities such as Atlanta, Birmingham, Pensacola and central and southern Florida (Carswell 142).

Although some former residents come back to Holmes County in their retirement years, the exodus of young people and lack of employment opportunity has the effect of

dispersing the community, causing an identity crisis. The population that remains in the area was left to support itself with images of the resilient pioneer (Carswell 28).

In times of cultural crisis, societies often turn to the past for support. The “presumed values” of a society’s ancestors become a resource for revitalization and strength (Ray 10). The “underlying impulse” for many cultural events and dedications is an attempt to keep the community alive by keeping the continuity of the community story intact (Brown XIX).

Although the written histories provided by historians and other academics are important in constructing community identities, such accounts are rarely the impulse for the manufacturing of new community events and rituals. In Holmes County, for example, members of the community formed a “society” to have the Keith Cabin recognized as a National Historic Landmark. This coming together of people in the community and their collecting of historical data is an example of how community history works. It is “not simply the articulation of some shared subconscious, but rather the product of intentional creation” (Brundage, *Southern Past* 4).

Such recognition is important in legitimizing the historic space both for those within and outside the community. In legitimizing the space itself, the community legitimizes--and thereby establishes the meaningfulness and truthfulness of--the events that take place there, along with the symbols and stories on which those events are based. For the people of Holmes County the legitimacy of the Keith Cabin is based on the external recognition provided by the Nation Historic Landmark status and the powerful connection of community members to the space and the land on which it is built. The ground itself

bears the mark of legitimacy. “Physical space” according to Brundage “is central to southern historical memory and identity” (Brundage, *Southern Past* 6).

The frontier identity of Holmes County has become rooted in a specific place, the Keith Cabin, in the same manner that Civil War battlefields or historic antebellum mansions embody the identities of other regions. The legitimizing of a space allows that space to become a platform for collective memory, political debate, family reunion, and the re-enactment of historical events. The legitimacy of the place gives credence to the community story. The legitimacy of the place legitimizes the story (Brundage, *Southern Past*, 6).

The Keith Cabin has become a venue for cultural events, endowing the events held there with an officially legitimized site. Part of the process of a place becoming a National Historical Landmark involves the owner of the land turning the property over to the public. This represents a sacrificial act on the part of the owner. The ground now belongs to the public, which establishes there a temple of remembrance in the form of the historical site. Through this process, both the historical site and the ground itself become sacred. The cabin becomes a sanctified stage for retelling history. Events that occur there take on a religious nature akin to a pilgrimage or to borrow a term from Gwen Kennedy Neville’s article, “Kin-Religious Gathering,” a “folk-liturgy.” According to Neville, the events that take place on the consecrated ground have

a larger social purpose beyond reconnecting with kinfolk. The gatherings are enactments and displays of heritage, a vehicle for retelling a story of an envisioned past, and a means of preserving and transmitting that story to future generations. In other words, they form a display for an ‘inner public’ of kin and

co-believers, a ‘metasocial commentary’ a ‘processional metaphor’ that speaks as loudly as any staged performance to a people about their past and to scholars about the structure and meaning of culture itself (Neville, Ray, ed. 132).

The Keith Cabin is a place for public celebration, for historical remembrance, and family gatherings that point to its frontier heritage. The Keith Cabin dedication and various “pioneer days,” along with the “Drums along the Choctawhatchee” Native American event, are community events that directly celebrate Holmes County and its frontier past. Other events, such as the family fish-fry, where, according to community member Reba Sconiers, “anybody can drop by,” also champion the frontier past by continuing an event that has occurred since the founding of the cabin. The traditional preparation of Choctawhatchee fish, an important staple of the Holmes County diet, celebrates the survival of the community. The annual North West Florida Championship Rodeo, which takes place in Bonifay, with its two day parade filled with horse-drawn wagons and groups of riders, displays images of Holmes County’s frontier past.

In 1893, Fredrick Jackson Turner wrote the essay entitled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” In this essay he espoused the importance of the frontier in shaping the American character and identity. By studying and participating in certain cultural events in Holmes County, I propose to follow Turner’s lead by asking the question, “What is the significance of the frontier in Holmes County, Florida?”

Since Turner’s view of the frontiersman has been the dominant image throughout our culture, including those portrayed in history books, political rhetoric, film and western novels, as well as the Holmes County community itself. Because of this it is important to briefly examine Turner’s work and its impact and importance in defining the frontier and

the image of the people that inhabited that frontier. The purpose of my paper is not to prove any theory, make any claims on the true nature of the frontier, or argue that the frontier ended at any specific time. Instead, I intend to discuss how and why Holmes County uses the frontier image in its cultural and heritage celebrations, and to identify frontier symbolism in these celebrations.

It will be of interest to note how the changing historical views of the frontier relate to Holmes County's view of itself as a frontier, what values the community applies to that image, and how the self-image of the community changes over time. For instance, the inclusion of Native American events and the acceptance of the Native American role in the community may have been less evident or welcome in the past. This study will also show that the frontier identity is not only a key element in the myth of the West, but also a key component for the mythic South.

Turner's "frontier thesis" maintained that the fundamental character of American democracy and character of its people was a direct result of "the existence of an area of free land, and its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward." This character was evident in the people who sought out and tamed the frontier land. Turner described these as "these slashers of the forest, these self-sufficing pioneers, raising corn and live stock for their own need" (Faragher 7, 9).

Turner's thesis became the dominant historical theory for many years, "the one learned in school, extolled by politicians, and screened each Saturday afternoon at the Bijou" (Faragher 230). Theodore Roosevelt championed the thesis, which he credited with putting into words ideas that had been "floating around rather loosely" at the time. Just as Wild Bill Cody's Wild West show presented a re-enactment of western expansion,

Turner's "frontier thesis" encapsulated the frontier story, making it a useable image for the general public (Faragher 230). The free land offered the American citizen the opportunity to spread democracy and civilize the wild, savage part of America. This was America's "Manifest Destiny."

Turner described the conflict as being a battle of "savagery and civilization." This battle represents the essential conflict depicted in Hollywood westerns since the silent era. Holmes County was an area of conflict when the Florida Homestead Act was passed and when Tom Keith and many others homesteaded the area in the 1880s. Although many of the native conflicts were events of the past in 1864, the area was still rife with many challenges that demanded what Turner called the "individualistic" character of the pioneer (Faragher 230).

The importance of the fighting image of the western movie cowboy is the cultural memory of the pioneer as seen through Turner's eyes. This image has been used to justify violence and champion American expansion by political leaders from Theodore Roosevelt to George W. Bush. These images are also evident in Holmes County cultural events, specifically the parades of the North West Florida Championship Rodeo. These will be noted in detail when the event is described in a later chapter.

As we saw in Brundage's work, communities in stress and change often look to perceived past images for strength. After the turn of the century and the end of the frontier, the country faced a struggling economy and troubles abroad. Turner lamented the end of the frontier and called for a return to frontier ideals that had served the country so well in the frontier past. In his essay "Middle Western Pioneer Democracy" he called for

a revival of the old pioneer conceptions of obligation and opportunities of neighborliness...In the spirit of the pioneer's 'house raising' lies the salvation of the Republic." Communities and congressmen, even today, still call for a return to these frontier values. Holmes County does this by holding cultural events espousing these values (Faragher 231).

Although Turner's essay is still regarded as one of the most important in American history, many new ideas and theories have emerged in the historiography of the American frontier. Modern historians increasingly call for a more nuanced view of the frontier, taking into account environmental, racial and ethnic aspects involved in the frontier story. These historians decry Turner's thesis as hopelessly simple and outdated. Despite these criticisms, Turner's is still the prevailing view of many "average" Americans. The image of the "self-sufficing pioneer" championed by Turner is still a potent one for these Americans. Those who fear the "new frontiers" of technology and a shrinking world that our nation now faces long for the individualistic ideas of the past just as Turner himself did. While historians argue over what is the true nature of the frontier, many communities continue to look to Turner's image of the frontier for strength in difficult times.

For my project I attended four cultural events in Holmes County, Florida: the dedication of the newly restored homesteading cabin of Tom Keith, "Drums along the Choctawhatchee", an event held at the Keith Cabin, staged by the Perdido Bay Tribe of the Lower Muscogee Creek Indians, celebrating the Creek heritage of the area; the North West Florida Championship Rodeo; and a fish fry held by a local family at the Keith Cabin. These events are all rife with meaning and memory.

I will devote a chapter to each event, giving a detailed description of the event, noting the images displayed, the history behind the event itself, a brief history of the people and time period the event purports to celebrate, along with relevant analysis of the event as a whole. I conducted interviews with people involved with the organizing of these events as well as with people familiar with the history of the event. Many of these interviews will be included in the pertinent chapter.

II. KEITH CABIN DEDICATION

The historical marker that stands in front of the Keith Cabin begins with these words:

In 1880, William Thomas Keith (1856-1949) homesteaded ten acres upon which this house stands. In 1886 he filed a homestead entry with the U.S. Public Land Office and in the fall of that year this cabin became home for himself, his wife, mother, and eight children.

On Saturday, December 19, 2009, I attended an event celebrating the completion of a renovation of the Keith Cabin. Though the work of many in the community, the Keith Cabin Foundation held a dedication ceremony on November 2, 2002 celebrating the cabin's entrance into the register of National Historic Place. After the initial dedication, the Foundation oversaw the cabin's complete renovation.

I have a personal connection to Holmes County and the Keith Cabin. My grandfather, James Vernon Keith, was born and raised in Holmes County, just a few miles south of the Keith Cabin in the community of Izagora. William Thomas Keith was his great uncle. After his marriage and the birth of his son Kenneth, my grandfather moved to Pensacola, a few hours west, to work in the naval yard as an electrician. He always maintained close ties to his home community and took his family, including my father, to visit his remaining family in Holmes County many times. I never visited there, however, until a few years prior to the Keith Cabin dedication. After meeting a few distant relatives, I

became interested in the people and the history of Holmes County. I developed a particular interest in what places and events the community chose to celebrate in hopes of finding my own connection to Holmes County.

As a child my father told me with a certain amount of pride that I was a seventh generation Floridian. This fact, I learned, made me a rare species. I grew up, in contrast, among the residents of a more “stereotypical” beach culture around Pensacola, Gulf Breeze, and Pensacola Beach. At the time, I regarded this beach culture as superficial and manufactured (although a real analysis of that culture could be a comprehensive thesis in its own right), and I was excited to find an area of Florida with hardly any relation to the beach culture. Holmes County was the place where the first generation of my family settled. I thought by understanding the heritage that was celebrated in Holmes County I could understand more of my own history and own identity.

My father now lives in DeFuniak Springs, in Walton County, Florida, which borders Holmes County to the west. On December 19, 2009, I drove to the Keith Cabin from his place, first taking Highway 2 east across the top of Holmes County and then, after crossing the Choctawhatchee River turning right on 179. The Keith Cabin is located about a quarter of a mile from Highway 2 in the East Pittman community. It was a clear, cool December Saturday, a beautiful day for the celebration.

The cabin sits about 100 feet off the road. Its front door faces east. A large live oak stands in the otherwise grassy front yard. About halfway from the road to the house is the historical marker. Beside it stands a Confederate marker, placed there by the local chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy, commemorating Tom Keith’s service in the Florida Home Guard. The Guard protected the community when the men were away

fighting; its members were often boys too young to fight. The stone is similar to the plain white Confederate grave markers found in cemeteries across the south. As I walked up to the cabin, members of the Holmes County High School Jazz Band were setting up under the big oak tree. There was a drummer, bass player, guitarist, and a few horn players. Most of the musicians wore blue and yellow letter jackets. A young girl in a leopard print jacket stood reading the historical marker. A few people milled around the cabin, making things ready for the ribbon-cutting ceremony set to take place in the early afternoon.

I walked around the edge of the yard to the fence that holds cattle in a small field. A small herd of cows roamed inside the fence. A few more giant oaks provided a canopy of shade, and Spanish moss hung from the limbs. It seemed to me that I could still observe the landscape as it looked in the days of William Tom Keith.

In *The Heritage of Holmes County, Florida*, Nannette Sconiers-Pupalaikis describes the type of person that settled the area:

During the mid-1800s few families dared to venture into the untamed world of the Florida Panhandle-most of these early pioneers were rugged and self-reliant. One such person was Tom Keith, who was born in the winter of 1856 to his namesake William Thomas and Nancy (Boutwell) Keith.

Her description of her great grandfather as “rugged and self-reliant” matches the description of the early settlers celebrated by Fredrick Jackson Turner. What Turner called “these slashers of the forest”, she describes as those who “those who dared to venture into the untamed world.” In the same way that Turner called for the celebration

of the frontier people, the community has found in Tom Keith what Brundage calls a “useable past” to celebrate (Brundage, *Memories* 3).

There are still people in the community who were born, raised and still live on properties homesteaded by their great grandparents. Junior Sconiers, Tom Keith’s grandson, was born and raised in the Keith Cabin. He begins his oral history in this way:

My name is Junior Howard Sconiers. I am one of the many grandchildren of William Thomas Keith. I was born in the log cabin that he built and I lived with him from about my eleventh year until his death. Some of my earliest memories are of him, Grandma Willie, and their farm.

Junior built a house next door to the cabin and lived there until he died in 2009 in his late seventies. Many other people in the community, such as Gladys Keith, grew up and still live on land homesteaded by their grandparents or great grandparents. The Homestead Act of 1862 gave rise to the feeling of God-given rights to the land and reinforced the concept of Manifest Destiny for many early settlers in the region. As a necessary condition for this “God-given” right the homesteader was required to build a house and make improvements on the land in the first five years of the process. This meant that the God-given right was only bestowed on those willing to work and struggle to build something. It was not something given out to squatters. Tom Keith and his cabin become a symbol for hard work and the earning of God’s gifts. For these people the land is a sacred place, almost God given.

For many people in Holmes County, as well as many other parts of the nation, the virtue of hard work and the act of clearing God-given land epitomize what I referred to in the introduction as the backbone of identity. The celebration of the Cabin is a celebration

of that identity, a manifestation and monument to the memories of the people who lived and worked in the community.

The historical marker goes on to say:

It became the focus of a cotton and tobacco farm that eventually grew to more than 190 acres.

While 190 acres may not be considered a large farm by today's standards, people of the community regard the clearing and cultivation of this land as a substantial achievement, and an example of hard work and God's blessings paying off. Today, this payoff seems harder and harder to realize for many residents of rural communities, where small farms rarely make enough profit to support a family. Small farmers increasingly turn to other forms of employment, and remembering and celebrating the resilience of the past becomes more and more important for those struggling to get by in this new and unfamiliar setting.

The inability of community members to provide a living for themselves and their families is an example of the community in crisis discussed in Brown's *Ghost Dancing on the Cracker Circuit*. For the community in crisis, the celebration of the Keith Cabin becomes a ritual remembrance and an emotional support system.

The historical marker further explains:

By 1893, improvements included a plaza, smokehouse, corn crib, enclosed shed rooms, and a well. The Keith Cabin was originally built as a one room, "Louisiana Roof"-style log structure with a wraparound porch, a fireplace, and a separate kitchen. This style of architecture is a rare form of 19th Century construction found in the Gulf States from East Texas to the Florida Panhandle. It

is characterized by front and rear porches formed by logs that extend beyond the main block of the house at each gable to support the broad roof overhang.

The event that I attended that Saturday in December was a celebration and ribbon-cutting for the newly completed restoration of the cabin. The restoration is the work of local craftsman Billy Harris. Mr. Harris meticulously restored the cabin to the original specification. He spent many hours trudging through the swamps searching for the best and most appropriate timber for use in the cabin. After the ceremony, Sconiers-Pupalikis overheard Mr. Harris explaining to a visitor:

I finally had to marry the girl [the Cabin]. She takes all my time and won't let me sleep or fish the river. Worse still, I had to tangle with the iron will of Tom Keith.

Sometimes I felt like I had to wrestle with the man himself (Sconiers-Pupalikis 1).

Until the late 1970's, the cabin was still being used as a residence, but it had fallen into some disrepair since that time. The original roof had been replaced with a tin-roof in the late 1930's or 1940's. The original roof had to be recreated by hand making wooden shingles, over 10,000 in all. In effect, the cabin had to be entirely rebuilt. This process became a reenacting of history, and the celebration and ribbon-cutting became a confirmation of history and a rededication of the work ethic that made the first building of the cabin possible (Sconiers-Pupalikis 1).

The restoration of the cabin in the same manner and style provides the structure with legitimacy, and also plays an important role in giving credence to the celebration, and a sense of accomplishment for the whole community. When people of the community visit the site, instead of simply seeing an old pile of wood with a rusty tin roof, they witness a reconstructed memory. For many residents, the rebuilding of the Cabin

symbolizes the rebuilding of the community as a whole. This illustrates Neville's idea of the "kin-religious gathering." The sacred land houses a temple to the past, and like the rebuilding of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the cabin can be a sign of rebirth. It can come to symbolize the resurrection of lost community values and ideals, and a monument to the past, reminding the community of ideals of hard work and family (Neville 234).

The ribbon-cutting ceremony began in the early afternoon. A giant crimson ribbon with a large bow stretched across the front porch. The dignitaries assembled on the porch for the ribbon cutting were Don Sales, Vice President of the Panhandle Historical Preservation Alliance who would act as Master of Ceremonies; two area Junior Miss winners, complete with crowns and sashes; Norma Jean Ward, a Keith Cabin Foundation member who lives next door and actually grew up in the Cabin; George Keith, my father, the great-grand nephew of Tom Keith and sometimes Keith Cabin Foundation genealogist; James C. Keith, President of the National Clan Keith Society; Bill Harris, and Eugene Mancill, who also helped with the restoration. The first speaker was Judge Owen Powell who complimented the Keith Cabin Foundation on a job well done. Then James C. Keith of the Clan Keith made a brief presentation connecting the pioneering spirit of Tom Keith with the heroism of his Scottish ancestors. The actual cutting of the ribbon was done by Bill Harris.

Other guests included Holmes County Commissioner Jim King and Chief Bobby Johns Bearheart of the Perdido Bay Tribe of Southeastern Lower Muscogee Creek. Chief Bearheart has been a supporter of the renovation and has attended many events at the

Cabin, including one held annually by the tribe which celebrates the native heritage and seeks to educate the population about the history of the Creeks in Holmes County.

While the ribbon-cutting event served as the “grand opening” of the remodeled Cabin, the site was added to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places on November 2, 2002, after several attempts to receive the designation and the grant money that goes with it. The money was necessary to pay for the future restoration.

The process of being added to the National Register of Historic Places required much research and several appearances before officials in Tallahassee. Many people contributed to the research and the paper work, but the major responsibilities were handled by Rob and Nannette Pupalikis. Reba Sconiers, Nannette’s mother and wife of the late Junior Sconiers, herself once a resident of the cabin, describes how the initial process worked:

We started getting a grant. I went down with Rob and Nannette to Tallahassee.

We started calling people before that. Rob and Nannette started calling people and working with it; they really worked. They went to Tallahassee and didn’t get the grant. We all went down there, lots of us. But the next year he [Rob] went. He flew home and went to Tallahassee, and stayed there for the meeting, and then he had to go back to work the next day, but he got the grant. He did so much detailed paper work, searching and searching to have the paper work filled out right. And he went and made a speech.

Here, Ms. Sconiers describes a typical example of the arduous, incremental process communities have to go through to create their own identities. The Keith Cabin is not a site discovered by academics or historians, but a place celebrated and championed by

members of the community, some of whom lived in the space itself. It was through the work of these local people, not the historians, that the project came to fruition. This process is an example of the community telling its own history. A fact sheet provided by the Keith Cabin Foundation under the title “Education and Advocacy” states that the cabin:

Will serve as an effective tool for augmenting and energizing traditional classroom instruction-the Foundation, in conjunction with the Holmes County Board of Education, is developing a lesson plan for incorporating into Teaching with Historic Places (TwHP) administered by the National Parks Service, enabling students to explore the relationship of their own community’s history with the broader themes that have shaped Florida.

The legitimacy provided by governmental institutions is crucial for local historic sites like the Keith Cabin, both for establishing strong emotional bonds with the community and for including historical accounts of the site in educational programs such as the Teaching with Historic Places program. Funding and use of public programs is also linked with legitimacy, along with public disagreements regarding how a community’s history is celebrated and conceived (or misconceived). Public debate over the funding for Confederate statues or the importance of sites in the story of the civil rights movement are recent examples of how different features of a community’s history have been argued in the public forum in the hopes of legitimizing a site, often so that funding can be provided for restoration and use in educating the community. Although the Keith Cabin seems to have had no community opposition, it was still necessary to make the case for legitimacy to the proper authorities to insure its funding and marking by the government.

Once the legitimacy of the site was established, it was necessary to have an administrative body to oversee the restoration and provide goals and leadership for the site. That is where the Keith Cabin Foundation comes into the story. According to a foundation fact sheet:

The Keith Cabin Foundation, Inc. (KCF) is a 501© 3 not-for-profit organization established in 2004 by a group of committed local volunteers to promote and encourage historical preservation and public interest in local and state history.

The Foundation is a member of the Florida Historical Society and the Panhandle Historic Preservation Alliance. The KCF along with the Holmes County Historic Society is Holmes County’s historic preservation organization (KCF fact sheet).

Within the economic crisis that Holmes County is currently facing, historic preservation is a “powerful economic development...tool.” The preservation of the Keith Cabin creates:

attractive places to live and work; promotes cultural heritage tourism by strengthening local economies; enhances education; and promotes community pride. Historic places remind a community from where it came-what previous generations achieved, what they believed in and what they hoped to be (KCF fact sheet).

The Keith Cabin is a reminder of where the community came from and what kind of person the community chooses to celebrate. The final piece of the historical marker describes Tom Keith in this way:

Keith served with the Home Guard and was a skilled farmer, lumberjack, mail carrier, store merchant, and medical practitioner. His life and home are excellent

examples of the rural lifestyle of early Holmes County and Northwest Florida.

Tom Keith is the perfect example of Turner's "self-sufficing pioneer, raising the corn and livestock sufficient for his own need" (Faragher 9). Tom Keith's struggle and hardship, as well as his ability to do all the jobs necessary to homestead, are championed by the historians of Holmes County. The obvious play on words in the title of E.W. Carswell's book on Holmes County, *Holmesteading*, represents a typical tribute to Keith and other Holmes County settlers.

Tom Keith and his older brother, George Washington Keith, served in the Florida Home Guard during the Civil War. This unit, made up of children and the elderly, had the job of protecting the community from rogue bandits and deserters who might seek to terrorize the community whose able bodied men where away with the regular Confederate Army. In 1949, the Keith brothers were featured in *Life* magazine as the oldest living Confederate brothers (Hoar 32).

Although Tom Keith is not buried at the Cabin, a small white Confederate marker stands on the grounds in front of the house to commemorate his life and service. Although this Confederate reminder is present and Tom's military service was mentioned at the dedication there were no other overtly Confederate images present at the event. Emphasis was placed instead on the frontier aspect of the Cabin and the life of Tom Keith. This is possibly due to the fact that the Cabin was built after the Civil War and that no major battles took place in Holmes County. It might also be the result of the Keith Cabin Foundation's decision to focus the message and the celebration on the pioneering aspects of Tom Keith's life. In any case, the fact that the focus remains on the

frontier nature of the Cabin shows that those values are the ones that serve as the backbone of the community.

After the ribbon cutting, a bluegrass band, Blue Shades of Grass, featuring “world-class dobroist” Jackie Hill, performed on the Cabin porch. Johnny Lipland, who accompanied the representatives from the Perdido Bay Tribe, gave a short performance with his hand-made Native American flutes. Chief Bearheart and members of his tribe played an ancient drum and danced on the front lawn. The tribe also provided a booth displaying native artifacts and their Native Pathways Mobile Museum. George Keith, my dad, set up a table filled with books and charts providing information on the Keith’s heritage in Scotland, which many visitors, including Chief Bearheart, perused with interest. At the end of the day there was a special appearance by Santa Claus. He perched in a rocking chair on the porch and many local children sat on his lap and told him their Christmas wishes. Although the crowds were far from overwhelming, the several hundred people who came throughout the day represented a good turnout from the community.

The Keith Cabin has always been a focal point of the community. The land near the Cabin once contained a general store run by Tom Keith. The Cabin also housed one of the community’s first radios. As Junior Sconiers remembers:

My finest memories are of Saturday nights. Men from all over the community loaded their wives and kids into oxen carts and wagons drawn by mules. They came from miles because Grandpa Keith owned the first Sears & Roebuck radios in this part of the country. So on Saturday evenings he’d sit on the porch, turn it up loud and we would listen to the Grand Ole Opry. The children would play late

and when they got tired, their Ma's would wrap them in a blanket and lay them down to sleep in their wagons. Women brought baskets of food and Grandma always had a big spread prepared. Men would sit around talking about farming, politics, and many interesting happenings in the country. People admired my Grandpa Keith and it was obvious to me at these gatherings.

The Keith Cabin event celebrates the heritage of the Florida frontier and the lives of men like Tom Keith. The Cabin serves as a venue for memory in the community. Since the Cabin has served this function for many years, it possesses a legitimacy and a sacredness that serves the community in its historical remembrances. The repetition of activity, especially historical memory and family reunion, creates a sacred space like that of a community temple to memory and identity. Every event reinforces the historical importance of the Keith Cabin.

Other events, such as the family fish fry, not only help to commemorate the lifestyle and memory of the early settlers but also become historical reenactments of past community gatherings. The simple act of frying fish with other people from the community becomes an act of historical reenactment.

As the participants in the day's events began to pack up their things and a beautiful sunset fell over the Cabin, I thought about all the effort that had gone into making this day possible. From the time spent achieving the site's recognition as a National Historic Place, to the work of the Keith Cabin Foundation in raising funds and making future plans for the site, to the actual physical labor of the craftsmen Billy Harris and Eugene Mancill who rebuilt the Cabin, many people came together to create a monument to the people who settled Holmes County. This is an example of people building community

memory. In times of community struggle and suffering, this creation becomes an important process to keep alive a useable history. The resilience of people like Tom Keith becomes the backbone of identity for the people of Holmes County.

I drove away from the Cabin, returning to my father's house, thinking about the history of Holmes County and the unique frontier history of the Panhandle of Florida.

As I crossed the Choctawhatchee River at sunset and looked at the river, I did not see the events of the day as the last vestige of a community in crisis, or as a hopeless "Ghost Dance" of a fading culture but as a community coming together to save what memories it could and provide a space for future revival.

III. DRUMS ALONG THE CHOCTAWHATCHEE

“Drums along the Choctawhatchee” is an annual event put on by the Perdido Bay Tribe of the Lower Muskogee Creeks led by Chief Bobby Johns Bearheart, and held at the Keith Cabin. I attended the third annual event on a clear, warm Saturday in late October 2010. Chief Bearheart and other members of the Tribe arrived in several cars and also brought their Native Pathways Mobile Museum. Volunteers set up lawn chairs under the big oak tree, and people placed homemade cakes on a nearby table for an auction to help raise money for the Keith Cabin Foundation. On the cabin porch, someone tested the P.A. system to be used both for announcements and for a concert by a Native American flautist later in the day.

As I walked around the grounds of the Keith Cabin, I saw many familiar faces--people I had seen at other events held at the Cabin. I saw Reba Sconiers and two of her sons, David and Dale, along with Norma Jean Ward, and several other faces I could not put a name to. The event took place about ten months after the Keith Cabin ribbon-cutting ceremony I attended in December 2009. The same concession stand operated at the back of the Cabin in approximately the same place where Tom Keith had built the kitchen, which was always kept separate from the homestead cabins in case of fire. Some tribal members set up a table of artifacts and a work area where they could work flint into

arrow and axe heads using essentially the same techniques that were used by their Creek ancestors from Holmes County.

After the P.A. test was completed, people gathered around the front of the Cabin and the opening ceremonies began. The Mayor of Pitman gave a quick introduction explaining that the purpose of the event was to celebrate a shared history and a past where Native Americans and frontier settlers worked together to live and thrive in Holmes County. He then introduced a member of the Tribe who reiterated the Mayor's statements, before leading the gathering in a prayer and a moment of silence for our servicemen abroad. He then directed everyone's attention to a circle of Tribes people gathered around a big native drum located on the side of the Cabin by the cake table. The members of the drum circle performed a native drum prayer for a sick Native American leader, which was also being performed at that exact moment by other tribal groups all over the country. This demonstrated the connectedness of the Perdido Bay Tribe to the rest of the Native American community across the country and provided attendees at the event with a rare chance to experience a possible remnant of the famous Ghost Dances of the late nineteenth century.

The event seemed to bring together two groups of people. As Chief Bearheart told me:

As you see here today, this is not a Pow Wow at all. This is not that type of event. This is like a family reunion. You've got all people who want to come are invited to come, and the people that came today are to support the Foundation, the Keith Cabin Foundation, and that is a very important thing.

The Creeks have a long history in Holmes County. The Creeks migrated to what is now the southeastern United States from the west, the disparate tribes coming together to form a Confederation to protect similar interests and for trading purposes. The Confederation was made up of Creek villages and was led by a chief from each village. The villages were organized almost like town squares with large areas in the center set apart for tribal games and religious practices (www.perdidobaytribe.org, April 12, 2011).

Although the Creek area was expansive, many of the Creek villages were clustered around the river valleys of the Alabama, Chattahoochee, and (in Holmes County) the Choctawhatchee (Ethridge 91). The site on which the Keith Cabin was built was important for the original inhabitants since it rests in the river valley of the Choctawhatchee. According to Chief Bearheart:

The river was very beneficial as far as a food source and as far as transportation, and of course the woodlands around here provided a lot of game that fed the people. It was a great place to be and Native people have been around this part of the country for many hundreds of years.

The Creeks aligned themselves with the British in the War of 1812 in hopes of combating the continued land expansion of the United States into Creek territory. After the British defeat, the Creek Confederacy was broken up, and finally, after several broken treaties, the American government removed the Creeks to territories in the West (Perdido Bay Tribe.org).

Although the Creek tribal way of life virtually ended with the removal, certain Native Creek folkways were kept alive by a small number of Creeks who refused to leave their sacred homelands. Those who stayed behind were forced into the swamps or assimilated

into the white world. Many of the native Creeks were tolerated because of their knowledge and skill in working timber and collecting turpentine, a valuable resource extracted from the area long-leaf pine. According to Chief Bearheart, times were tough for Native people:

I was born and raised in the Okephenokee swamp area of South Georgia. It was a group of Native peoples, descendants of the Muskogee Creeks, that was able to live in the swamp areas there. It was one of those periods “out of sight, out of mind.” It was not a healthy thing to be a Muskogee back in those days. So by working in the turpentine industry in the swamp. We were about the only people who could work down there and knew the swamp; so we were beneficial to the landowner. So he took pretty good care of us.

Even in an environment of open hostility toward Native Americans in the southeastern United States, the surviving Creeks were able to pass on their traditions and folkways in the old way. Chief Bearheart explains:

It was a learning period for me. I was honored to learn from my mother’s oldest brother, which is our system. He was my clan uncle that taught me the ways of our ancient peoples and bringing it up to modern times, which was in the thirties at that time.

After the prayer for the national Native American leader, a group of local politicians spoke to the crowd about the upcoming elections, explained who they were and what office they were running for and urging community member to turn out to vote. The Keith Cabin and the Native American event served as a proper public forum for political

debate, illustrating Brundage's observation that public historical place serve "as tangible, physical context for political debate and social action" (Brundage, *Southern Past* 6).

The Keith Cabin Foundation held an auction to raise money. They auctioned various home-made cakes, some going for more than \$100. The tribe also auctioned off some native goods, including a hand-made dream catcher. Although this is only the third specific event put on by Chief Bearheart and the tribe, they have supported the Cabin and appeared at other "pioneer day" events in the past. Chief Bearheart says that he relishes the opportunity to help the Keith Cabin Foundation and is thankful for the space to hold his event at the Cabin:

It does take funds to create something that all the people can be proud of and enjoy and that makes it nice to be a part of it. We can do something for it, and at the same time, it's bringing to our people, too. Pride's a special thing.

After the auction, the Keith Cabin Foundation presented the Chief with a portrait, painted by a local artist, showing him surrounded by native symbols. The Foundation gave the gift in appreciation for the tribe's support of the Cabin and the Foundation.

For Chief Bearheart, the "Drums along the Choctawhatchee" event celebrates the cooperation of two important cultures from the same community. For him, the event harkens back to a time when settlers and Native people worked together to find ways to live in a sometimes harsh and untamed land. It represents a created memory that identifies an important melding of cultures. Instead of focusing on the times when Native people were to be "out of sight, out of mind"-- when it was not safe to be in the public

eye-- the event seeks to celebrate the interdependence of two cultures once at odds. Chief Bearheart is enthusiastic in his appreciation of the event:

Now this Keith Cabin has been a stimulus to recreate important history of a time when the settlers and the Indians really were working harmoniously together and were learning from each other. We learned from them; they learned from us. That's what this represents for me. Since this is such a long period of history that existed here, Keith Cabin, it's quite an honor to be a part of what it really means.

For Chief Bearheart, the event celebrates a shared past of people working together, not the repression and removal of Indians from their lands. This is an example of communities choosing which part of their history to celebrate and what to forget.

The fact that the Keith Cabin is a National Historic Place lends legitimacy to the event, Chief Bearheart observes, as does the fact that Tom Keith married Clyde Keith, a Creek Indian.

This is the third year since the Cabin has really become recognized in Washington as an historic destination, as you probably know, it's the oldest cabin on its original location in Florida. It's amazing. The fact that Mr. Keith married a Creek Indian woman has made it ours, too. So we are honored to be invited.

These two facts serve to legitimize the event. The recognition by the federal government gives the site itself legitimacy, while the fact that Mr. Keith married a Creek woman provides a legitimate bloodline connection to a sacred place. This process works both ways. Just as the Homestead Act, the act of clearing the land, and the belief in Manifest

Destiny provide the Keith Cabin and the people of Holmes County, a sense of sacredness (i.e., a shared conviction of the meaning, truthfulness and historical relevance of the site), the fact that Mr. Keith married a Creek woman imbues the Keith Cabin and its land--and the event itself--with a sacred spirit.

Marriage between settlers and Native people was nothing new in Tom and Clyde Keith's time. In fact it was not uncommon for early white settlers to take Creek wives. One early example of this type of intermarriage was Alexander McGillory, "the son of a Creek woman from the prestigious Wind Clan and a well-to-do Scottish trader." McGillory became a powerful Creek leader in the late eighteenth century (Ethridge, 11). The remnants of these intermarriages still remain today, not only in the family of Tom and Clyde Keith but in other families in the area, many that still participate in the area tribal affairs. Says Chief Bearheart:

This is an area very associated with Native people. You'll hear some of the most recognizable names associated with the heritage of the Creeks, mostly; some Cherokee. Some Wards; some McGee's are some of the families that prevail here. Chief Red Eagle.

The Indian Wars and the removal of the Creeks ended the initial collaboration between the native people and settlers, although many families survived and were able to reconstruct a semblance of the clan tribe system many years later with many of the names from the past appearing as leaders (i.e. the Wards and McGees).

"Drums along the Choctawhatchee" celebrates a different type of frontier image than the Keith Cabin "Pioneer Days." It celebrates a time before what Turner called

“Americanization.” As Chief Bearheart observes, it is, for the Perdido Bay Tribe, a time before the destruction of the Creek Confederacy and the removal.

There’s a lot of early history between the States and the native peoples. Of course, in the 1830s when people were finally being removed, literally, things changed quite a bit in that period. We literally lost all our land, and it, pretty much started the annihilation of our people.

To teach people about the ways and importance of Creek culture and the time when Indians and settlers worked together, it is essential to go back to a time when Creek culture was still vital and intact. This sets the heroically individualistic frontier image celebrated by the Keith Cabin and Turner’s ideal at odds with the more cooperative example of the “Drums along the Choctawhatcee” event, which represents a time period that is essentially pre-American since Florida, after all, did not become a state until after the Removal. The land promised to the homesteaders was not yet “free” of the native people.

Although these two images (two cultures working together versus the American pioneer who “rightfully” takes the God-given land from the Native people) are seemingly in conflict, the two communities are forced to work together to create a common “genealogy of identity” of Holmes County (Brundage, *Memories* 4). Both the Keith Cabin Foundation and the Perdido Bay Tribe depend on each other to make their projects work. The “Drums along the Choctawhatcee” event raised money for the Keith Cabin Foundation, and the Cabin provides a platform for the Tribe to raise awareness for their projects.

With the completion of the auction four tribal members, two men and two women, all decked out in full native regalia, performed a number of traditional dances to music played over the P.A. system. The Tribal Master of Ceremonies from the opening ceremony discussed each dance while the dancers danced on the lawn in front of the Cabin. The main male dancer wore a full buck-skin suit, complete with fringes and moccasins. He sported a Mohawk headdress and black face paint more indicative of the Blackfoot tribe than the Creek. He danced with his wife who wore a traditional long dress. Her hair was long and straight. The other male dancer, who was younger, wore a tasseled outfit of unnaturally bright colors--neon yellow and purple. He danced with an older woman in a long native dress. A crowd of 40 or 50 people looked on as the tribe members performed numerous dances, each more complex than the last. Some crowd members ate from the concession stand; others snapped photographs of the dancers; while others toured the Cabin or sat on the porch watching the dancers.

When the dancers finished their routines, Johnny Lipman, who had performed at the Keith Cabin ribbon cutting, played a solo concert on his hand-made flutes, sometimes playing two at a time. The sky was still a clear blue and the music drifted out into October air.

During Mr. Lipman's performance, I wandered over to the area where two tribal craftsmen, dressed in full native costume, sat in folding chairs carving arrow heads and axes from raw stone. On a blanket between the two men lay an array of arrow heads, on display for the wandering crowd. A few interested spectators asked the men questions and the older of the two would answer and pick up a piece to demonstrate his reply.

Behind the craftsmen stood a table of Native artifacts including arrow heads, headdresses, and buckskin. This collection belonged to a tribal member from Alabama. He travels to all the tribal events just to show off his collection. Several interested people stopped by to discuss his unique items and tell him about their own rarities.

I wandered over to the Native Pathways Mobile Museum, which was parked in the shade of the giant oak. A colorful mural of green and orange, showing Indian men and women making native artifacts, covered the side of the motor home. A table of tribal goods was set up on the side of the R.V. near the door to the museum. A woman sat behind the table selling dream catchers, pottery, wood sculptures, and other native wares. We chatted briefly, and then I entered the R.V. museum.

There was a small collection box by the door; admission was free, but they accepted donations. Inside the tiny museum to my right, I encountered a mannequin dressed in authentic Creek garb. The walls of the museum were adorned with illustrated scenes of past Creek daily life, augmented with artifacts of the activities described. In the back of the Museum, under protective glass, stood a model of a Creek settlement including tiny wooden shelters situated around a open space in the middle of the village, tiny Indian figures frozen in mid-native game. As a whole, the museum displays were concise and informative.

The reason for creating the Mobile museum is a community in crisis. The community, both the Native American community and the community at large which the tribe wishes to inform, has been in crisis in two important and interconnected ways: lack of money and lack of youth interest. As school budgets are slashed, schools can not afford to make field trips to the tribe's permanent museum. Instead of simply accepting defeat and

shrugging off the lost opportunity to educate the children of northwest Florida, Chief Bearheart came up with the idea of the mobile museum:

We are very honored to be able to establish, not only a permanent museum and cultural center, but we've been able to have a motor home that we got from the USDA and rebuilt it into a museum. We proudly call it "the Bear Mobile"; We're Bear Clan as you can tell by our names, and that has been a wonderful outreach, too, because we have found that a lot of the schools can't come to the museum like they used to could. The budgets are so low, so we found that this is the best way that we could help them, and we never charge, and we're all volunteers. It's a very gratifying thing for us to have the honor and responsibility to take the word in education to the children.

This proactive approach to educating and creating memory recalls the similar approach taken by those who established the Keith Cabin and the work of the Keith Cabin Foundation in reaching out to educate the community. In addition to their other contributions to the community, the Perdido Bay Tribe can also bring history to the schools.

The other challenge facing the Tribe is actually getting the message through to the community. With all the distractions that children face today and the hectic nature of modern life in general, making history accessible to people is both difficult and essential. Especially important and challenging for the Tribe is to reach Native American children. The modern way of life, explains Chief Bearheart, makes teaching Native American children "in the old way" difficult:

It's not an easy thing, let me say that. It's not one to take lightly, and you can do it in a way that is not a hard sell. It was done in the old way by assimilating with the elders... You've heard the term "it takes a village?" Each child was involved in their family. They learned early that it took all the people to feed all the people. There were a lot of chores, but it wasn't considered a chore. This was a family unit and a village unit working together. They had a lot of pride. That's one thing that our young people are losing now... Unfortunately there's not a good situation these days. The children have a hard time now, but if they could be put in that environment that we're talking about it makes all the difference in the world that they learn who they are. They are capable of anything they want to do, and they have the right to do anything they want to do.

This same sentiment is shared by members of the Holmes County community. The Keith Cabin Foundation has also emphasized the importance of educating the youth of their community. Chief Bearheart explains that, for the Bear Clan, reaching the youth is important due to the shrinking tribal numbers and the Creek bloodline.

As our blood quantum gets thinner from intermarrying and so forth, it's something we have to work out real hard to keep our young people interested in, where they came from and where they go to keep our future people involved.

This crisis is happening in Holmes County as well. The lack of economic opportunity forces young people in the community to seek their livelihoods and educations elsewhere. The Keith Cabin Foundation strives to educate the young people before they leave so they will remember where they came from and possibly bring back whatever resources they can if they return to the community.

Faced with many of the same challenges, the Bear Clan and the Holmes county community decided to collaborate. The “Drums along the Choctawhatchee” event and the collaboration that it takes to make it happen are acts of reconciliation, recalling and celebrating the time, whether real or imagined, when settlers and Indians worked together for their mutual survival. This fact is not lost on Chief Bearheart:

This is the type of opportunity that you need. You’ve got to have a good reason. You’ve got to have a fun reason. You’ve got to have a challenge to make it happen, and we involve the young people in it as much as anybody else.

Reba Sconiers prepared a meal for the Bear Clan, and everyone sat down a long table under the oak shade. After their meal, in the late autumn afternoon, the tribal members assembled around the big drum. They invited the remaining children and adults to sit around the drum and play and sing Native songs. Those that did not sit in the drum circle danced around it following the dance steps of the Tribe. As this activity began to wind down, I slipped off to my car and left.

Despite the contradictions in time line and the historical facts that might separate these two events, they still share the celebration of the same pioneering spirit, and a general belief in recapturing something of the “old ways.” Through the venue of Keith Cabin, the people involved in both events have created a new story, one of collaboration and respect for two parts of the past. Because both parties need each other to perpetuate their goals, they are living the history they teach.

IV. HOLMES COUNTY FISH FRY

The Keith Cabin not only hosts planned cultural events like “Pioneer Days” and “Drums along the Choctawhatchee,” but it also hosts spontaneous events like the family fish-fry. Whenever a neighbor catches a “mess of fish” (which can be just about anytime) people gather at the Cabin and fry as many fish as can be eaten. Anyone is welcome.

People who live along the Choctawhatchee River have a special connection to the water, a deep love and respect for what the river can give and what the river can take. Most of the people who live along the riverbanks are devoted fishermen. For these fishermen, past and present, the river has always proven marvelously bountiful. According to Junior Sconiers, there is no season to this bounty: “You can catch fish in that river any time of year. Summer, spring, winter, and fall. Rain or shine.” Junior and his family, who live next door to the Keith Cabin (Junior and his wife Reba lived in the Cabin for years), have fished the river on an almost daily basis for generations. As a result the fish-fry is a community staple and has been for as long as family members can remember. As Reba Sconiers told me, “I think I was born at a fish fry.” Consequently Choctawhatchee fish is a staple of the Holmes County diet.

Today, fishing is primarily a sporting and leisure activity. In the past, however, going back to native times before white settlers came to the area, fish was a crucial source of

food for people living in the wilds of northwest Florida. When white settlers came, due to poverty and isolation, they were forced to find food wherever they could. Dana Ste. Claire, in *Crackers: the Cracker Culture in Florida History*, states:

There was a time when early Cracker settlers had to eat everything they could get their hands on to survive in the Florida wilds. Here the simple diet of backwoods Floridians was created of necessity, for few settlers could afford “store-boughten” food, even if it was available to them. Most had to do with what they could find around them. Indeed, some of the greatest Cracker fare known was born out of poverty.

For poor families along the river the Choctawhatchee abundance was a god-send. Reba Sconiers recalls: “My mother-in-law (who lived in Keith Cabin with Reba and Junior) went fishing every day... We had fish two or three times a week.”

In early September, Reba invited me to a fish-fry at the Keith Cabin. The event was to take place the next day, Sunday. Reba spontaneously put together the fish –fry due to the fact that her son, David, had caught a mess of fish and wanted to share them with the community.

It was a gorgeous, sunny Sunday afternoon. I helped set up a table and some folding chairs in the lawn in front of the Cabin as David Sconiers assembled the gas stove on the Cabin porch. A table on the porch held several covered dishes containing potato salad, cole slaw, and other food brought from Reba’s house next door. In addition to her son David, Reba’s two other sons, Dale and Dean, her daughter Anne, and other family member were in attendance. About a dozen other people, including my dad and me, milled around helping set up chairs or chatting with each other. Reba made it clear that

anyone driving by was welcome to attend. The way she said this made it clear to me that the neighbors were aware of the open invitation.

As David set up his factory-cooler of fish, giant open bag of corn meal, fryers, and an empty beer box for placing the freshly fried fish, he told me the secret ingredient of a Holmes County fish-fry:

Fresh Choctawhatchee fish (bass, bream, catfish). They don't taste like that pond-caught stuff. They have a clean taste; not that muddy taste. Choctawhatchee fish are the best tasting fish in the state of Florida.

David's method for cooking the fish was simple enough: take a fish out of the cooler; put it in the bag and shake it up; drop it in the silver pot of oil on the burner; after a few minutes, pull it out and place it in the beer box to soak up the extra grease.

I made myself a plate of fish and hush puppies along with some slaw, potato salad, and beans. David was right about the fish. It was the best fresh water fish that I have ever tasted. Gone was the muddy flavor of the pond-caught fish that I have eaten in the past, and in its place was a clean fresh taste of pure bream and bass. The meat was whiter and flakier than the fish I have had in the past. I sat and talked with Reba on the porch. She told me about the fish-fries of her youth, which she described as remarkably similar to the one we were having today:

We always had these fish-fries outside, right here in the yard. First of all there wasn't room in the Cabin. There was a lot of us living here.

The specific taste of Choctawhatchee fish captures something essential about the place, while its presentation and the manner that it is served to the people of the

community inherently reflect the history of Holmes County and the Keith Cabin, from the frontier times to the present day.

The term *terrior* refers to the flavors embodied in certain wine that bring out the elements of the place where wine is made. For example, the flavor of a specific grape from the South of France can evoke certain things about that culture. This *terrior* can be applied to food as well, as shown in Bernard L. Herman's article "Drum Head Stew: the Power of Terrior" dealing with the dish prepared in the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Herman explains, "*Terrior* defines the particular attribute of a place embodied in cuisine and narrated through words, actions and objects." In the same way that drum head stew does this for the eastern shore of Virginia, the fried Choctawhatchee fish embodies the history of Holmes County. When eating the fresh Choctawhatchee fish at a Holmes County fish-fry one is consuming the history of the place. As Herman states, "In its literal consumption, we ingest and digest *terrior*, imbuing ourselves with tastes of identity and authenticity" (Herman 37).

For local people *terrior* means is that "food always brings people together" (Herman 41). This is important in Holmes County as well. The local fish-frys have been a community event as long as anyone can remember. Whether it is a regular family meal or a Saturday night get-together, with participants sitting around listening to the Grand Ole Opry, these events have remained an important part of community life. In an area where, as Gladys Keith observed, "everybody was poor", these events provided an important escape from the hard work and struggle of daily life. When older people in the community are nostalgic for the past, these are the type of events that come to their mind.

The fish-fry I attended on that warm September Sunday began to wind down as the sun disappeared behind the tree line. I helped pick up some paper plates and pack up the table and chairs and chatted with a few people who were heading to their cars. I naturally reflected on what those Saturday nights that Junior Sconiers so warmly reminisced about would have been like. I think events like this naturally bring to mind thoughts of the past.

Because of the continuity of the event across generations, these fish-fries have a more visceral connection to the past than events like the “Pioneer Days” and the “Drums along the Choctawhatchee.” The fish-fry has been a part of life in Holmes County as long as anyone has lived near the Choctawhatchee River. Even the native people ate and prepared fish in a communal manner (although I doubt their fish were deep fried). The fish-fries add and reinforce Holmes County’s identity as a frontier area. The ability to catch one’s own food and prepare it with basic ingredients is a reminder of the self-sufficient nature of the early settler and the native people of the area. As a cultural event it stands in sharp contrast to the stereotypical fancy ante-bellum banquet in which the participants adorn themselves in hoop dresses and Confederate uniforms. The Holmes County fish-fry is a simple way of living the history of the area, one fraught with struggle and hardship; at the same time, it is an appreciation for the simple things in life.

V. 66TH ANNUAL NORTH WEST FLORIDA CHAMPIOSHIP RODEO

For the last 66 years, Holmes County has played host to the North West Florida Championship Rodeo. On the first weekend of October, Bonifay, the county seat, is transformed into the capitol of Panhandle Rodeo activity. People from all across the area come to town for the three days of rodeo action and street parades. During the Friday and Saturday parades, many local residents ride through Main Street on horseback, wagon, four wheeler, or Mardi Gras style float, waving banners and flags to spectators seated along the parade route. The spectators relax in lawn chairs, while others call out for candy from the people on the parade floats. I attended the parade on Friday afternoon and the final night of the rodeo on Saturday night. These events were rife with frontier and western imagery, from the horse-drawn wagons to the rodeo men and women.

I arrived in Bonifay on Friday afternoon, a few hours before the scheduled parade. I parked behind Ralph Harris's men's boot and clothing store, appropriately named "Western World USA." Main Street was lined with vendors sponsored by various clubs selling food and drinks to raise money for sports teams and civic organizations. I bought some candy and a cold drink from the Vernon High School football team and then I walked across the street to Mr. Harris' store. The store is located near the end of Main Street, offering a perfect view of the parade, and I decided to watch the activities there. Mr. Harris offered me a folding chair as we talked casually about the rodeo. Mr. Harris is

old enough to remember the first rodeo in Holmes County, which he described as the biggest event to happen in the county. Everyone in the area descended on Bonifay to attend, just, as I observed, they still show up today.

Buddy Biddle, a fellow attendee of the Fish Fry, also remembered the early days of the rodeo:

Me and a group of friends would ride our horses down to the rodeo (from Izagora to Bonifay). They had a big corral there and you leave your horses there and then ride back.

The use of horses to attend the rodeo enabled Mr. Biddle and his friend to live their own version of the cowboy myth.

The cowboy myth and the rodeo itself each began in the late 1800s and the closing of the open range. During this period, private ranches fenced off large tracks of land, and the big cattle drives came to an end. Cowboys went to work for specific ranch owners and large cattle barons, and the ranch work became a seasonal activity. During the off season, cowboys from different ranches gathered to compete in contests designed to show off their cowboy skills. These forerunners of the rodeo took place away from towns and were mainly attended by the cowboys themselves, for whom they served as a distraction from the boredom of the off season (Fredrickson 10).

Not until the mid 1880s did these events become public entertainment in the form of the Wild West show. On July 4, 1882, in North Platte, Nebraska, William “Buffalo Bill” Cody staged the first Wild West show for a public audience. Cody’s show included re-enactments of historical events involving the taming of the West, as well as displays of cowboy skills and a buffalo hunting demonstration (Fredrickson 10).

Cody provided his audience with a visual story of the West, with famous Indian battles, like Custer's Last Stand, which at times included battle participant Sitting Bull himself. For Cody the show was living history. According to Slotkin:

Certainly Cody himself was responsible for establishing the Wild West's commitment to historical authenticity and to its mission of historical education.

The management of Cody's enterprise declared it improper to speak of it as a "Wild West show." From its inception in 1882 it was called "The Wild West" (or "Buffalo Bill's Wild West"), a name that identified it as a "place" rather than a mere display or entertainment (Slotkin 67).

Cody's Wild West embodied Turner's frontier myth long before Turner himself put his theories into words. According to Faragher: "What Turner did when he first codified his theory of the importance of the Western past was provide intellectual legitimization for Cody's image" (Faragher 230).

Cody's Western image was an immediate success. According to Richard Slotkin in *Gunfighter Nation*: "'Buffalo Bill's Wild West' was for more than thirty years (1883-1916) one of the most popular and successful businesses in the field of commercial entertainment (Slotkin 66)." Cody's success immediately inspired competition. By the mid 1880's, more than fifty Wild West shows were touring the country (Frederickson 10).

By the time Turner wrote his famous essay, similar ideas about the importance of the frontier and the frontier story itself were well known and widely discussed, thanks in part to the pervasiveness of the Wild West shows. Turner, however, was the first historian to articulate these sentiments in theoretical form. For his efforts, Turner received a letter

from legendary frontiersman and future President Theodore Roosevelt praising him for putting into words ideas that had been circulating for years. Just as Cody's Wild West was successful, both Turner's and Roosevelt's exploitation of Cody's Western image were also a monumental success (Faragher 230-231).

Many of the classic Western images were on display at the North West Florida Championship Rodeo (N.W.F.C.R.) that Friday in Bonifay. Standing in front of the Western World USA store on Main Street, I watched the parade. The parade was led by the Bonifay police cars and fire engines. The first float was a long flatbed truck with a large Klien Brothers Rodeo banner draped along side. Several young rodeo cowboys sat on bales of hay in the bed of the truck waving to the crowd. Next came a few cars carrying local beauty contest winners, including such luminaries as "Little Miss Rodeo", Cassidy Caroline Taylor, and "Little King Rodeo", Carson Jackson.

A few more floats paraded by, including floats from local churches, before the Holmes County High School R.O.T.C. marched by in military formation. The most anticipated part of the parade followed, as hundreds of locals came riding down Main Street on horseback, accompanied by additional participants riding in old wagons. The wagons presented a distinct western image. One large wagon, pulled by four horses, proudly displayed a sign "Milner Big H Ranch." Some western images were mixed with other more typically southern symbols. An older man on a spotted horse rode through the parade carrying a large Confederate battle flag.

A group of women riders passed by, followed by a group of ten or twelve four wheelers. The four wheeler and the "mule" vehicle have largely replaced the horse and

the real mule as the preferred farm and ranch equipment, making them, it could be argued, a new frontier symbol.

The community's ride through town on horseback represented a display of and identification with the county's frontier heritage. As the riders rode down Main Street, they waved to friends and family along the parade route. The rodeo, with its opening parade, is the biggest event in Holmes County. Along with the Cabin dedication, the Native American event, and the fish-fry, the rodeo provides the community of Holmes County an opportunity to embrace and express pride in its frontier past.

In the forty years after Cody's enterprise came to an end, the Wild West shows eventually morphed into something resembling today's rodeo, with the rodeo performer retaining the characteristics of Cody's original show. These characteristics were identical to those identified by Turner as necessary for conquering the American West. As Michael Allen observes in *Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination*:

These cowboy characteristics include courage, disregard for personal pain and injury, innovation, loyalty to the cowboy group, reticence, plain speech, anti-intellectualism, and a strong belief in democracy and equality (Allen 6).

The characteristics embodied by Cody's cowboy and his story of the Wild West became the model for Hollywood movies, pulp novels, and popular songs. This did not happen over night. It was not until the end of World War II, approximately the same time as the first rodeo in Holmes County, that the rodeo and the rodeo man began to capture the broader public imagination. During the second half of the century, films like *The Lusty Men*, *The Misfits*, and *Junior Bonner* all dealt with the lives of rodeo men. Popular songs by Ian and Sylvia, Buffy Sainte Marie, the Byrds and others referenced the

rodeo, and popular books by Larry McMurtry, Ken Kesey, and Craig Lesley all dealt with the rodeo man's image (Allen 9).

Most of these popular works show the rodeo man as a person out of time, a man whose values are at odds with the modern world. Junior Bonner, played by Steve McQueen in the film of the same name, is a rodeo man so devoted to the rodeo and the values that come with being a rodeo man that he is unable to operate in the real world (Allen 52). The images of the outsider resonate with rodeo participants and spectators alike. People of Holmes County, being from one of the poorest counties in the State and already identifying with the frontier image, can easily relate to the struggles of the pop culture versions of the rodeo hero.

I went back to Bonifay Saturday night to attend the final night of rodeo action. The grounds around the Bonifay High School football stadium were filled with campers and vendors selling horse equipment, such as saddles and ropes, cowboy hats and t-shirts. A crowd of several thousand entered the stadium and bought concessions. I sat on the east side of the stadium at about mid-field. Everyone was dressed in western wear. I seemed to be the only person not wearing a cowboy hat.

The opening ceremony involved members of the community who wished to participate riding their horses around the field as fast as they could. Groups of riders came out of the chute at full speed, and the field soon filled up with several hundred riders. This was a dangerous event. One young girl fell off her horse and barely escaped being trampled. One young man dismounted in the middle of the field and asked his girlfriend to marry him. She said "yes." These activities provide another example of

community members embracing each other while simultaneously embracing the frontier ideals with the whole community as a witness.

According to Allen, the rodeo is partially “a folk-based *performance*” (Allen 11). It is a way of displaying frontier values. The participatory nature of the N.W.F.C.R. allows the population to be a part of the performance. The act of riding through the town and through the field allows members of the community to live the history inherent in the rodeo itself. The line between the participant and the observer is washed away, and the community as a whole becomes a part of the rodeo.

During a break in the rodeo action, I heard the announcer say: “There’s more redneck here tonight than anywhere else in the country.”

Although redneck has negative connotations for many people, the term has been embraced by rodeo crowds and people who identify with the rodeo man. As Allen observes:

Although born (along with *cracker*) in a southern milieu, *redneck* has, in recent decades, become very much a part of western folk culture and vernacular. In the West *redneck* signifies, most importantly, rural status and an individual adherence to the western folk culture (e.g., the Cowboy Code). Although *redneck* and *cowboy* are not synonymous, they are, in the West, linguistic and cultural cousins. Nor are they imbued with racist connotations. In the West some rednecks may very well be racists, but when all is said and done they have more important things on their mind, like four-wheel-drive-rigs and deer hunting (Allen 11).

The embracing of the term *redneck* by certain communities can be seen as a way of separating themselves from others. It is a way, as Celeste Ray says, of “celebrating together as a group apart” (Ray 2).

I watched the remaining events and left the stadium just before the end of the final event of the night. The whole weekend, from parade to bull riding, was rife with Western and frontier imagery, completely embraced by the community. The annual parade offers people of the community the opportunity to fly their western flag, and the rodeo events allow them to re-enact the taming of their land; it gives them a chance to relive the struggles of their ancestors who homesteaded land in Holmes County. While the N.W.F.C.R. is not an explicit historical celebration like the Keith Cabin Dedication or the Native American event held in Holmes County, still it hold implicit meanings that champion frontier values just the same.

This event also stands in contrast to antebellum pilgrimages and many other explicitly southern events, where community members visit historic sites dressed in period costume. The N.W.F.C.R. celebrates a wholly different identity: the frontier and the values that go along with it. The event allows the community to participate in historical memory, re-enacting the taming of the frontier and reasserting Holmes County’s identity as a frontier place, embracing all the ideological meaning embodied in that place.

This backbone of identity as a frontier place gives the community strength in a world where rural communities seem under attack by society at large. While society at large may refer to them as *rednecks*, the people of Holmes County clearly prefer that identity to its alternative: a community that turns its back on its past.

VI. CONCLUSION

Much has been written about the South's obsession with its past. Many cultural events in the South help solidify memory and create identity. W. Scott Poole, in his essay "Memory" in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Myth, Memory, & Manners*, writes the following about the South's "culture of remembrance":

The South represents what could be called a culture of remembrance, meaning not only that the public face of southern life borrows heavily from themes of the past (historical monuments, public symbols, historical tourism) but also that the values of southern life are deeply influenced by the values of commemorating and ancestral meaning. Those values themselves are constantly undergoing reinterpretation, as they are "re-remembered" by contemporary southerners (Poole, Wilson, ed. 104).

Much of the discussion about this "culture of remembrance" focuses on the South's obsession with the Civil War and how that event continues to shape southern identity and memory. However, not every community identity in the South is shaped by the region's failure in the Civil War. Holmes County's identity is shaped more by the frontier nature of the area and the pioneering spirit of those who settled the land. The values championed by the earliest settlers are the same values that are championed by the people of Holmes County today. These are, of course, the same values Fredrick Jackson Turner

gave reference to in his famous essay “The Importance of the Frontier in American History” in which he espoused the importance of the American frontier in molding the American character. Turner praised the men and women who braved the wilderness, embraced Manifest Destiny, and carved out a life in the wilderness. Despite criticisms that Turner’s view was hopelessly simplistic (and that a more nuanced view of the frontier is called for) his image of the frontiersman remains the prevailing stereotype for the average American, constantly reinforced by classroom lessons and the portrayal of the frontier and its earliest settlers in Western books and movies (Farager 230).

The West was not the only frontier. Florida was a frontier as well. After the Civil War many people homesteaded in Holmes County, a rugged and rural land that required much work in exchange for little monetary reward. Although Holmes County citizens participated in the Civil War and some citizens today identify with the Confederacy, most people in the area had little to gain or lose either way. In fact, as E. W. Carswell writes in *Holmesteading: the History of Holmes County Florida*, “many Holmes Countians opposed the idea of secession and the war itself (Carswell 39).”

Carswell and other historians of the area never fail to champion the ideas and struggle of the people of Holmes County; even the title of his history, *Holmesteading*, is a play on words that reflects his respect for the commitment and tenacity of the county’s earliest settlers. Jesse Earle Bowden, in his memoir *Always the River Flows*, describes the people who settled the area in this way:

They were frontiersmen of the Southern backcountry- plain folk of modest origin, of Scottish-Irish-English stock, who had continued south from Virginia, the Carolinas, and Tennessee as the Indian menace diminished. They had nothing but

hope and determination, their hands, a rifle, an ax, a hoe, and a few scrub cows they worked as oxen. *And the land: Florida land* (Bowden 54).

This description fits Turner's image of the frontiersman perfectly. It represents the backbone of identity to many in Holmes County, a different image than the prosperous southern planter who longs for the good old days before the war. Holmes County stands in contrast with the image of the Southerner obsessed with the loss of the Civil War.

While I do not believe that Holmes County is unique in this, the image of the Southerner as pioneer has been generally overlooked in favor of the championing of the Lost Cause.

The most prominent example of Holmes County's identification with the frontier is the dedication of the cabin of Tom Keith as National Historic Place. The oldest homesteader cabin on its original spot, it has become a focal point of community gatherings, and stands as a monument to the perceived values of the pioneer. I visited the Cabin for the ribbon cutting on its official opening, after it was painstakingly restored. The restoration, in full public view, was itself a re-enactment of Holmes County history. Rebuilt with timber from the same land and re-roofed with hand made shingles, the Cabin is legitimately reborn.

The recognition of the spot by the Federal Government and the State of Florida also provides legitimacy. Legitimacy for the Cabin legitimizes the events held there, which in turn legitimize the image, memory, and identity of the community as a whole.

This legitimacy and the events that take place at the Cabin provide a sense of pride for the community, not only ancestral pride, but pride in community accomplishment. This is important for Holmes County during this current period of social and economic crisis. It is one of the poorest counties in the state of Florida. Economic opportunities are few

and far between, forcing many young people to leave the area for better jobs and education elsewhere. Holmes County has suffered under this condition for at least the past fifty or sixty years. Those in the community involved in the Keith Cabin events feel that is important to teach people about their heritage before they leave the area, in order to keep young people connected to their community. They also feel like the cabin can provide an historical reference for tourists and other visitors to the area.

Another community in crisis is the Native American community, specifically the Perdido Bay Muskogee Creek Tribe based in Pensacola. The Creeks have a long history in the Holmes County area, inhabiting the area hundreds of years before the white settlers came. This long history, along with Tom Keith's marriage to a Creek woman, gives Native Americans a legitimate place at the Cabin. The Tribe, faced with thinning bloodlines and the difficulty of passing down Creek folkways to the next generation, sees the Keith Cabin as a venue and a platform for educating the community. In turn the Tribe also raises money for the Keith Cabin Foundation. In this way, two communities in crisis help each other. Keith Cabin provides the venue, while the Tribe provides funds and support for the Cabin.

The nature of the collaboration creates an interesting historical irony for the Native American participants: the Cabin celebrates a frontier history in which the native people were driven from their land to make way for white settlers. As Bowdin has described, the native people were looked on as a "menace" by the white population. For Chief Bearheart of the Tribe, the "Drums along the Choctawhatchee" event represents collaboration between Native people and settlers that is essential for the survival of both

cultures. Transcending the conflicts and resentments of the past, the event is an act of reconciliation, driven by the urgent need to educate as many people as possible.

Other events that take place at the Keith Cabin take on historical meaning. The traditional and frequently occurring Holmes County fish-fry acts as a re-enactment and a celebration of the plentiful and delicious Choctawhatchee fish. Since the time of the Indians, the river has supplied the inhabitants of the area with a precious food source. The main ingredient in the recipe is fresh Choctawhatchee fish. The fresh fish embodies the history of the area, *terroir*. Just as early settlers ate fresh fish caught from the Choctawhatchee River, I attended a fish-fry held on the front lawn of the Keith Cabin. This event still has the ability to bring to mind the old days of the weekend and community get-togethers that are still remembered fondly by the older people of Holmes County. The fish-fries most important function, according to Bernard L. Herman is that they “always brings people together” (Herman 41).

The annual North West Florida Championship Rodeo offers the people of Holmes County the opportunity to celebrate their frontier past. Today’s rodeo has its origins in William “Buffalo Bill” Cody’s Wild West shows of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Cody’s Wild West, along with Fredrick Jackson Turner essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” were key elements in shaping the story of the frontier and championing the purported values of those involved in “taming” the land. The story of the frontier lives on in the modern rodeo, and today’s rodeo participant, as portrayed in popular culture, still retains and exemplifies the values of the frontier. The participatory nature of the N.W.F.C.R. allows the people of Holmes County the opportunity to be a part of the rodeo, and by so doing, to take on the values of the

rodeo participant for themselves, further strengthening the community's identification with the frontier.

All of these cultural events in Holmes County conjure up a memory and an image of the frontier. The dedication of the Keith Cabin, the Native American event, and the community fish-fry all help the community remember its past. The image of the self-sufficient pioneer is the backbone of the community identity. In a place with a history of poverty and struggle the image of the pioneer is a crucial one for the people of Holmes County. A community's celebrations inevitably reflect its needs and its aspirations.

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