

Gold promoter

Part 4

The surface soil and gravel in the valley of Coker Creek has been washed, sifted, strained and searched for gold so many times since the early 1800s that it is doubtful if there is a square foot of it that hasn't been turned upside down sometime.

William Tilley owned 160 acres on Coker Creek in a section that maybe has been dug into the most. Tilley is thought to have owned his tract, beside the Murphy-Tellico Plains Turnpike, well before the Civil War.

But the most money Tilley ever had at one time is said to have been \$800, and that was said to have been his savings of many years. He was robbed of it late in life, and died close to the beginning of this century, owning nothing much more than his 160 acres.

His wife Penelope later told that Tilley never had held any illusion of someday finding enough gold on his land to make him rich.

Tilley did hire out as a laborer when outsiders came to Coker Creek searching for gold. He worked for 10 cents a day, the standard wage in that time and in that place. None of the people who hired him ever found much gold, either.

When Tilley and wife Penelope died the land passed to their son, Elihu Tipton Tilley and his wife Emma. They later divided some of it with their daughters, one of whom is Fred Payne's wife, Josephine. Then Fred and Josephine bought out all the other family members, and in the early 1920s owned the entire 160 acres.

The Paynes were the busiest in this period that they would ever be in a long and busy life. Their children were being born. Josephine was a substitute mail carrier driving their Model T touring car, and driving their Model T truck to move people, when she was asked.

Fred was a justice of the peace, and was what he calls a "shade-tree mechanic" working on cars, mostly Ford Model Ts, that were becoming numerous in the neighborhood. He farmed the Coker Creek acreage in season.

The Paynes and her sister Elsie, and Elsie's husband Luther Lenderman, also were singing regularly in the first "organized" quartet in Monroe County. They sang *a cappella*, from shaped-note songbooks, and not many days would pass that they wouldn't be asked to sing at a funeral.

"So many people died one summer, and we sang at so many funerals, that I almost lost my crop," Fred says. (He is now two months short of his 90th birthday, and still is often asked to rise and sing bass with visiting quartets at neighborhood churches.)

It was at this overcrowded time of their lives, early in the 1920s, that a gold-mining promoter, who in Fred's words "shot with a big gun," brought even more excitement to Coker Creek.

His name was James L. "Jim" Akers. He was from Mississippi. His Annette Mining Co. did begin the biggest and most mechanized search for Coker Creek gold ever attempted, before or since.

Fred and Josephine began buying her family's farm there just after World War I. They first built a little house that they would live in awhile until they could finish a bigger, permanent home. Then the little building became their garage.

The big home was completed and being lived in when Jim Akers arrived in the valley. In the tradition of both their families, Fred and Josephine were hospitable people who regularly fed visitors who came down the newly-graded Highway 68 at mealtime.

They fed Akers, and he praised every meal he ate



er 'prospected' in Knoxville hotel rooms



The Payne home beside Highway 68, at Coker Creek in Monroe County, was new when this picture was made in the early 1920s, about the time the Annette Mining Co. was beginning to dig for gold on a tract of land upstream. Boys in the picture were the two oldest Payne sons, Yale and Earl. Yale, now of Folkston, Ga., says the yard was fenced to keep out cattle, horses, sheep and donkeys that grazed at will under Tennessee's then-prevailing open range law. Donkeys were bad about getting into the bees, and upsetting the hives, so the fence was built to protect the bees more than for any other reason, Yale says.

there, and soon was bringing his own visitors to eat at the Payne table. Most of the men Akers brought to Coker Creek were wealthy men, several from Knoxville, who came to inspect the Annette operation and decide whether they would invest in it.

"He'd bring them in without any notice at all," Fred recalls. "We were just crowded to death, but there was nobody else in the country to cook for them, and my wife is a good cook.

"Those big men with money enjoyed eating at our house. And they enjoyed the good drinking water we had from a big-flowing spring," Fred says.

Akers paid Josephine an agreed price for feeding his guests. He depended on new investors to supply the money to pay her and all his other, greater expenses, including the wages of the eight or 10 men who ran the machinery to dig the gravel and wash it, to reduce it to a black sand that he hoped would be rich in gold.

Fred recalls that the Annette company brought the president of the American Mining Congress to Coker Creek from Washington.

"His name was Payne, too. I remember that his salary was \$25,000 a year. It seemed like a tremendous amount to me," Fred continues.

"They brought him down there hoping to prove that there were paying amounts of gold there, so they could make a report and get men who had money to invest in their company, so they'd have money to keep on mining."

Sometimes it was a long time between investors. Even those who did buy stock didn't always buy as much as Akers had hoped, and the Annette Mining Co. would get far behind in its local bills.

"Akers got behind in the board bill he owed Josephine. He was behind a hundred dollars or so and it looked like we'd never see him again. He was gone for months. We didn't know where he was.

"Finally he showed up and all Tellico Plains, nearly, was after him. He owed every merchant in town, for groceries and hardware and you name it.

"When he got there, he had money, and he was just a-handing it out, paying debts, in every direction. People around there would think the world of Akers then, for awhile, until he'd get in debt to all of them again."

Fred believes Akers believed that Coker Creek would indeed yield a profitable amount of gold sometime soon, and that if he hadn't believed it he wouldn't have returned.

Fred Payne continues his recollection of Jim Akers, promoter. Although Fred never did give the Annette Mining Co. any chance of success, he did regard Akers as a friend.

"He drove a big old Winton automobile. I never saw another like it. He'd get me to drive him to Knoxville and we'd put up at the Farragut Hotel, and I believe that was the best there was there at that time.

"He'd gather and get these big men to come into the hotel room at night. He'd try to prove everything by me. I was a justice of the peace then, and he'd call me judge.

"He'd say, 'The Coker Creek mud on my car out there — we can pan it and get gold out of it. Can't we, judge?'"

"And I'd say that if we drove it through the right mud over there, there's be gold in it, of course there would.

"He was an entertainer, and a promoter. I remember one trip we made up there he ran out of money, and had to borrow a little from me, to pay the hotel bill.

"When we rode back toward Coker Creek, he was glum, like an old sore-headed dog. But when we got to Sweetwater he got a man there to invest a thousand dollars in his company. Then as I drove that old car on home he was the happiest man. He was singing. He was whistling.

"When he got back home his creditors'd be after him like dogs after a rabbit until they got their pay. He'd pay when he had money. He sure did shoot with a big gun."

This account of the search for gold on Coker Creek, as told by people who were there when it happened, will be continued.