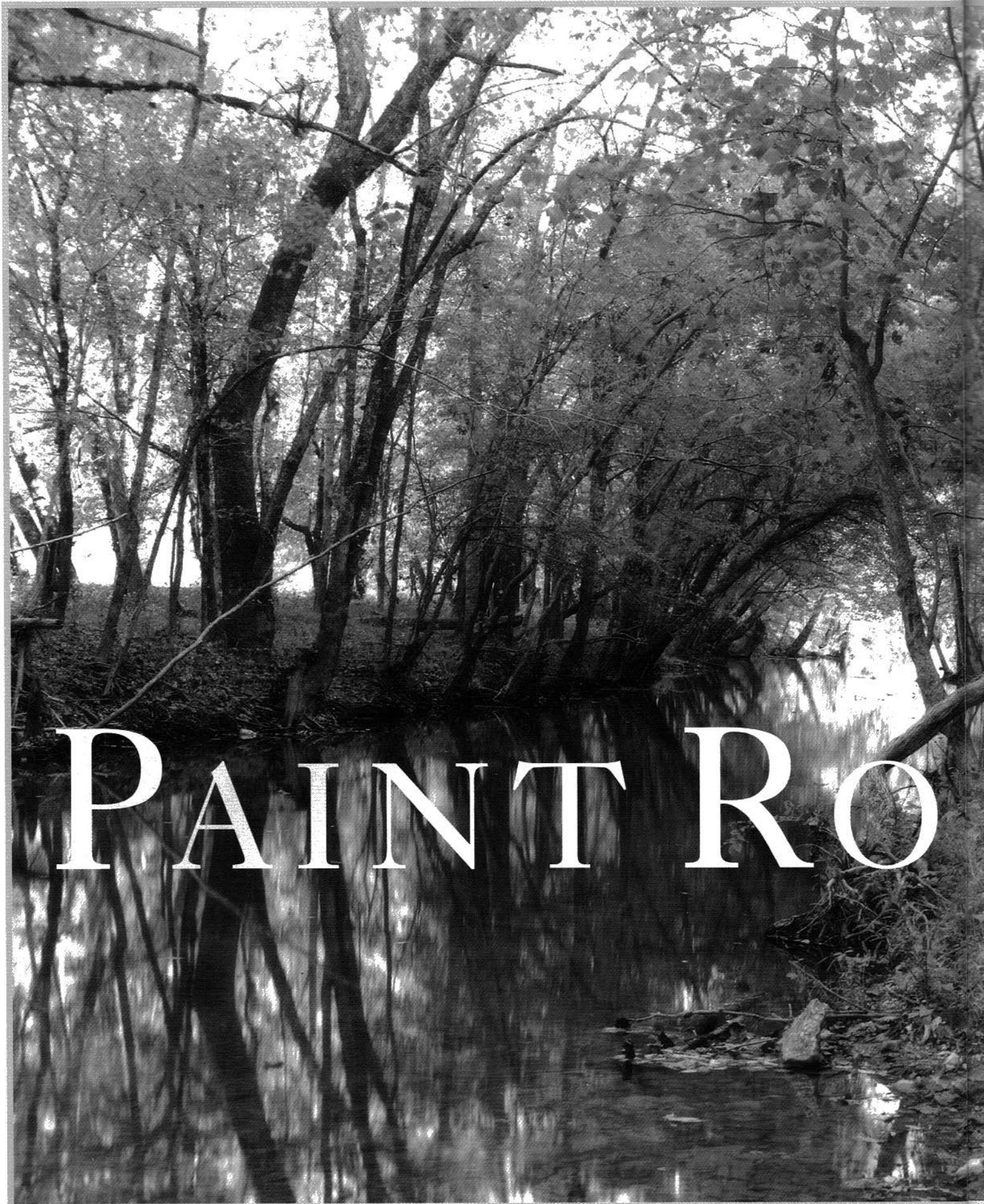
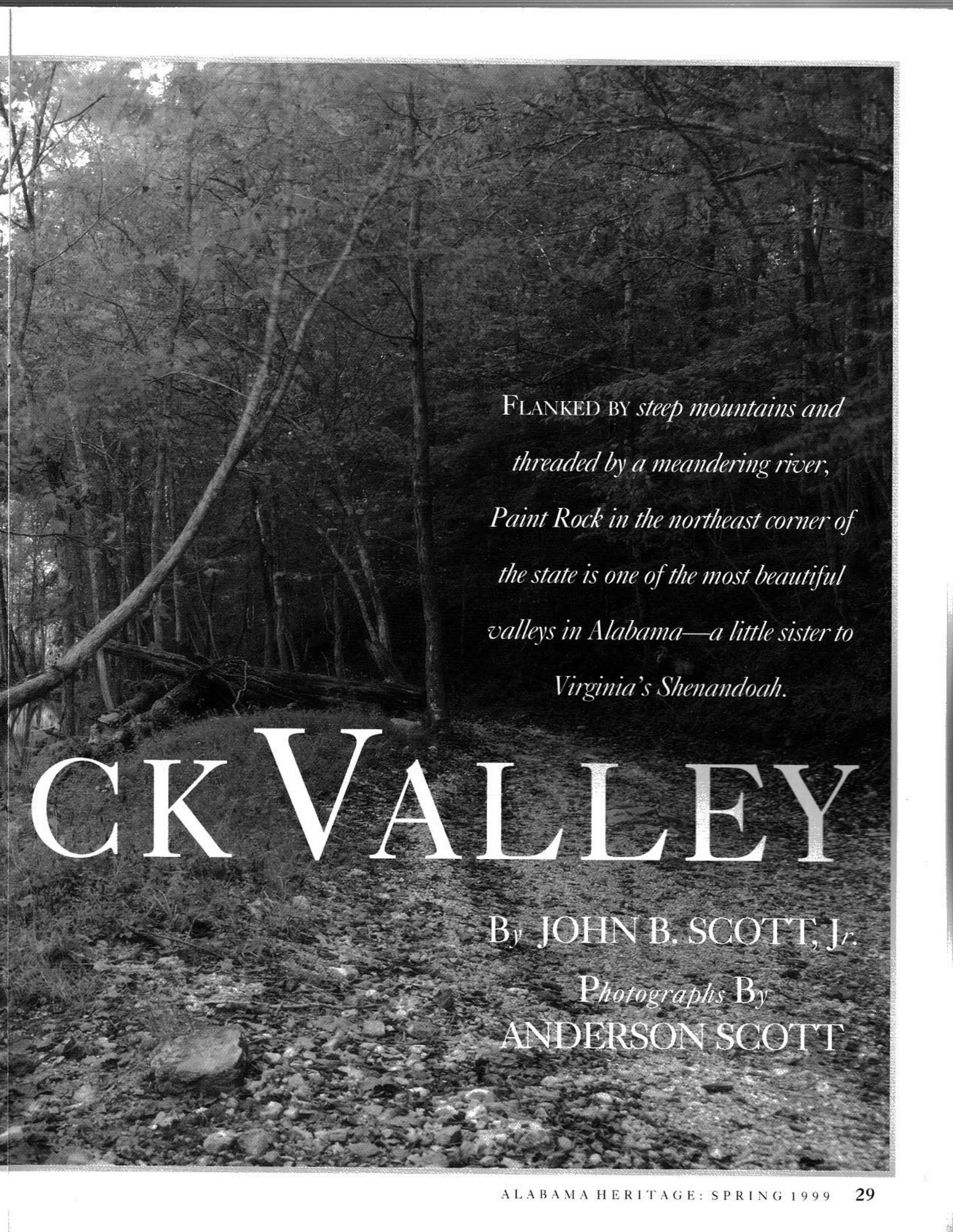


ALABAMA HERITAGE





PAINT RO



FLANKED BY *steep mountains and*
threaded by a meandering river,
Paint Rock in the northeast corner of
the state is one of the most beautiful
valleys in Alabama—a little sister to
Virginia's Shenandoah.

CK VALLEY

By JOHN B. SCOTT, Jr.

Photographs By
ANDERSON SCOTT

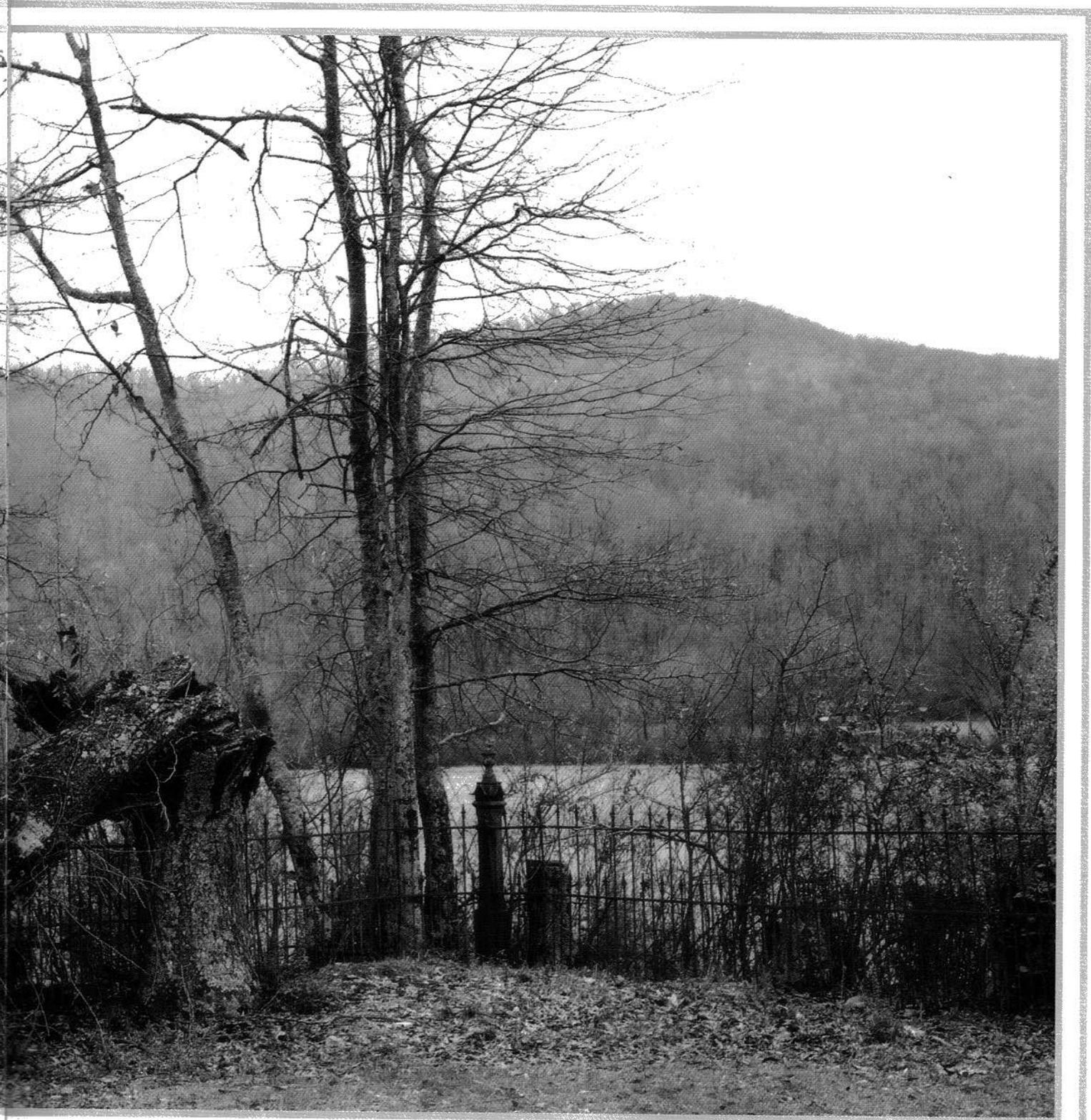
IN THE NORTHEAST CORNER of Alabama lies a little kingdom set apart from the rest of the state. This “other country” is situated in the northern part of Jackson County where the Cumberland Mountains rise behind the string of towns along the Tennessee River. One senses immediately that something is different about the place. Extending down from Tennessee, the Cumberland Mountains dominate the landscape. The remnants of a great plateau, the Cumberlands have been sculpted by ages of wind and water into a maze of flat-topped, steep-flanked mountains. Capped by hard sandstone ramparts and underlain with softer limestone, these mountains might look a bit like western mesas if their contours were not softened by the forest cover. Tucked away among the thickly wooded promontories are level coves of all shapes and sizes—many hemmed in on three sides by the mountains. It was the deep, fertile soils of these coves that drew the yeoman farmers of English and Scotch-Irish ancestry down from Virginia and the Carolinas to settle this country in the early 1800s.

White pioneers, however, were by no means the first people upon the land. They were preceded by many waves of native folk of whom the most recent were the Cherokees. By the middle 1700s, the westward tide of white settlement was already lapping at the eastern ramparts of the Blue Ridge, but the Cherokees still held sway over a vast mountain domain which included present-day Jackson County. Proud and brave, the Cherokees defended their lands in northeast Alabama with tenacity, driving the encroaching Shawnees north beyond the Ohio River, repelling occasional probes from the Creeks on the south, and stifling all early attempts at white settlement. Long

IT WAS THE DEEP, fertile soils of Paint Rock Valley's coves that drew yeoman farmers of English and Scotch-Irish ancestry down from Virginia and the Carolinas in the early 1800s.



Above: Graveyard, Princeton, with Putnam Mountain in the background. Previous spread: Upper reaches of Estill Fork, Paint Rock River. As one drives north from the town of Estillfork, the valley narrows and the road edges closer to the river. Finally, the pavement gives out altogether, and the road becomes a graveled track that runs along the river's lip. This photograph was made in the summer, when the water was exceptionally low.



after the Cherokees had begun ceding lands elsewhere, Chief Dragging Canoe and his followers, known as the Chicamaugas, kept the Tennessee River blockaded and stood their ground in the area where Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia come together.

Chief Dragging Canoe died in 1792, and within two years the power of the Chicamaugas was broken—their

warriors defeated and their settlements overrun. Under relentless pressure from land-hungry whites, the Cherokees were finally forced to cede most of their lands in northeast Alabama to the United States in 1819. Alabama became a state that same year, and the new legislature, meeting in Huntsville, created Jackson County from the territory acquired from the Cherokees.

The new county was named for Gen. Andrew Jackson, who was showing race horses in Huntsville at the time.

With the opening of these new lands, white settlers surged into northern Alabama. The Tennessee River, then wild and untamed, was the means by which many of these pioneers reached Jackson County. Struggling over the gaps in the Appalachians or coming down from the western valleys of Virginia, they converged at Knoxville. From this point, they set off down the river, drifting along its broad reaches in flatboats. Their final challenge was "The Narrows" where, between present-day Chattanooga and the Alabama line, the river bends around on itself and cuts through a mountain range. Here, in the Gorge of the Tennessee, they had to run the gauntlet of thirty miles of treacherous rapids bearing such ominous names as "The Suck," "The Boiling Pot," "The Skillet," and "The Frying Pan." When the river finally calmed down, widened out, and emerged into the magnificent Tennessee Valley of North Alabama, it must have seemed to these weary travelers that they had, indeed, reached the Promised Land.

For a fortunate few, "getting there was half the fun," as one old boatman put it. In an account published in *Harper's Magazine* in the 1850s, this veteran of the river recalled the first time he piloted a flatboat through The Narrows. Fortified by a bottle of whiskey, he elected to take on the rapids at night. He and the boat's owner were taking turns at the bottle when the boat was caught up in a strong, smooth current "as slick as goose grease." He continued:

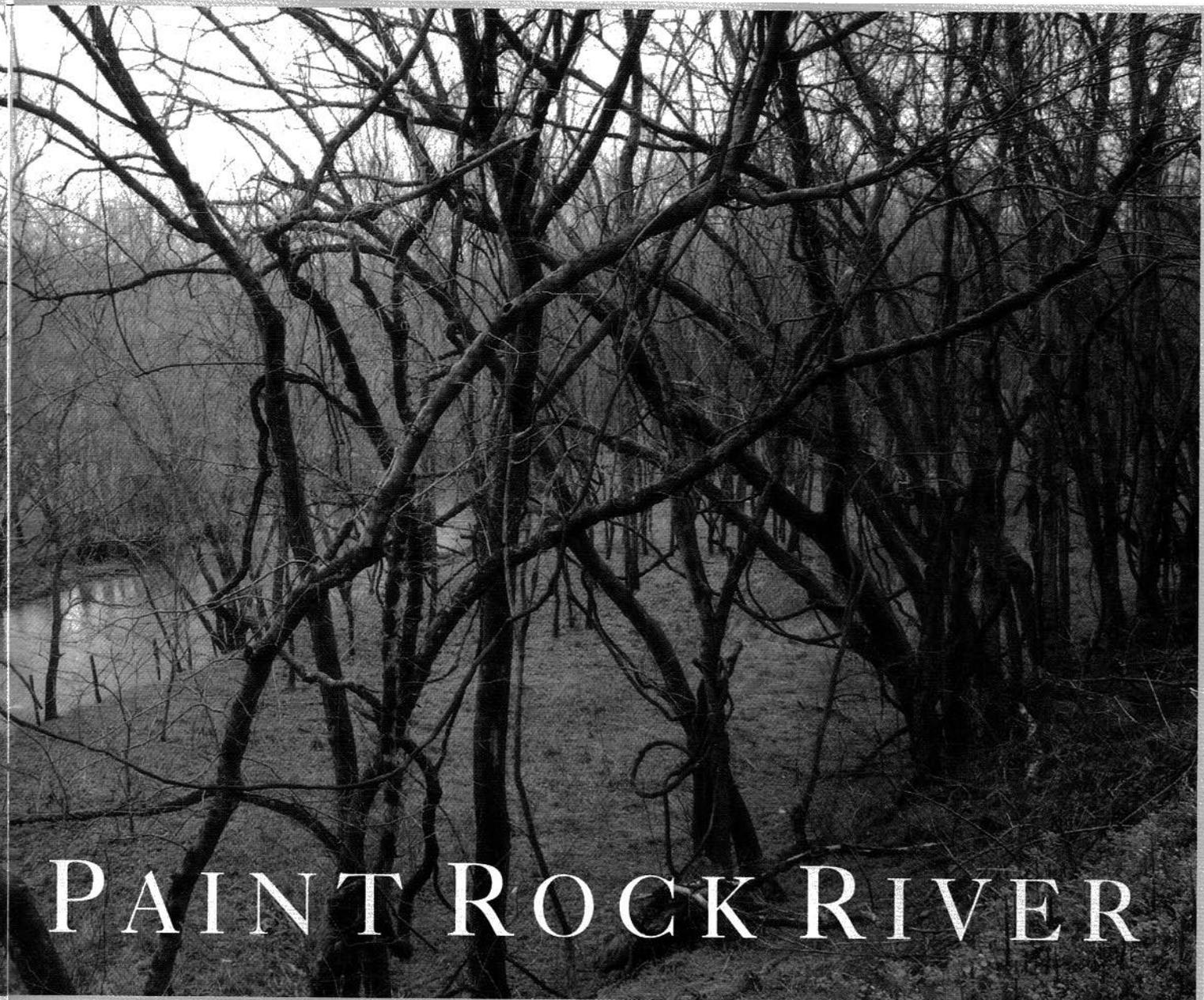
So, by and by we see lights on the shore, and passed by a house where a feller was playin' Old Zip Coon like a saw-mill, and people dancin' . . . So we went on pretty sprightly; and by jingo, before we got well out of sight and hearin' of that house we went past another, whar they were dancin' to the same tune. "Success to 'em," says I. "Hand us that bottle; while fun is goin', we might as well have our share." So, we drank a mouthful, and before [we] were done talking about it went past another place, fiddlin' and dancin' like the rest.

Finally, on coming upon the ninth such house, the boaters, beginning to doubt their eyes, pulled up to the landing for a reality check and found they had been going round and round in The Boiling Pot for the past several hours.

As the new immigrants fanned out into the coves and hollows of the Cumberlands, a goodly number took up lands in the broad, beautiful Paint Rock Valley, which extends from present day U.S. Highway 72 north some



USUALLY THE PAINT ROCK River is a peaceful stream, running green and clear, but occasionally it goes on a rampage and floods the whole floor of the valley. In an attempt to control flooding, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, in the 1960s, "channelized" a twenty-mile stretch of the river at the lower end of the valley. The rest of the stream, however, remains in a relatively natural state. Along with the Cahaba (*see AH No. 50*), it is one of the few free-flowing rivers left in Alabama. Jim Godwin, aquatic zoologist for The Nature Conservancy's Alabama Natural Heritage Program, says that the Paint Rock River, with its one hundred different species of fish and forty-five species of mussels, is one of the most biologically



PAINT ROCK RIVER

diverse streams in the state. He points out that the river is important to the survival of several species. Two of the mussels, the pale lilliput and the Alabama lampmussel, are now found only in the Paint Rock, and one of the smaller fishes, the palezone shiner, survives in only one other stream.

Although there are no significant industrial or municipal discharges into the river, it is being affected by “nonpoint” sources of pollution from agricultural run-off and leaking residential septic tanks. In 1996 a group of local residents and landowners formed a nonprofit organization known as the Paint Rock River Initiative for the purpose of protecting the river and its watershed. The group has obtained initial funding through a \$200,000 grant from the federal Environmental Protection Agency

The Larkin fork of the Paint Rock River, named for the stained bluffs at its mouth.

routed through the Alabama Department of Environmental Management and has engaged retired army lieutenant colonel Billy W. Morrison as project manager. Morrison relates with contagious enthusiasm PRRI's plans for promoting sound conservation practices by the farmers and residents of the valley. In what will be a cooperative endeavor, he hopes to involve everyone from the largest cattlemen to area schoolchildren in protecting the river. Plans include the establishment of an environmental center in the town of Paint Rock which will be located in an old school building with five acres of adjoining grounds for demonstration projects.

THE FOLKS who settled Paint Rock Valley were true pioneers. They did not come bringing retinues of slaves and old family silver. They were small farmers who raised corn, oats, and wheat, with maybe a little cotton on the side.

sixty miles to the Tennessee line. Flanked by steep mountains and threaded by the meandering Paint Rock River, this valley may have seemed to some of the Virginians to be a little sister of the Shenandoah. The river, which gets its name from the stained bluffs at its mouth, begins where the Estill Fork, flowing down from the state of Tennessee, is joined by Hurricane Creek coming in from the east off Cumberland Mountain. The river then flows south for sixty miles, looping for most of the way through the broad, flat floor of Paint Rock Valley and finally emptying into what is now Guntersville Lake on the Tennessee River.

THE FOLKS WHO SETTLED Paint Rock Valley were true pioneers. They did not come bringing retinues of slaves and the old family silver, dreaming of grand cotton plantations. They were small farmers who raised corn, oats, wheat, pumpkins, and sugar cane, with maybe a little cotton on the side; they kept horses, mules, cattle, sheep, and hogs. Corn was the staple, and, according to Jackson County historian John Robert Kenamer, the coons, squirrels,



and bears often got most of it. "It was the habit of the bear," he relates, "to go into the field at night and gather forty or fifty ears of corn, pile it up and sit down to eat all he wanted."

As their farms became more firmly established and the country tamed down a bit, residents of the valley began to do some exporting, hauling what cotton they had overland to Nashville or sending it downriver to wind up eventually in New Orleans. Some of the men and boys also got to see a bit of the world by driving herds of hogs—two or three hundred at a time—

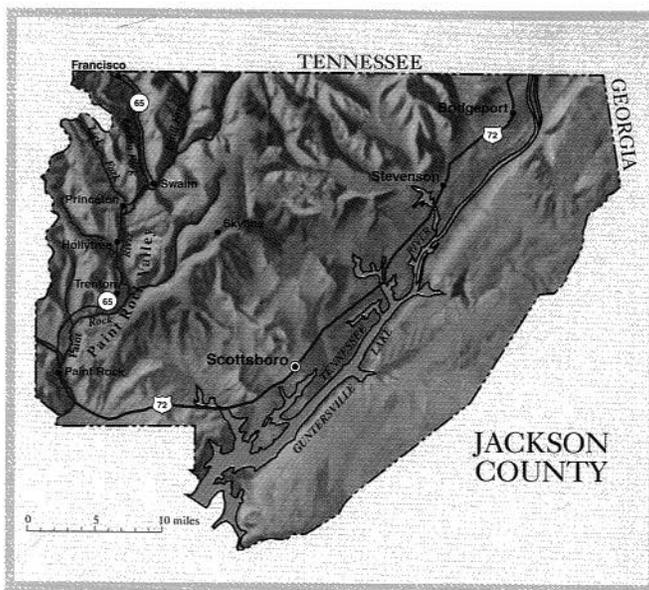
down to central and south Alabama where the planters were flush with cash and short on pork. The whole round trip was usually made on foot, so it was sightseeing the hard way. A whiff of their adventures along the way is embedded in one of the old dance-party songs:

*Hog drovers, hog drovers, hog drovers, we air,
A-courtin' your darter so sweet and so fair,
Can we git lodgin' here, oh, here,
Can we git er-lodgin' here?*

To which the house owner replies:

*This is my darter that sets on my lap,
And none o' you pigstealers can get her from Pap.*

In the early days, the main valley floor was such a tangle of big timber, canebrakes, and wetlands that virtually all of the settlers built their cabins and established their farms in the side coves where the land was easier to clear and the climate was considered more healthful. Their pattern of settlement is evident to this day, for although the main floor of the valley is now open pastures and cropland, nearly all of the communities and farmhouses still nestle back in the coves or hug the bases of the flanking mountains.



*Above: Mountain-rimmed Paint Rock Valley in the western section of Jackson County remained one of the most isolated places in the state well into the twentieth century. (Map courtesy University of Alabama Cartographic Laboratory) **Opposite page below: House near Larkin Fork, Paint Rock River.***

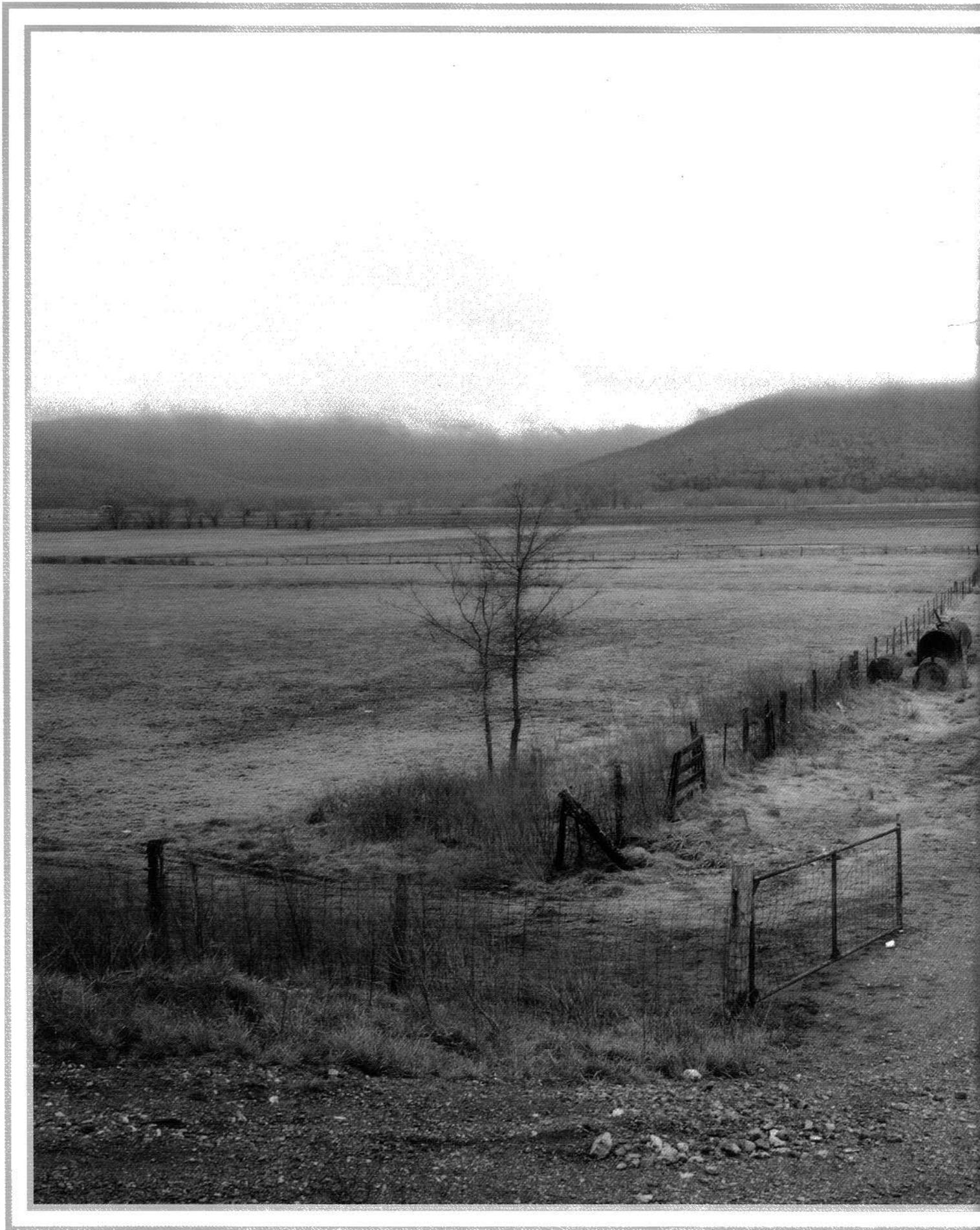
say how the folks in Francisco got out when the water was up. This sort of isolation was probably partially responsible for many of the early settlers making sure they had plenty of company around the house, as well as help for the farm, by employing the "do-it-yourself" method. For example, one old valley patriarch, Moses Swaim, who settled on the Estill Fork in 1823, had twenty-five children by three successive wives.

In the years leading up to the Civil War, Paint Rock Valley evolved along the same lines that Thomas Jefferson had hoped the entire country would evolve. As Jefferson biographer John Dos Passos put it: "He wanted a republic of medium-sized farms. He felt with the early Romans that only on the independence and integrity of men who farmed their own lands could a government truly republican be founded." Paint Rock Valley in the 1850s, with its quilt of self-sufficient family farms, would have come close to Jefferson's ideal. Then came a war that pulled the people of the valley into a conflict in which they had much to lose and practically nothing to gain.

The Civil War in Jackson County was truly a fratricidal conflict, for the sympathies of its own people were divided. Although the county's primary allegiance was to

Following pages: A dirt road near the town of Paint Rock.

Until comparatively recent times, the residents of some of the outlying communities lived in a state of isolation that is hard to envision today. Consider, for instance, the little settlement of Francisco, situated ten miles up the Larkin Fork from the main valley. Today, State Highway 65 goes right through Francisco, but as late as 1916 a report on the roads in the area noted that the one dirt road leading up to Francisco from the main valley was "practically in the bed of the creek" and crossed the Larkin Fork twenty-five times in one five-mile stretch. The report did not





the Confederacy, the mountain communities of the Cumberlands also included a substantial number of Unionists or "Tories." Recognizing early on the strategic importance of the Tennessee Valley, the Union occupied all of Jackson County north of the Tennessee River during most of the war. As the Union army moved into the area, a band of thirty-three Confederate volunteers from up and down the valley crossed into Tennessee to join Company K of the 4th Tennessee Cavalry, being organized at Winchester and commanded by Captain Francisco Rice, a medical doctor from the valley.

No major military engagement occurred in Paint Rock Valley, but troop movements were frequent along the railway line at the lower end. In addition, the Union army often sent small units known as "wedges" through the occupied part of the county to plunder the countryside and demoralize the Southern supporters. These raids led to retaliations by Confederate partisans, and, as the war dragged on, to savage guerrilla skirmishes throughout all of the county north of the Tennessee River. In a memoir published in the July 1901 edition of *The Confederate Veteran*, J. R. Harris of Scottsboro, who served with the 4th Alabama Cavalry, recalled the situation in Jackson County toward the close of the war:

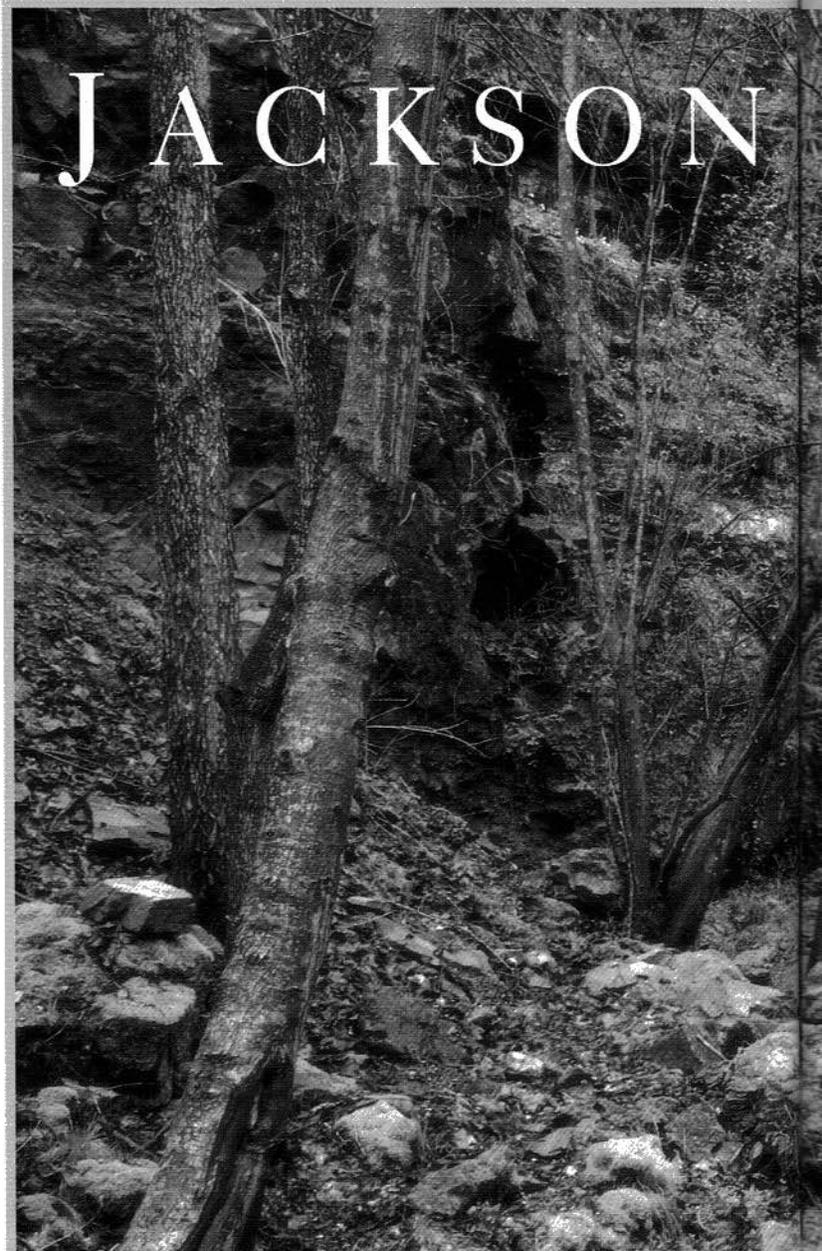
After Hood's retreat from Nashville, I passed back through my home county in North Alabama and saw how the Tory companies, as we called them, were stationed at almost every railroad station in the country and learned of their daily robberies, murders and abuses of the old men and good women of the country.

Although resigned to the South's eventual defeat, Harris picked a few men and continued to fight guerrilla-fashion behind federal lines until the end of the war. He chose his opportunities carefully, he later recounted, but never attacked from ambush—always in the open and always mounted. The account of his last engagement illustrates the bitter nature of the conflict in Jackson County:

So far as I know, I made about the last fight of the war with five men against sixteen. Of these, there were two Indians, one Negro and thirteen Tories of North Alabama, who had gone afoot [during the night] from Larkinsville, into Paint Rock Valley [where they had stolen] a horse each, two large farm wagons, four yoke of oxen, . . . and were returning with these loaded with beds and bedding and wearing apparel. We charged them in close quarters, killing five and wounding two, and captured the wagons, teams, and drivers and fourteen horses. The horses had sixty-three

LOOKING IMPASSIVELY DOWN, the enduring mountains surrounding Paint Rock Valley probably regard the human history of the valley as but a passing pageant. But even the mountains have a history, and they know how to keep a few secrets of their own, for this is limestone country and the hills are honeycombed with caverns and fissures, great and small. Subterranean watercourses murmur through these underground labyrinths, sometimes surfacing as cool, clear springs that bubble out of crevices and caves on the flanks of the mountains.

According to the Huntsville-based National Speleological Society, the Paint Rock River watershed contains over seven hundred registered caves. Most are known



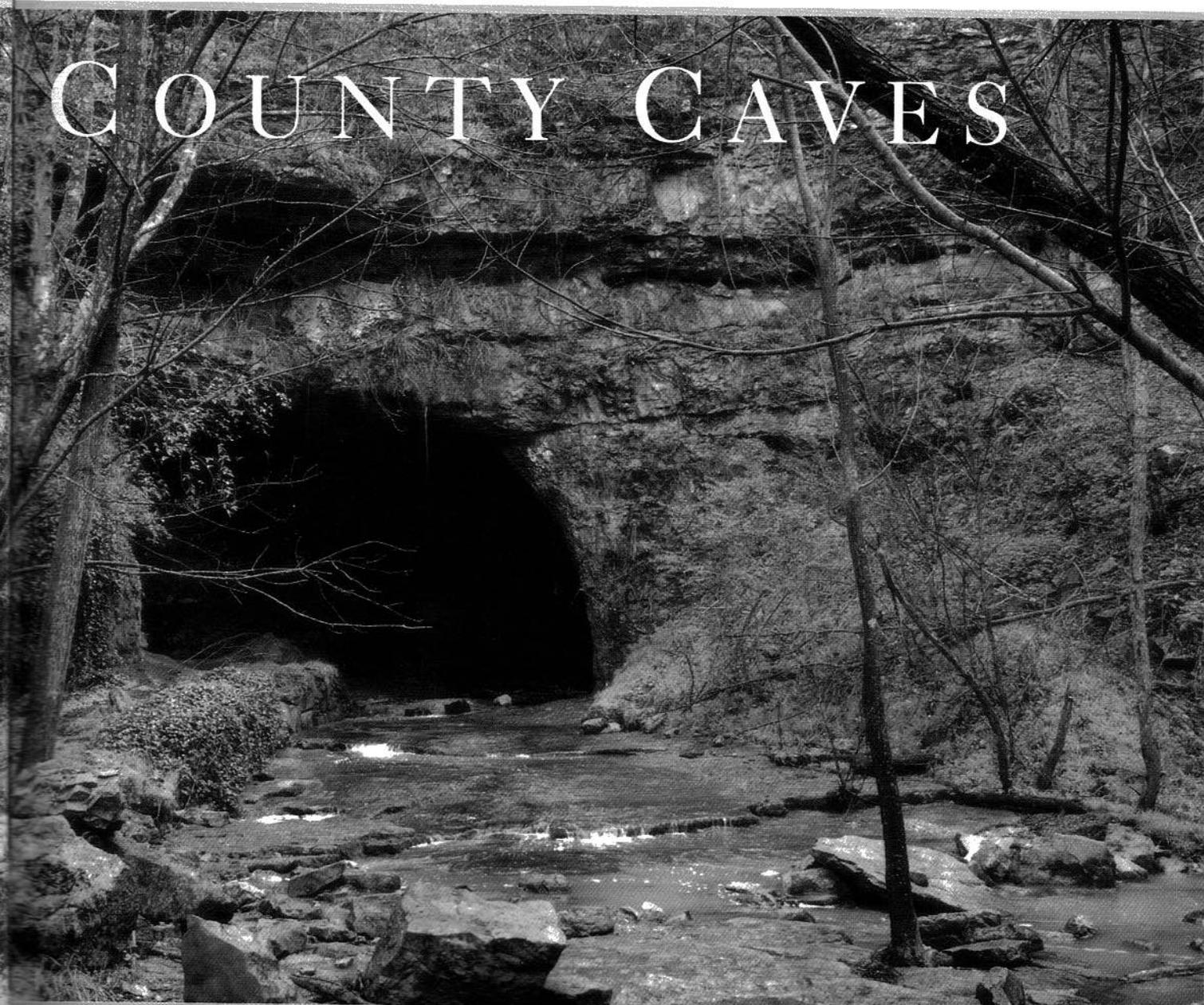
only to the landowner and a few spelunkers, but several of the most spectacular are world famous. Perhaps the best known is Fern Cave, located on the slopes of Nat Mountain. With sixteen miles of explored chambers and passages, it is the longest known cave in Alabama. The entrance is now owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which has closed access to protect the estimated two million gray bats that hibernate in the cave during the winter months.

Although virtually all cave entrances in the Paint Rock area are on private land, many landowners permit access to reliable spelunkers. Because these intrepid explorers, like the crew of the Starship *Enterprise*, want "to boldly go where no man has gone before," an average of about one hundred new caves are discovered in Ala-

bama each year. Sometimes explorers hit the jackpot. Last year, for example, a group of spelunkers, including Chris Hudson of Huntsville, chanced upon a small, previously unknown entrance to Guess Cave, located in a side cove of Paint Rock Valley. They found that it led to five miles of passages including several huge chambers with spectacular formations and an underground stream with a twenty-five-foot waterfall.

Blowing Wind Cave, near Scottsboro, Jackson County. Although not in the Paint Rock Valley, it is typical of the caverns that honeycomb the base of the Cumberland Plateau in the valley. Home to a huge colony of bats which emerge each night to hunt, Blowing Wind Cave has been designated a national wildlife refuge by virtue of its bat population.

COUNTY CAVES



homemade counterpanes or bed covers tied on them with cords cut from the beds.

Another Confederate soldier, John Wyeth, described the desolate condition of Jackson County as he made his way home to Guntersville just after the war ended.

As we came west on the train nothing but lonesome-looking chimneys remained of the villages and farmhouses. They were suggestive of tombstones in a graveyard. Bridgeport, Stevenson, Bellefonte, Scottsboro, Larkinsville, Woodville, Paint Rock . . . had been wiped out by the war policy of starvation by fire. Farmhouses, gins, fences, and cattle were gone. From a hilltop in the farming district a few miles from New Market, I counted the chimneys of six different houses which had been destroyed.

Understandably, the war and the economic privations that followed it inflicted hardships and heartaches on the people of the Paint Rock Valley that took generations to heal.

In the decades following the Civil War, Jackson County became caught up in the general obsession with cash crops, and the Paint Rock country came under the tyrannical rule of old King Cotton. Growing cotton took not only land and labor but also money. Once a farmer started borrowing money for seed, fertilizer, and other supplies, the banks and other creditors insisted that he keep on growing cotton to pay back his debts. Thus, the old independent farmers got sucked into the money economy—and it proved the ruin of many of them. As one canny observer put it: “Once a farmer starts keeping books, he’s going broke shore as hell.”

So, stuck in a rut, Paint Rock Valley sent its cotton off to satisfy the insatiable appetite of the mills, but the chief export of the valley turned out to be not cotton but the more energetic and ambitious of its sons and daughters. The Bouldin family offers a good illustration.

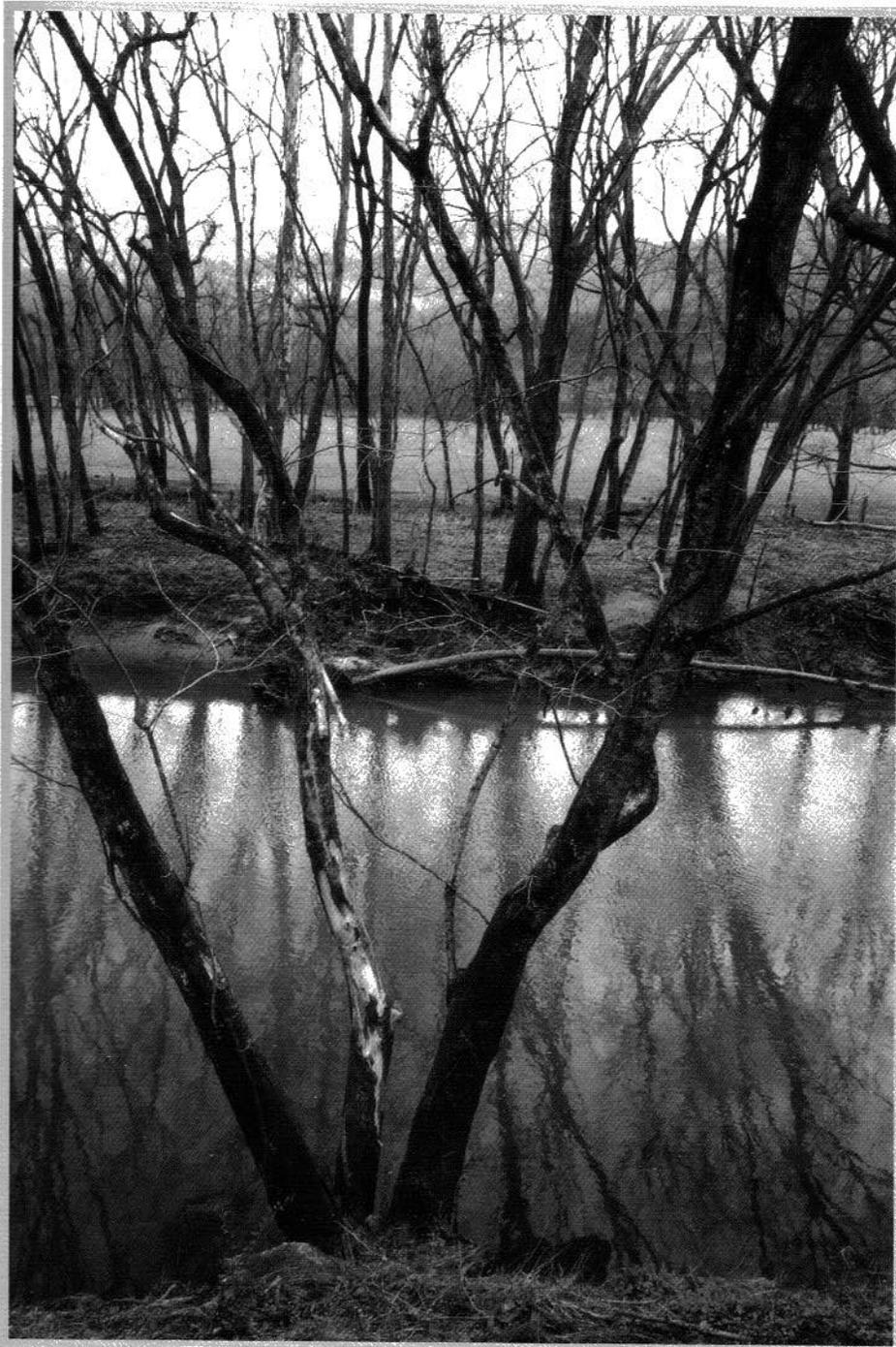
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John and Mary Bouldin married in 1864 and raised twelve children on their farm near Princeton. Through the Bouldins’ heroic work and perseverance, eleven of their children were able to attend college, but, ironically, there was little to hold such bright young people in the valley once they had completed their schooling. Of the seven sons, Benjamin Franklin became a doctor in Arizona; Thomas Jefferson, a lawyer in Ft. Worth, Texas; George Washington, a Baptist missionary in Japan; and Terrell, a businessman in Argentina. Another son, Virgil, became a lawyer in the county seat of Scottsboro and later served twenty-one years on the Alabama Supreme Court. Two sons, James and Gideon, followed in their father’s footsteps and became farmers—but left the valley. Of all the Bouldin children, only one daughter, Amanda, stayed where she was born.

BECAUSE OF ITS REMOTE mountainous situation, the county was known for many years throughout the Tennessee Valley as “High Jackson.” Through the early 1900s it remained basically agricultural and was little touched by the industrial activity in Birmingham and other rising cities to the south. Proud of the area’s rural traditions and self-reliance, the county’s principal newspaper, the *Progressive Age*, published in Scottsboro, continued to carry on its masthead the slogan: “High Jackson—Home of Hogs, Hominy, Health and Happiness.”

The county was finally stirred from its time-honored way of life by the coming of the Tennessee Valley Authority and the construction of Guntersville Dam, completed in 1937. This project gave a needed economic boost to the area and gradually made cheap electric power available throughout the county, but it also caused intense hardships. TVA condemned and bought 110,145 acres of land along the Tennessee River, displacing 1,182 families. (The wrenching effect of the dam on the life of Jackson County was vividly depicted in Borden Deal’s 1940 novel, *Dunbar’s Cove*.) Although Paint Rock Valley was not directly affected, the massive dam project had a ripple effect that touched all corners of Jackson County.

By the time of the Great Depression and the coming of TVA in the 1930s, many descendants of the proud, independent yeoman farmers who had settled Jackson County had fallen off the back of the economic wagon. They were desperately poor sharecroppers and tenant farmers. In 1934 the Federal Emergency Relief Administration launched an effort to rescue some of the neediest—



Larkin Fork. On the upper reaches of the Paint Rock River's tributaries, the water runs a peculiar shade of blue-green, a color imparted when the water percolates through limestone underground. The primary sources of all the valley's streams are springs which emerge from limestone caves at the Cumberland Plateau's base.

particularly those displaced by the building of the Guntersville Dam. The agency acquired 13,000 acres on the Cumberland Plateau, above Paint Rock Valley, and established a "model farm community" known as Skyline

Farms, designed to accommodate some two hundred families. Each family was provided forty to sixty acres and a modest home which they could purchase over time from the government at a cost not to exceed \$2,000. J. W. Wall, the engineer for the project, commented on the project's participants in a 1939 *Birmingham News* interview:

Most of these people are . . . of good stock. Practically all of them had ancestors that fought in the Revolutionary War. Look over a list of their names and you'll see many names prominently identified with the history of our country. It was the system, the terrible tenant system, that got them.

In addition to helping needy people, the project was also designed to keep the most desperate of the dispossessed farmers from joining "red organizations," and it is ironic that Skyline Farms, with its government-run commissary, community center, and cooperative marketing system, had many of the trappings of a commune. After an enthusiastic beginning, though, the project—which local papers called the "Great Social Experiment"—failed. By 1945 government sponsorship

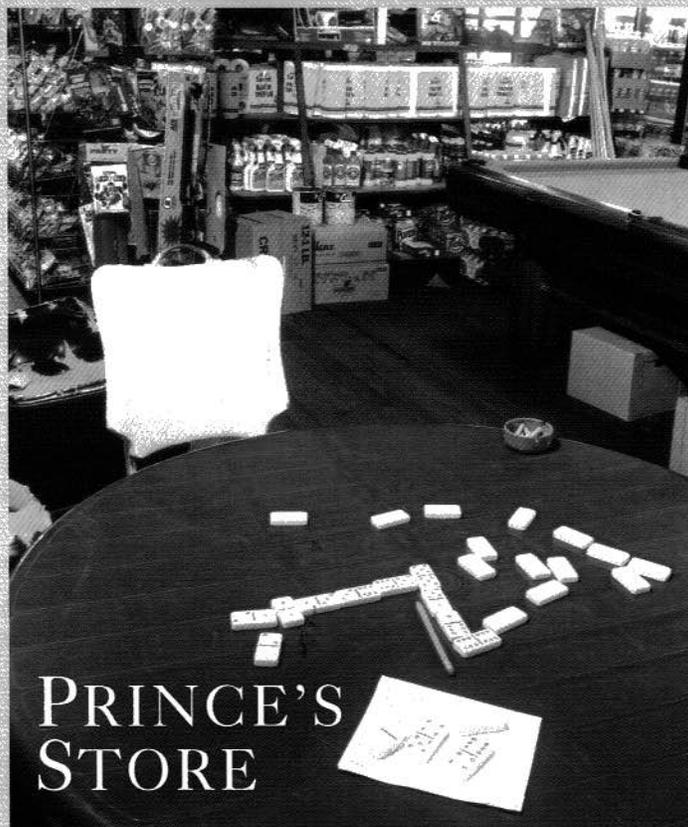
had ended and the land and community buildings had passed into private hands. A number of the project's buildings remain intact, however, and recently there has been a surge of interest in preserving these structures, particularly the Skyline Farms School.

According to long-time residents, the population of the valley reached its peak during the late 1930s. At that time, the town of Princeton, with seven stores, was a lively place. Bob Maples, a lifelong resident of the valley, remembers attending, as a boy, a 1936 open-air concert at Jaybird Flats, on the outskirts of town, at which the

legendary banjo player Uncle Dave Macon and his bluegrass band drew a crowd of some three thousand people. Further up the valley at Estillfork, the wagons would be lined up for a quarter of a mile on Saturdays at the store then operated by the Reid family.

With the advent of World War II, the lure of high-paying factory jobs in the cities, and the general mechanization of agriculture, the population of the valley began to decline, a trend that has continued ever since. Although fewer people are there now—the valley has an estimated population of under one thousand today—the region looks tidy and prosperous. The main valley floor and the side coves are a quilt of corn, soybean, and hay fields interspersed with cattle farms and a few poultry operations. The mountains, cloaked in dense second-growth hardwoods, form a striking backdrop that changes hues with the seasons.

As one travels up the valley, the larger communities are marked by the post offices at Paint Rock, Trenton, Hollytree, Princeton, and Estillfork. Of these communities, only two are large enough to be called “towns.” Located at the bottom end of the valley, Paint Rock would have to be considered the more urban of the two since it is on busy U.S. Highway 72 and the Norfolk Southern Railroad passes through. Princeton, however, some fifteen miles up the valley on State Highway 65, is the queen of the countryside. Beautifully situated where the Lick Fork comes out



WHATEVER ELSE may happen in Paint Rock Valley, one institution seems destined to endure: Prince's Store at Estillfork. This emporium was built by Mr. Floyd “Pete” Prince in 1949—the same year electricity finally made it to the head of the valley—and he has been running it ever since. Into this small building is crammed just about everything a reasonable person could need (the sign out front says “If we ain't got it, you don't need it”). It is also headquarters for news and a running domino game in the back that has been going strong as long as the store. Mr. Pete, now ninety-three, is still going strong himself, but he is gradually turning the reins over to a son and granddaughter, so the future of Prince's Store seems assured.

of the mountains to join the main river, this tidy village is the home of Paint Rock Valley High School, which serves the entire valley. The school's main building was constructed in the 1930s of native field stone. Next to the school is an athletic field named for country songwriter Curly Putnam, who grew up in the valley and captured its essence in his most famous song, “The Green, Green Grass of Home.” With grades K through 12 and a present enrollment of 165 students, the school provides a common bond that helps give the whole valley a sense of community.

But what of the future of Paint Rock Valley? Some years back another popular country song spoke of the longing for old times and familiar scenes that had been swept away by what we are wont to call “progress.” The refrain was simple but filled with a nameless pathos: “Don't it make you want to go home now? Don't it make you want to go home?” Paint Rock Valley is still one place where “home” hasn't been swept away. But can this last? The growing city of Huntsville is perilously close. Will the valley ultimately become just another suburb with its woods and fields whacked up into ranchettes, mobile home parks, and strip malls? Or will its people have the foresight and will to preserve the rich human and natural history of the area so that Paint Rock Valley remains one of the most beautiful places in Alabama? Only time will tell.

Al