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MONTEVALLO'S BRIEF AFFAIR WITH IRON ORE

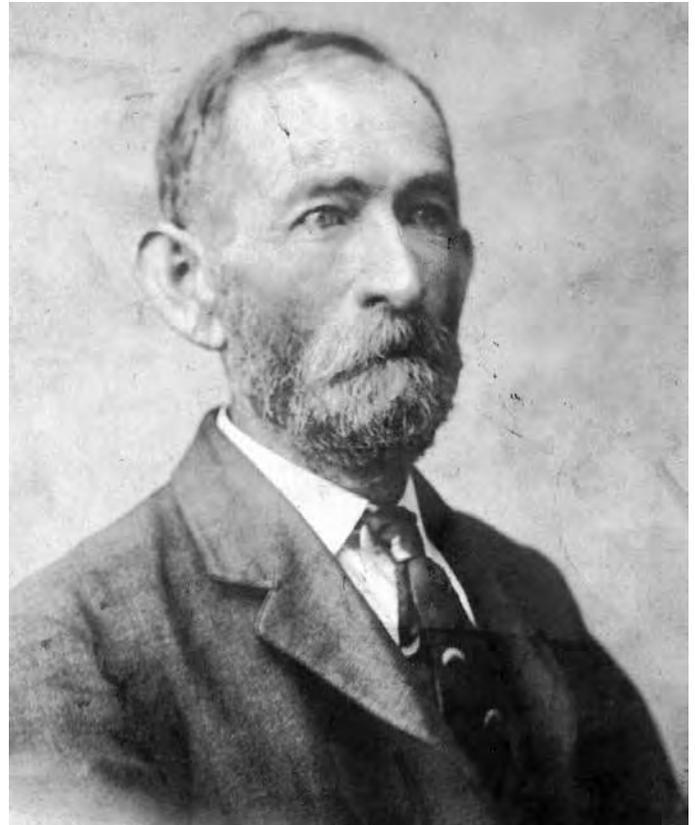
Submitted by Marty Everse

Scattered around Montevallo, mostly on private property, there are some peculiar pits and curious craters. Here and there, southeast of Orr Park and southwest of town near the cemetery are the remaining traces of the town's last and brief fling with the Alabama iron industry.

From the earliest settlement of the area, it seemed that iron was destined to be an important resource in the economic development of Montevallo. In the mid-1820s, the first documented forge producing wrought iron in central Alabama was located just a short distance down Shoal Creek from the town center. The state's first geologist, Michael Tuomey, in 1847, heralded the "long ridge abounding in beds of fine [iron] ore" occurring near Montevallo. But despite the proximity of all the ingredients required to make iron, ore, limestone, and charcoal, nothing much happened. The nearby forge, last known as King's Iron Works, played out in the 1850s, and during the Civil War ironmaking efforts in the area were all directed five miles southeast of Montevallo at Brierfield.

Things began to look promising in the early 1880s, however it took a newcomer to get the ore rolling. Andrew Dowd Lawhon moved up from the rich blackbelt soils of Hale County, purchased ore lands, built a tram road from his ore pits to the railroad, installed a washer to separate the ore from clay and other impurities, and even constructed a commissary to supply his workmen. By 1883 the newly created Lawhon Iron Company was shipping Montevallo iron ore to blast furnaces in Anniston and all the way north to the Tecumseh Furnace at Rock Run in Cherokee County. When his daughter, Ella, married local boy Henry R. Wells and the Wells properties were combined with Lawhon's, the local paper proclaimed that the ore was so plentiful, it would certainly justify the building of a blast furnace. Yet the feast to famine, boom to bust economy of the mid-1880s quashed the dream and all news of the iron revival around Montevallo dried up as many of the state's furnaces went in and out of operation and demand for ore went bust.

Then, fifteen years later, another high roller came to town. Raised in the country down about Greensboro, William Gordon Robinson, by the time he came to Montevallo, owned iron mines at Ishkooda, Spring Gap, and Reeders in Jefferson County, at Champion in Blount County as well as limestone quarries at Dolcito and Van near Birmingham and at Compton in Blount. All told, his Robinson Mining Company employed over 2,000 men. He had big plans for his new project at Montevallo. By late November 1899, 75 men were at work building two large dams on Shoal Creek to impound water for ore washers while others were laying track for a branch railway to the newly opened ore pits. A sawmill



Henry Rush Wells married into the iron ore business when he wed the fair daughter of A. D. Lawhon.

was erected to produce lumber for the proposed 50 houses needed for employees. By February of 1900, the *Montgomery Advertiser* reported, "The ore mines recently opened by the Robinson Mining Company in Montevallo are developing the best quality of brown ore ever found in the state. They will eventually employ two to three hundred men, which will be of great benefit to the town." Not to be outdone, the *Birmingham News* added, "The Robinson Mining Company are opening up their ore mines in great shape. More than one hundred men are at work. They are sawing timber daily for houses for their employees. They are shipping ore now by the car load." When a sample of the Montevallo ore was awarded first premium at the State Fair later that year, prospects looked bright. But with labor troubles, a dip in the economy and just maybe W. G. Robinson had gotten a bit over extended, all mention of Montevallo's brief flirtation with the iron industry faded from the pages of area newspapers in 1901.