FAYETTE COUNTY EXPERIENCED SWEEPING SOCIAL and economic changes during the latter half of the 1800s. The Civil War ended slavery and many plantations and it opened the gates to German and Czech immigration. The immigrants brought new cultures, established new community institutions, and revitalized the local economy. The county prospered, especially through the production of cotton and corn. The region developed a rich ethnic mix and active social life. In the midst of it all, the small community of Winedale formed around the old Lewis farmstead.

Following the Civil War, the economy rebounded quickly and enjoyed a sustained growth from 1870 to 1900, fueled by the influx of German and Czech immigrants and the arrival of the railroad in 1872. The immigrants bought land from the old plantations and created smaller productive farms, whose leading cash crops were still cotton and corn. The immigrants altered the cultural face of the area, as well. By 1890, 25 per cent of Fayette County’s population was foreign born, and the immigrants tended to dominate local business and civic organizations, including the Round Top Schützen-Verein (“Rifle Association”), founded in 1888.

The “Winedale” community began around 1870 as a tiny German settlement called Triebald (“Affliction”), located just across the Washington County line about two miles from the Lewis-Wagner farmstead. So fond were the local farmers of making good wines from mustang grapes, dewberries, peaches, mulberries, and raisins, that the name soon changed to “Winedale.”

Around the time that the Joseph Wagner family purchased the Lewis farmstead in 1882, the Winedale community relocated to Fayette County to cluster around the Wagner property. What had been merely farmland now became a community, and Winedale thrived there until the end of World War II. Joseph Wagner, Jr., standing at right with his family around 1890, became a key figure in Fayette County politics. The house shows the original Townsend-era roof line, as well as an outbuilding now removed.

By the 1890s, the Fayette County population was a rich mixture of ethnicities and social classes. Despite the increasing number of Anglos, Germans, and Czechs, African Americans still constituted a full third of the population, though they had little political power. Each group developed its own organizations and social activities: shooting clubs, literary and musical groups, fraternal and religious organizations, and sports teams. Bands and orchestras played concerts and dances throughout the area. Social occasions such as community picnics frequently tapped the resources of the local brewing industry established by German and Czech immigrants. And baseball was truly the American pastime of Round Top and Winedale, with their rival all-German teams.

The family of Lena Dancy ran a Fayette County plantation. Her papers provide significant details of Civil War life on the home front. Miss Dancy spun, wove, and made the homespun dress pictured here, even spinning the thread to sew it. She recalled that they could not buy thread, flour, or coffee in La Grange, and that meals consisted of “corn bread 3 times a day.” Her papers also include a book of patterns for weaving counterpanes (bed coverings) on the loom.

The Civil War was a pivotal experience in Fayette County. It drained men and resources, ravaged the economy, freed the slaves, and ended the large plantations. Most of all, the war uprooted people’s lives and often set neighbors and even families against one another. Active military companies in Fayette County included the Round Top Guerrillas (cavalry), Round Top Veteran Infantry, and Round Top Mounted Infantry. The latter, an all-German unit commanded by the son of pioneer Friedrich Ernst, was a notable exception to the general antipathy of local Germans to the war. Ernst died in the war in 1863.