

*The Historic Reelfoot Lake Region: An Early History of the People and Places of Western Obion and Present Day Lake County.* By Judge David G. Hayes (Collierville, TN:

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Alluring and mysterious, Reelfoot Lake and its majestic bald cypress trees anchored in swamps and sloughs are an exceptionally rare site in the Southeast. The lake meanders through Lake, Dyer, and Obion Counties in Tennessee, one of the most captivating places in the Mississippi River flood plain. Nestled in far west Tennessee, it lies east of Kentucky's Jackson Purchase Region which shares its proud heritage.

*The Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, written by David G. Hayes, proclaims its rich culture. An attorney in private practice, Hayes served as a senior judge on the Tennessee Supreme Court. He also taught at the University of Tennessee at Martin and was a faculty advisor at the National Judicial College at the University of Nevada in Reno. As part of the third generation of his family to reside in the lake hills, Judge Hayes knows the subject matter well.

An authoritative publication, this is the first known written account of early Lake County. It includes some anecdotes not previously reported. Misinformation about the area is addressed and in some instances revised in concise detail.

Hayes's extensive treatment of old files, county archives, court documents, deeds, biographies, and newspapers, reflect the author's dedication to the finding of facts. Opening chapters grab the readers interest with the description of the lake and its environs, juxtaposed with the backdrop of Paleo people and native residents.

Well-researched narrative portrays the power struggles among the multiple governments that later claimed control of these water lands. He describes these complexities by relating the rivers and land as the Chickasaw Nation and French trappers would have seen them. By using

eye witness interpretations of the 1811-12 earthquakes which formed the lake, Hayes masterfully brings the terrifying events to life. For example:

*“On the 16th of December 1811, about two o’clock, a.m., we were visited by a violent shock of an earthquake, accompanied by a very awful noise resembling loud but distant thunder, but more hoarse and vibrating, which was followed in a few minutes by the complete saturation of the atmosphere, with sulphurous vapor, causing total darkness. The screams of the affrighted inhabitants running to and fro, not knowing where to go, or what to do – the cries of the fowls and beasts of every species – the cracking of trees falling, and the roaring of the Mississippi – the current of which was retrograde for a few minutes, owing as is supposed, to an interruption in its bed – formed a truly horrible scene.”*

*– Eliza Bryan, resident of New Madrid (p. 25-26).*

Other compelling depictions highlight unique aspects of the landscape such as the lost rivers, the washout, the scatters, the bluffs above the lake, as well as how the lake affected those living nearby. Hayes chronicles numerous villages and communities through the exchange of lands, establishment of governments and the development of transportation venues.

Real people are woven into the story as Hayes handily guides the reader from those European explorers to pioneer settlers of the new frontier. The legendary David Crockett provided one of the most visual, complete and entertaining vignettes. His fascinating life as a land owner, game hunter, politician and biographer was significant in the formation of these Tennessee counties.

Kentucky is not forgotten in the telling, as Mills Point was a busy river point settlement on the east side of the lake. Positioned in what was then called Hickman County, this essential town was part of the Jackson Purchase. In 1837, Mills Point was renamed Hickman.

Kentucky Bend held its own weight in the community and economic development of the vicinity. Hayes deftly applies spirited sketches of local river people to recount important factors such as political wrangling, the formation of Lake County, and the glory days of steamboats.

As the territory evolved, farmers turned from corn production and cotton became king of agricultural pursuits. Slave labor eventually changed to the sharecropper system which led to around eighty percent of cropland being rented in Lake County. Crop failures, market values and lending practices eventually caused many farmers to leave the area. This pushed large farm operations to bring laborers in from surrounding states. The black population of Lake County tripled between 1890 – 1910. After the 20th Century, agriculture in the section became a two-tiered system, large farmers and farm laborers.

Hayes uses his professional insight to reveal the past through early court cases of Lake and Obion Counties. Topics range from apprenticeships, caring for the orphaned and poor, setting tavern tax rates and the branding of animals.

For Civil War buffs, the defense of the Mississippi River and the Battle of Island 10 in Chapter 13 are a must read. For those who simply enjoy lively non-fiction, subsequent chapters feature notorious tales of feuds, assassinations, murder, meanness, and mayhem during the period of reconstruction. This includes the formation of the Obion County State Guard in 1867 due to the ongoing threat of violence by the Ku Klux Klan.

This interesting analysis of west Tennessee closes with a brief retelling of the Night Riders of Reelfoot Lake. These men banded together to resist the efforts of one family's control of the lake and the livelihood they'd always known as commercial fishermen.

Several photos and maps compliment the narrative along with extensive endnotes and an index that will satisfy families with local ties. That said, I did long for a page reference on specific sites and historic events.

This volume is an exceptional work about the establishment, social and general history of western Tennessee and far western Kentucky. It is a fitting tribute to all the unnamed Reelfoot Lake inhabitants Hayes set out to honor.

Bobbie Bryant

Kentucky League of Cities