

## Cedar Lake in the 1930s

While Cedar Lake was platted in the final years of the 19th century, the 1930 census is the first to call out Cedar Lake as a community outside of Decatur. Undoubtedly the community was enumerated in the previous censuses, however, the inhabitants were not strictly labeled as living within a community called Cedar Lake. In 1930, there was a total of 202 individuals, living in 43 households listed on the census. About 75% of the families owned their own land in Cedar Lake, with only 12 families renting from others – most likely the Nelsons. While the town was quite diverse – being home to merchants, railroad workers, cooks, teachers, ministers, and laundresses – the backbone of Cedar Lake was the farmers. There are 20 men that list their occupation as farmer; over half of them were the heads of household and owned their own land. Another 20 men said they primarily worked on a farm, presumably as farmhands to the other farmers in town. Meaning there were 40 men working the soil and tending to the crops within a small town of only 200 people.

The average age for a homeowner in 1930s Cedar Lake was substantially older than their renting counterparts. While there are two 29-year-old men who own their home, the average homeowner was 52 years old. More than half of the home-owning population was over 50 years of age. Conversely, those renting their homes were much younger. Despite the fact that there were fewer renters overall, their average age was only 35 and three-fourths of them were men under 40 years of age. The youngest household was a set of 19-year-old newlyweds, Robert and Grace Polk, who with a then-newborn daughter, rented a house alongside Robert's father and brother.

# THE DECATUR DAILY

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## “Settler Wouldn't Recognize Home Place”

By Dana Beyerle, Daily Staff Writer (Article found by Peggy Allen Towns)

Jake Johnson, who was at least 100 years old when he died in the early 1950s, would hardly recognize his home place.

Cedar Lake, first settled after the end of the Civil War by Johnson and others, until recently had changed little.

Once exclusively a settlement of blacks, today Cedar Lake area is a mixture of black and white – mostly white. Crowding the once close-knit, tiny community are new housing developments.

Soon, what is left of Cedar Lake's heritage may be only a memory.

Jake's grandson, Chester Matthews, 70, and Chester's son, Newlyn, 42, still live in Cedar Lake. They remember how different the community looked only 10 years ago.

“A lot of changes around here,” deadpans Chester.

Ten years ago, most of the houses were dilapidated; there was no running water for the 221 residents. Outhouses were a discreet distance from back doors. Some still are.

Then city government moved in and started changes. Gone is the community well north of Chester's house. Gone are the hotel, two stores run by “Railroad” Dan Matthews and Heywood Matthews, Chester's father. Gone is the black baseball team.

The post office, the dance hall, the Masonic Lodge, they are all gone, too.

“There used to be more houses in the past than there is now,” said Newlyn Matthews. “The community is declining in both population and housing.”

Sumacs grow in clusters around old home sites; partially toppled chimneys peek through brush uncut for a decade.

A few modern brick homes have been built in Cedar Lake. Newlyn and Chester Jr. live side-by-side in comfortable ranch-style homes on Central Avenue, one of only a few streets in Cedar Lake proper – Ray Avenue, Dustin Avenue, Linnet Street, Marr Avenue and Main Avenue.

There are three churches. To the north is Cedar Lake Road, and another tiny black community called The Hill. To the east are L&N Railroad tracks. To the west, three apartment complexes and a major, growing subdivision. To the south are industrial parks.

All of this is within a few hundred yards, plus Mutual Savings Life Insurance Co.'s home office, BMB Specialties plant, a church retirement home.

Five years ago, 221 people lived in the 105-acre Cedar Lake area that was annexed by the city in 1967. Of the 68 structures, 50 were substandard. If Cedar Lake's “boundaries” were extended to U.S. 31 and Spring Avenue, the population would number in the thousands.

Indians had lived in Cedar Lake for centuries, getting water from the tiny pond known today as Johnson's Pond.

City Councilman James Roberts, 65, whose family farmed in Austinville, remembers the pond. “That's where we'd go to fish when the crops were in,” he said.

After the Civil War, as former slaves moved in and stayed, the area became known for the cedar trees and the pond. The two features combined to produce the name Cedar Lake.

Today, blacks and whites are making new homes. It is one of the fastest growing areas in Decatur. Within the last two years in the immediate area, three major apartment complexes, an industrial plant, scores of new homes, and a church retirement home have been built. An elementary school will [copy of article cut off]...

“They haven't done all the work they promised to do,” said Hubert Scott, a Cedar Lake resident since his mother moved the family from Jeff, in Madison County, in the early 1940s.

Scott is not complaining, only marking time until federal funds can resume

paying for modernization.

The money spent in Cedar Lake, according to the city's Planning Department, provided sewer service for 30 houses. Part of Cedar Lake Road, mostly in the black area, was widened and paved. Storm drainage was installed.

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“Everything is on hold,” City Planner Rob Walker said. Street improvements are incomplete, drainage is incomplete and water lines need to be laid in the black community.

Once of the greatest changes is yet to come – if there is enough money. Central Parkway, a route from Alabama 20 south to a proposed “outer Beltline Road” south of Cedar Lake will bisect Cedar Lake Road. But completion is years off.

They done pretty good,” said [copy of article cut off]... [Chester's and] Newlyn's wife, Euniceteen, have the same names.

Just across Main Avenue, a stone's throw from Newlyn Matthews' front door, are the 38-unit Lakeview Apartments and the 60-unit Dogwood Apartments. Both opened within the past two years.

Brand new is the 120-unit Albany Landing apartment complex. Albany Landing is built around Johnson's pond, which has been landscaped to fit the apartment layout.

(Left) Transcribed Article from the *Decatur Daily*, March 12, 1983, by Dana Beyerle. Article Found by Peggy Allen Towns

During the Scottsboro Boys trial in the mid-1930s, four outstanding African American citizens testified to the fact that the county had failed to survey them or their community for prospective jurors. When asked for a list of men whom they considered to meet the standards of jury duty, the four produced a combined list of 183 names. Of these names, Will R. Garth, Jim Skinner, Will Martin, and Hillard Tate (meaning Hillard, Jr. as Sr. would have been nearly 90 years old) were among the names – all landowning farmers of the Cedar Lake community. Land Records from Morgan County collaborate the land holdings of these men (see the map of African American landowners of Cedar Lake): W. R. Garth is known to have owned at least 33.5 acres of farmland; Hillard Tate, Jr owned 26.3 acres of farm land, plus a house in the town of Cedar Lake; Jim Skinner and Will Martin both lived in houses in town, but listed their occupations as farmers on a general farm – they may have owned land elsewhere, only it was not identified during this research.

## The People Behind Cedar Lake

### The Nelsons

George Asa Nelson (March 10, 1853-July 27, 1928) was a prominent North Alabamian of the turn-of-the-20th century. His first career was as a lawyer and a well-respected member of the Morgan County Bar Association. He is said to have married Lilian Ray in the 1870s. Lilian Katherine Ray Nelson (1854-November 26, 1939) was born in England but came to Alabama after her marriage. She was a literary writer under the nom de plume “Jack Carleton.” In their later years, George