

Mullins Flat, Pond Beat were unique communities

BY ED PETERS

The locale today is world famous, owing to missile and space activities.

It was not always thus. Before the Army came, the Redstone Arsenal area contained the farm communities of Mullins Flat and Pond Beat.

The homely names fit the circumstances of these places. There was no electricity, no plumbing and no telephones. Sharecroppers worked on thirds and fourths. Roads were so rough that "it took four mules to pull an empty wagon," remembers Earl P. Lacy, 79, a former resident.

But the locale in its own way was as unique then as a farming area as it is today as a center of high technology and high achievement. When the Army bought the land in 1941, much of it was in the hands of people who had been born to slave women or were only a generation or two removed from those who had been. They farmed their own land, owned their own stores, shops, mills and gins and put up their own money so so they could have schools for their children.

The holdings of some of the Mullins Flat and Pond Beat families, notably the Jacobs and Hortons, were extensive, amounting to hundreds and even thousands of acres.

On Saturday, July 4, there was a reunion here of the the Jacobs and Hortons, along with the Lacys, Joiners, Burns and others whose roots go back to families in the Mullins Flat and Pond Beat communities — families that accompanied white settlers into the area and worked the land first as slaves who could legally own nothing and then as free people who worked hard and prospered on farms of their very own.

Before Redstone Arsenal was established, the nearly 40,000 acres that it now covers encompassed two communities that were separated by Huntsville Spring Branch, which flows east-to-west across the arsenal. Mullins Flat was to the north and Pond Beat extended southward to the Tennessee River.

Virtually all was creek- and river-bottom land that was fertile and productive.

Some of the larger farms had many tenant sharecroppers who gave one-third of their corn and hay crops and one-fourth of the cotton harvest to the land owner as rent.

While the rural poverty that pervaded the Tennessee Valley was here also, relatives, neighbors and churches helped the poor get along.

The folks who lived in Mullins Flat and Pond Beat

are getting old. They and their children and grandchildren are intensely interested in assembling and preserving a record of the unique communities to remind people that there is a rich history here that has nothing to do with missiles and space.

The old-line families are compiling genealogies and histories and sorting out the complex lines of cousins and double cousins that developed over the years in the close-knit Mullins Flat and Pond Beat communities.

Their Fourth of July reunion was the first time all of the families had assembled together in the nearly half-century since their communities broke up. More than 500 people attended from all parts of the United States. Some hadn't seen each other in 30 years or longer.

On Saturday, they came to Redstone Arsenal to eat a barbecue lunch and visit and photograph their old home places and the cemeteries where their ancestors are buried. Saturday night there was a dance at a local motel and a buffet dinner "that was supposed to have been a sit-down banquet but so many people came we had to change plans and have a buffet," Geraldine Horton Taylor, one of the reunion's principal organizers, said with a laugh.

She said the Horton family had a reunion in 1979 and in the course of researching the family history, lines of kinship to the Jacobs, Burns, Joiners, Lacys and others were traced and the families decided this year to all have a reunion together. "If you start with Jacobs, you will pull in all these families," she noted.

She said the family lineages have been treated as somewhat of an embarrassment over the years but that her father, Ovoy Horton, urged his children to take pride in theirs and learn all they could about it.

"Daddy talked about it all the time and wanted us to know about our relatives and how we came about," the daughter related. "Some said to leave it alone and keep it quiet but he always wanted us to talk about it."

The Horton lineage, she said, has been traced back to Amanda Jacobs Horton, servant of Jack Horton, whose name she took and by whom she had three children: Everett T., Yancy, and Celia, who received parcels of their father's land and later figured prominently in the affairs of the Mullins Flat and Pond Beat communities.

"When you think in terms of these black families and you go back and look, that's the kind of thing you're going to find," she remarked.