

Nicholson looks back at a century

Residents of Jackson town will sing its praises at centennial fest



Choir director Clarke Kelser leads practice recently outside of the Nicholson City Hall. The choir was preparing for a performance at the Nicholson centennial celebration today.

Kelly Lambert / Staff

Victoria Stephens, 5, Anna Kate Thurmond, 5, and Mary Grant Thurmond, 2, perform during a recent practice at the Nicholson Civic Center for the centennial celebration.

Kelly Lambert / Staff

Members of the Nicholson Community Choir practice on the porch of Nicholson City Hall in preparation for the city's centennial celebration.

Kelly Lambert / Staff



By Michelle R.M. McQuiston | Correspondent | Story updated at 11:02 PM on Friday, June 29, 2007

NICHOLSON - Margaret Ward remembers "that game" and admits that she participated in the pandemonium.

"That game" was a sandlot baseball match between the Georgia towns of Nicholson and archrival Sanford shortly after World War II.

According to local tradition, as well as the accounts of a few first-hand observers, a hotly contested call at third base sparked a free-for-all on the field and in the stands.

"It was serious business," contends Ward, who chairs the planning committee for Nicholson's centennial celebration today.

Baseball - and rivalries among the community-based teams - was an important part of life for mid-century Nicholsonians, says Donna O'Kelley Butler, a professional storyteller and near-native. (Her parents moved to a Nicholson farm, relocating her father's parents and younger siblings with them to an

adjacent house, in the 1930s. Still, "that's new to some people around here," says Butler.)

Butler wrote a play that community members will perform today at Nicholson's centennial celebration, which runs from 2-9 p.m. in the Jackson County town.

The "historical storytelling tableau," as Butler describes it, is based on contemporary newspaper reports, county historical society records and oral histories taken from those who either remember the big events, such as "that game," or have heard the tales oft-repeated by parents and grandparents.

Performances are at 2:30 and 7 p.m. in the Nicholson Civic Center.

The town, 12 miles north of Athens on U.S. Highway 441, was chartered in 1907, but its roots date back to at least 1796, when the first local church, Cabin Creek Baptist, was established.

For much of its existence, Nicholson has been a place most people drive through - or ride a train through - on the way to somewhere else. The community, then unincorporated and known as Cooper, renamed itself in the 1870s after the president of the Northeastern Railroad in exchange for a fuel stop on the Athens-to-Lula line.

Today, while much of smalltown America shrinks, Nicholson is growing, albeit more slowly than communities on the western side of Jackson County, which abuts the metro-Atlanta county of Gwinnett. There are farms - Jackson County is home to the largest sheep herd in Georgia - alongside growing residential developments.

Many residents work in Athens and other nearby towns, but that has long been the case, says Butler, and Nicholson still is a small town rather than a bedroom community. It remains the type of place where, should you drive your car into a ditch, a passing resident will stop and call neighbor with a pickup truck and a heavy chain to pull it out.

Nicholson also is a place where collective memories reaching far into the past contribute to the sense of community. It was clear at a rehearsal for today's performance that residents are excited about their history. In the seats, older community members shared stories, alongside high school drama students and musicians and very young children, between scenes.

Ward showed off an old Nicholson team baseball uniform. Another participant had a tiny majorette's dress long ago worn for the Nicholson rhythm band, whose elementary school drummers and twirlers once marched at a rally for President John F. Kennedy.

Nicholson residents seem to share a sense place that can only come from living in it over multiple generations.

"Some people would say it is not more than a spit of land with a highway running through it," wrote

Stuart Robinett, an East Jackson Middle School student and the winner of a centennial essay contest. But "Nicholson is a peaceful and quiet place. ... It has a rather slow pace, much to my relief."

But then, Robinett is too young to remember "that game."

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