

FERRYBOAT

on the Chattahoochee

JANUARY 15, 1950



By WILLARD NEAL

JOURNAL MAGAZINE PHOTOS BY GUY HAYES

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FULTON county is famous for its fine bridges spanning the Chattahoochee river, but there are still two old-fashioned ferryboats plying the still yellow waters.

Hutcherson's ferry carries traffic between Palmetto and Rutlet, near the county line, and Old Campbellton ferry operates on the short route between Fairburn and Douglasville, just 19 miles from Atlanta. Henry Brock has practically lived on the Campbellton ferry since he was 2 years old.

"That was in 1901, when my dad, Joe Brock, bought the farm here, and took over the boat, and was known all up and down the river as the one-armed ferryman," said Mr. Brock. "I started helping him, even before I was big enough, and I've been crossing this river ever since."

Summer suns and winter winds have burned the ferryman's face as brown as his river. His eyes squint, like those of most outdoorsmen, from looking over ripoles to follow the flight of wild ducks, geese and ducks, or to spot jumping fish. His hands are rough from hard work and frequent dunkings in water and mud as he sets the abbreviated gang-planks into position.

In his 49 years on a ferry Mr. Brock has seen a lot of funny things. He stood by

in amazement when a car ran right across the boat into the river. He saw a mule jump off the ferry and swim across. He had watched the river, normally seven feet deep, fall so low that a Model T forded there. And he has seen the Chattahoochee 27 1/2 feet above normal, rolling like the ocean and a mile wide, as he could hitch the ferryboat in his front yard away up the hill.

LATE one night Smith Latham, who lived nearby, fell asleep in his buggy as he approached the river. His mule walked onto the boat and right off the other end, and swam across, with Mr. Latham clinging to the vehicle. The damage might have been slight. If the buggy had not hung in a tree-top on the Fulton side, so that the mule was dragged under by the current and drowned.

"It was a freezing night," Mr. Brock recalled. "Smith was the coldest man I ever saw, by the time he had come out of the river soaking wet, and had spent a lot of time trying to rescue his mule, and then had sloshed up to the house and waked me."

"Another time Herschel Bowers, who lived just over the river, was crossing with his mule tied behind a two-horse wagon. Suddenly the mule beaked up, and fell off the back end of the ferry. The

lead rope broke and the mule swam on across. Didn't hurt it at all—just gave it a bath.

"Three or four years ago Tom Simmons brought a fishing party down here. The ladies got out on the Fulton side, and Tom and another man started to take the car across the river, just as they pulled onto the ferry the brakes gave out, and the car went over and dived onto its nose in seven feet of water. I hauled the ferry upstream a ways, until a wrecker could tow the car out. Water was pouring from every seam, but the automobile didn't look to be damaged much."

There used to be plenty of fish in the Chattahoochee. "But about 15 years ago a lot of them died," said Mr. Brock. "Thousands of 'em. Dusted pest here. Nobody ever found out just what killed them, but I believe it was some chemical coming out of factories in Atlanta. Fishing hasn't been good since then."

"The biggest fish I ever saw caught was a 28-pound carp, landed by Jim Wilson, an Atlanta fireman. When he tied it to the door handle of his car, its tail drung the ground. The biggest haul I've seen was 44 pounds of catfish caught on trot lines one night."

"One time a bunch of fellows camping on the bank shot traps for catfish. The

loser got so far behind that he had to go up on Sweetwater creek and fish for a week to pay off."

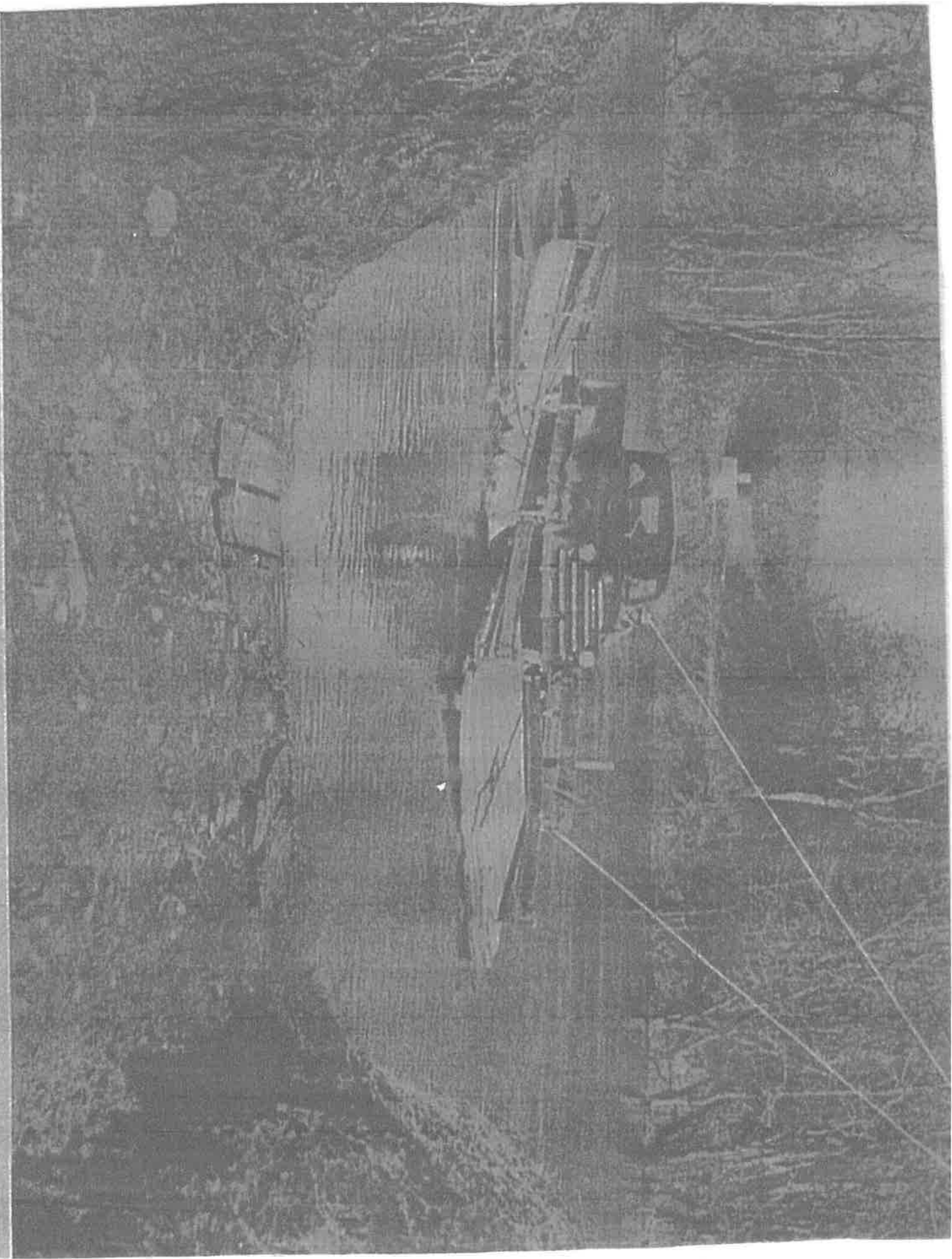
The Chattahoochee can go on a rampage in wet weather, or dwindle to a trickle in a dry summer. The lowest it ever fell was in the record drought of 1925, Mr. Brock said. Normally the water is seven feet deep near each bank, and five feet in the middle, but that summer it fell so low that when the Campbellton preacher brought his flock down for a baptizing, they had to wade across the river to find a hole deep enough. That same summer Barney Cochran, of Red Oak, forded the river in his Model T, just to show it could be done.

THINGS are different after a long rainy spell. Mrs. Maggie Bonnar's house, occupying the highest point in the valley across the river, sits on an island. The roistering water speeds like a millrace, and carries down trees, logs, trash and all kinds of junk, but hardly ever anything of value. The ferryman has caught several loose boats, but even they were not very good.

Normally the current flows about six miles an hour—mighty fast for a river, Mr. Brock said. The ferry is hitched by ropes and pulleys to an overhead cable.

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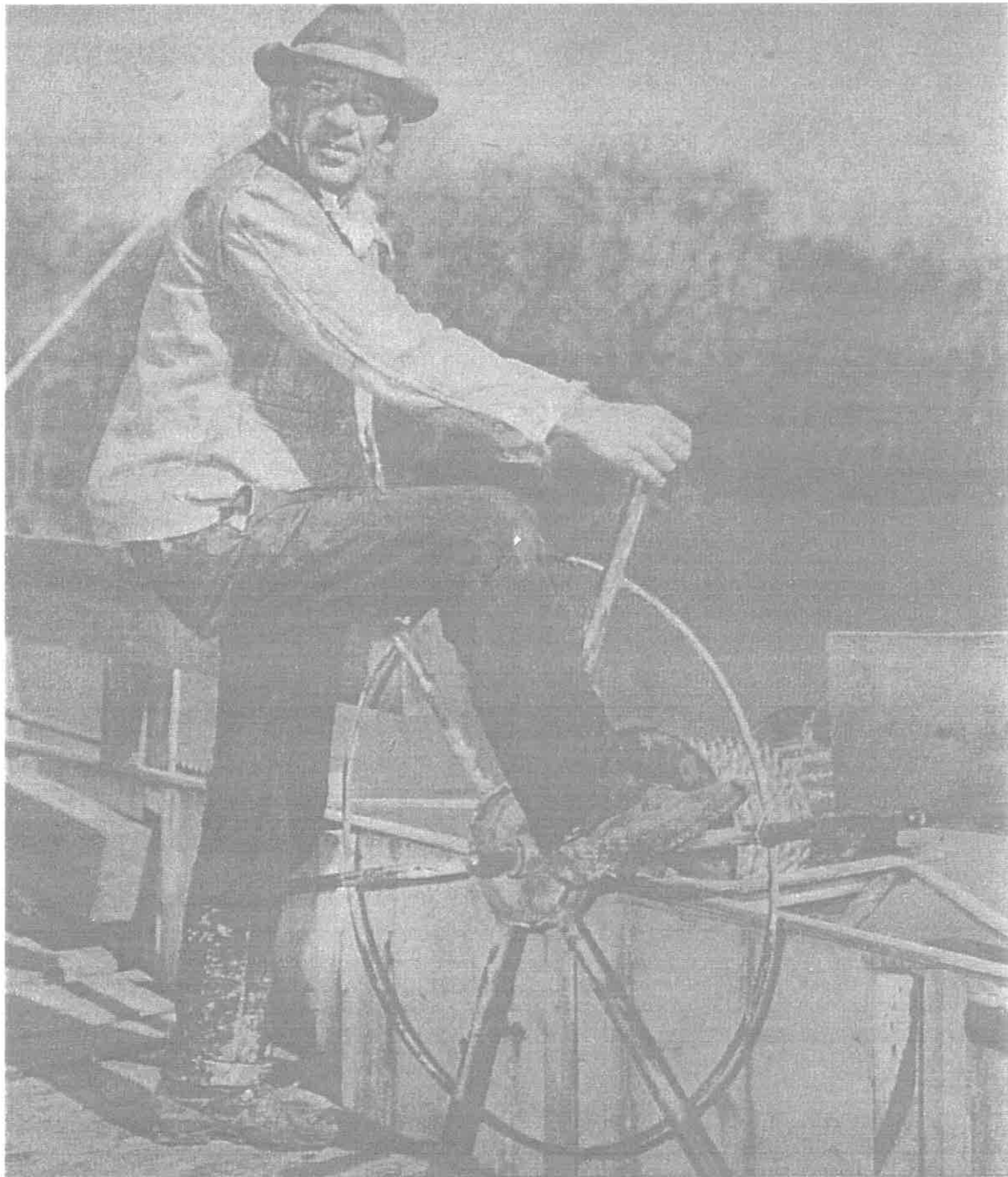


J. W. Shadix, superintendent of Douglas county schools, crosses in a truck. He was born nearby, and has ridden the ferry ever since he can remember.

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The turbulent river rolls along at six miles an hour, with a channel seven feet deep near each bank. One time a car ran across the boat into the water.



Henry Brock has practically lived on the old Campbellton ferry, 19 miles from Lanta, since 1901, when he was 2 years old. His father was ferryman, too.