

West Georgia-1890's ... Napa Valley East

As early as 1888, small vineyards around Tallapoosa were producing grapes for commercial use: the land, it seems was ideal for growing the "sweetest and largest fruit this side of the old country." Ralph L. Spencer who came to West Georgia from Connecticut was a born salesman who started many business ventures. He decided to expand the vineyard and winery industry in the early 1890's, by inviting some Hungarian wine making families then employed in the mining industry in Pennsylvania to settle on 2000 acres of land near Tallapoosa. Many accepted this offer. They named their largest community Budapest in honor of the capital of Hungary. A nearby village was named Tokaj in honor of a vine-producing region in Hungary. Tokaj was founded to satisfy the desire of Jacob and Paul Estavanko for lots larger than ten acre, Other Haralson fruit colonies included Stedman and Boheme. An 1896 map reveals that by then vineyards covered approximately 12,726 acres of land in Haralson County.

Led to Georgia by a Catholic priest, the Hungarians brought the Catholic faith to Haralson County. A sketch of them prepared for the dedication in the mid-1950s of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church in neighboring Carroll County reports that: In 1893 two hundred families of Hungarians who had settled in the Pennsylvania mining region emigrated to the South to begin a new industry, the cultivation of grape vineyards. Under the guidance of a Catholic priest, Father Janisek, they established a colony about four miles east of Tallapoosa and named it Budapest. Various groups from Ohio and other parts of the United States were attracted to the area and the new industry. Among them was a group of Slovaks who formed a second town site named Nitra. The colony quickly flourished into a town with sixty buildings including a Catholic Church, stores and a post office. Soon the sloping hills were garlanded with grape vines. Storage vats were prepared and wineries were planned.

Many laid out vineyard colonies sprang up all over, including both ethnic groups and northern investment companies. Some of the names were:

- Georgia Fruit Growing a Winery Association
- The Steadman Colony of Fruit Growers
- Highland Colony of Fruit Growers-Southland d Colony of Fruit Growers
- The Southern Homestead and Fruit Growing Company
- The Piedmont Wine Company
- Chicago Fruit Growers Colony

The fruit growers in Haralson and Carroll counties formed an association, and before long there was Georgia-Alabama Fruit Growing Winery Association, with a full time staff. A glass factory for bottles and basket factory for shipping fresh fruit opened in Tallapoosa. Grapes and Wine were shipped out by the train load to northern states. Excursion trains brought guest to Tallapoosa from Chicago, New York, Boston, Little Rock, Philadelphia, Washington, Atlanta, St. Louis and Sioux City, for week extended visits.

The Census of 1900 reveals how polyglot the Tallapoosa Districts' population became in the late nineteenth century as a result of Northern colonization schemes. Among the out-of-state birth places recorded were (not in any order): England, Italy, Germany, Sweden, Canada, Switzerland, Norway, France, Russia, Hungary, Austria, Scotland, Ireland, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, Tennessee, Maryland, Virginia, Texas, New Hampshire, Illinois, Indiana, Connecticut, Florida, Arkansas, Kentucky, Wisconsin, Alabama, Iowa, and North Carolina. The number of people born in Northern states and abroad substantially outnumbered those born in other Southern states.

This great agriculture economic venture was brought down with the passage of the Georgia Prohibition Act of 1907. The investment colonies were dissolved and most of the settlers moved back north. At its peak: the West Georgia-East Alabama area had upwards of 20,000 acres of vineyards-second only to California.