

HUXFORD

Panoramic view, very friendly people can be found here

Story and photos by Mary Lee Conwell
Press Register Reporter

Huxford, Ala.-Folks up in Huxford think their town is about the finest place in the world to live. They're just about right.

The rural community, in the heart of the Gulf Coast Plains farm belt, stretches wide and flat, providing some of the best farmland in south Alabama.

It also provides one of the most beautiful panoramas in the area. Rows of soybeans and cotton give the land that surrounds an occasional farm house or church a lush green color and the air a deliciously fresh scent. A bright red and white crop duster can be seen swooping up from near ground level into the light blue sky, barely missing, it seems, the branches of a hundred-year-old oak tree on the field's edge.

The unincorporated community and the immediate area surrounding it in northwest Escambia County are made up of about 500 people who "would say they live in Huxford," Rebecca Ann Powe, Huxford Postmistress, said. She added that about 90 people live in "downtown Huxford," north on State Highway 21, east on Huxford-McCullough Highway, south on Butler Street then west on Huxford Front Street. Huxford's greatest quality is her citizens. The open, friendly residents of Huxford are "a pretty tight knit group," according to Brenda Coker, secretary/bookkeeper at Huxford Pole and Timber Co., who seem to accept strangers as they are and, at the very least, tell strangers how it is.

Mrs. Powe, who came to Huxford in 1956, is a prime example of the straightforward nature of Huxford citizens. The postmistress' gleaming smile shines through the "bars" she stands behind to sort the mail at the Huxford Post Office.

She has been postmistress for the past 11 years and is acquainted with practically everyone in the area. She'll dispute that, however, arguing that her father-in-law, W.O. Powe, is the leading authority on Huxford, past and present.

Powe, as his wife calls him (his grandchildren call him "Depot"), has lived in Huxford all of his 80-some-odd years. The elderly railroad man has seen the community grow, shrink and level off.

According to the octogenarian, many of the Huxford settlers came south from Butler County shortly before the turn of the century.

"That was the prettiest virgin timber you ever saw," Powe said about the long-leaf pine.

The settlers cut the pines and began farming the fertile soil. Cotton, soybeans, corn and wheat were grown and still exist as the farmers' main crops.

Powe remembers when Huxford was called Local, Ala., because the local train went through. That was when the railroad was owned by Southern States Lumber Co. The timber company had temporary rails set up all around the area that led to their logging camps.

"There were log camps everywhere," William Gorum, principal of Huxford Elementary School, commented.

The temporary train set-ups were used, Powe said, because trucks were not the popular means of transport at the time.

Southern States sold out in 1913 to Gulf, Florida and Alabama Railroad. The company continued the train tracks north to Monroeville and south to Pensacola.

Yet, as the town grew, the G.F.&A. Railroad folded and changed to the St. Louis-San Francisco Line around 1920. The Frisco line ran from Pensacola to Birmingham, with plans to go through to Muscle Shoals in north Alabama. Frisco never made it to the north Alabama town, but it did build a coal shoot in 1926 in Huxford, which serviced the railroad for many miles north and south until 1956, when the railroad started using diesel fuel.

Powe, who spent his career with the Frisco, remembers the day when the railroad had 29 cars filled with potatoes, radishes and peaches grown at the "state farm," now referred to as the Fountain and Holman prisons.

Powe said the prison farm actually helped the little community grow by providing another source of employment for the citizens. Back in 1927, C.C. Huxford donated 8,000 acres, where his turpentine still

was located, to the state prison system. Prisoners were brought by train to Local and “walked down hot, dusty roads to the state farm,” Powe said.

In 1928 citizens of Local thought it appropriate to change the name of their town to Huxford, after the man who owned so much of its land and had brought employment to the area.

Huxford High School also opened that year, providing grades one through nine. The school limited its grades to kindergarten through six in 1974, when all the elementary schools in the area consolidated at Huxford. The older children in town were sent to Atmore High School to finish their secondary education. The town kept growing and by World War II, Huxford had three stores, a cotton gin, potato shed, cafeteria, barber shop, grist mill, junior high school and, of course, the post office.

Unfortunately, as the big timber companies acquired more land around the community, small farmers sold out to big farmers and land became less available to the younger Huxford citizens. The young people of Huxford were forced to move from home town to find employment after the war. Even the school’s population dropped from about 300 in 1955, when Gorum became principle there, to about 180 students enrolled today.

The town took an upswing when Huxford Pole and Timber Company moved into the town in 1959 providing new jobs for local residents. The company started with the white pole business and grew from there. It now dries poles in a kiln and treats them with creosote and pentachlorophenol. Company officials make sure they are very much a part of the community, helping out when they can.

Even when there is a fire during working hours, Huxford Pole excuses all of its employees to help the volunteer fire department put out the blaze.

“When we have a fire, it looks like they’re coming out of the woodwork,” Mrs. Powe said about the volunteer firemen, adding “Everybody’s proud of our fire department.”

Fire Chief Gerald Parmer won’t dispute that fact. He is just as proud. The small unit has three trucks, one of which has a drop tank used to transport water where there are no fire hydrants.

The fire department holds a fish fry and raffle every year to raise money to keep the department operating. This year’s raffle, to be held August 9, will offer either a quarter of beef or a gas grill.

The town is also very proud of its water system. According to Powe, the water in the area is not suitable for drinking and the town lost many residents to typhoid fever. Powe, secretary/treasurer of the water board, and two other men started working on the water system in 1965 and in 1971 the new system opened.

“That’s what we’re most proud of,” Mrs. Powe said, “our fire department and our water system.”

Huxford has much more than that to which to be proud. Today, Huxford has a grocery store, the pole company, post office, fire department, Masonic Lodge, Eastern Star chapter, an elementary school and five churches. Burlington Northern took over the railroad in 1982. The community can also be proud of its spirit and loyalty.

“Huxford has held its own,” Billie Ridgeway, plant manager of Huxford Pole, said about his hometown.

Ridgeway said that what he can’t get in Huxford, he can just hop in the car and get in Atmore, Pensacola or Mobile. He admitted that driving down Airport Boulevard in Mobile seems like “Los Angeles” to him and after a day of shopping there, Ridgeway said, “it’s nice to get back here.”

After 29 years in Huxford, Mrs. Powe agreed, stating with a wide grin spread across her mouth and a flash in her eyes, “It kind of grows on you.”

(pictures in the article were: a drawing of the southern end of Alabama showing the counties and the location of Huxford; a picture of downtown Huxford; a picture of Brenda Coker and Billie Ridgeway; a picture of Huxford Baptist Church; a picture of Huxford Elementary school, 1928; and a picture of Gerald Parmer and William Gorum with two fire trucks from the Huxford Volunteer Fire Department behind them.)

(Source: Mobile Press Register; this copy typed by Holly Huxford from a Xerox of the article in her possession, 10/28/2008.)