



Gateway to the West



Lee County Historical and Genealogical Society P. O Box 231 Jonesville, Virginia 24263

July 2014



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President's Report

By Becky Jones

It has been a busy six months for the Lee County Historical Society. We have had good speakers at our meetings. We've worked hard on scanning pictures and getting them ready for our 2nd pictorial book. All together we have scanned more than 3000 pictures. Thanks to you who have supported us on this project and shared your pictures. We hope this book will be out by next year.

The Society has had the first Pictorial book reprinted. It was just delivered this week, so anyone who did not get a copy of the 1st printing will have a chance to get a copy.

Wilderness Road State Park has a new manager and he is a native of Lee County. Scott Bowen spoke to us in January. He had just started his new post and told us about plans the Park Service has in expanding our park.

In February we did not have a speaker, so I talked about my family's oral history back to Stephen Hospkins who came over on the Mayflower. Lee County Sheriff, Gary Parsons was our speaker in March. He talked about the history of the sheriff's department murder of Deputy John Martin in 1988.

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Skeletons in the Closet

by William Smith

In Memory of Henrietta Smith

Every family will have the proverbial skeleton or skeletons in their closet if they are determined to come up with an honest three dimensional review of their ancestors past. Not only does it flesh out their family past but it helps to sometimes explain the motivations behind certain twists and turns in otherwise inexplicable actions. And with the Smiths of Cuedrly, (Cuedrly is a small village to the immediate east of Liverpool on the Mersey), their descendants were to produce skeletons aplenty.

I was to initially stumble onto a family closet where a skeleton resided in this particular Smith line in the early days of my interest in genealogy. Verbal tradition in the Smith family had it that the first Smiths to America settled in the area of Hubbard Springs in what is now Lee County, Virginia. The story went that David Smith married Sallie Romins (spelled Romains, Romans, etc.) in Rome (Roam) Ireland and came to this beautiful corner of Virginia about 1813 where David rented land owned by Arthur Blankenship. This information seems to have been related to Elizabeth Smith Jennings by the daughter of Noble and Mary Morgan Smith, Mary Smith Carter) back in the 1929s. For years, the trail went cold because before the days of Ancestry.com there were too many Smiths by the name of David in western Virginia during early settlement days to pinpoint which one was our David.

Then in the latter 1900s, Elizabeth's sister, Henrietta Smith of Rose Hill, Virginia was researching in the courthouse files at Abingdon, Virginia. She came

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Saving Lee County's History

by Libbie Laforce

Henry Jasper Morgan was born on February 5, 1827 in Rose Hill, Virginia. He was the son of Nathan Morgan and Martha Yeary Morgan. As a young man he worked in a store in Rose Hill. At the age of 16 he became an Assistant to the County Clerk.

During the Civil War it was common practice for the union soldiers to burn courthouses, hospitals and other public buildings as they passed through towns. Mr. Morgan felt responsible for the county records. He took records from the courthouse and hid them in a cave about 4 or 5 miles from Jonesville. In 1863, the Union army did burn the courthouse along with Franklin Academy which they thought was a hospital. Due to the efforts of this young man, Lee County records were saved. Later Mr. Morgan strongly recommended that a fireproof safe be installed in the courthouse. In 1933, a fire accidentally burned the courthouse and for the second time Lee County records were saved.

Mr. Morgan later became a lawyer and in 1870 became Lee County's first judge, who served a ten year term. He also, along with I.S. Anderson and W.K. Armstrong, organized Powell Valley Bank, which was the first bank in Lee County. This bank is still in existence today.

Judge Morgan's house still stands on the corner of Wilderness Road and Palace Street in Jonesville. He passed away in 1905 at the age of 77 and is buried in the Hill Cemetery in Jonesville. He is remembered for his impressive political and outstanding banking career but also for helping preserve Lee County history.

Many other localities' valuable records and history were destroyed during the Civil War. We were lucky enough to have a young man who had such foresight in preserving and protecting our Lee County history. These records still exist today thanks to Henry Jasper Morgan.



Official Portrait of Judge Henry Morgan
in the Lee County Courthouse



Above: Home of Judge Henry Morgan at the corner of Wilderness Road and Palace Street in Jonesville.

Left: Judge Henry Morgan's monument in Hill Cemetery in Jonesville.

Inscription: Judge Henry J. Morgan
Born Feb. 5, 1827
Died Jan 14, 1905
Aged 77 Years, 11 MOS, 9 Days

Why Sports History? *By Dave Audia*

Though organized sports were not a part of the early history of Lee County, games probably were. When some of these games became national pastimes as organized sports, Lee County embraced them too. Baseball as we know it, football and basketball began in large cities or at colleges. It took a little time for them to filter down to rural American places like Lee County. Nationally, baseball came first in the mid 1800's with football just a little later, then basketball in the late 1800's. In Lee County, there are known records of baseball teams in the late 1800's. Basketball teams start showing up in records in the early 1900's and the first organized football teams show up in the 1920's.

One of my dreams is to record the history of these and the other Lee County sports. I enjoy reading the stories, seeing the pictures and hearing the tales of the legends of the old days. Do you, like me, wonder how the kids of today would stack up against those of the old days?

Wouldn't it be nice to capture most of this history in a book so that we could discuss the content and argue about what and who were included or left out? For the 1800's and early 1900's, lots of patchwork and guesswork will be needed to paint the early picture of our sports history.

From the early 1900's there are some written and published stories and pictures. Coming from about 1920 forward to the present I can find some information to assemble. Going back from 1920 is a lot harder. Where do I look?

I need some suggestions from you. In your lifetime of competing and being a fan, do you have some stories that need to be included? I can certainly do some research, but I would like to hear from you about the athletes, the games, the seasons, the careers; all the legends of your time. Let's write this down before we forget and, above all, before this very important history is forgotten for future citizens.

Here are just a few facts I have uncovered in the past few months:

- Coalfield baseball both in the amateur and professional ranks produced good ball players and great competition. Within the county, the competition was both balanced and ferocious at times. Every community wanted bragging rights for the best baseball team. Competing in leagues with teams from surrounding communities in several states, our teams were well known for the serious, hard fighting, never backing down style of play.

The players of this era from the early 1900's through the 1950's should have their names recorded. A few of those who brought baseball from the late 1800's to the 1900's are, according to the best I can figure, Robert Carnes, Frank Litton, John and Sam Cecil, Arthur Bailey, Grover Gilley, Charles Herndon, and Bradley Flanary. From there through the 50's are names like Buford Rhea, Cowboy Barker,

Walker Cress, Lefler and Pee Wee Herndon, Hobart Scott, Ty Harber, Charles Wax, Virgil Wacks, Bill Halstead and Frank Scott. Others are my cousin, Hershel McElyea, and Swede Sage. I know I am leaving out many important people here, so please, help me fill in those people.

- Lee County has produced 3 Virginia High School State Champs. The first were the Dryden Girls Basketball Team of 1977, the 1988 Jonesville Football Team and the 1990 Lee High Golf Team.

- Two teams finished 2nd in the State, coming up just a little short in the State Championship Finals. The 1964 Pennington High boys basketball and the 1976 Pennington High football teams

- Five athletes with strong Lee County ties made it to the top rung of the professional ranks in their sport:

- Walker Cress of Ben Hur and Pennington High pitched for the Cincinnati Reds in 1948 and 1949. He also won 99 games in the Minor Leagues from 1939-1951.

- Beattie Feathers, from Bristol and the University of Tennessee, was the first player ever to gain more than 1000 yards in the National Football League. In addition, his 8.44 yards per carry was the NFL record until Michael Vick broke it in 2006. While an NFL star, Feathers married a Lee County girl and played baseball for the pro Pennington Miners during the off season.

- Jim Palmer of Keokee went on to play basketball in the National Basketball Association from 1958 – 1961. Jim was a great rebounder and scored about 10 points per game for his career.

- Jim Pankovits was born at Lee General in the 50's while his dad, Vince, was player/coach of the Pennington professional baseball team. Jim played in the Major Leagues with Houston, then has gone on to a fine coaching career in pro baseball. He continues that profession today.

- Barry Audia had a very successful amateur boxing career before turning pro in 1980. He won an astounding 20 in a row before losing in 1984. He finished his career at 28-5. Barry lives and coaches in Lee County today.

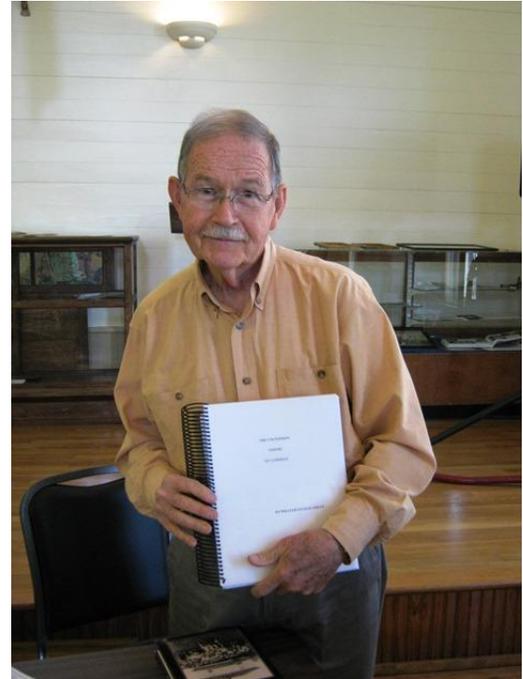
- At least three individuals have been selected for and inducted into the Virginia High School Sports Hall of fame. Joe Robinson was inducted for his contributions as a Coach in football, basketball and baseball. Ron Skeen, of Thomas Walker High fame, was inducted a few years ago for his coaching expertise. Steve Marsee, of Pennington High, was selected in 2012 due to his terrific basketball career in which he set a new state scoring record.

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President's Report from page 1



Lee County Sheriff Gary Parsons presented the Historical Society with photographs of former Sheriffs when he spoke to us in March.



Mr. William Smith spoke at our April meeting

Also in March our secretary, Judy Davidson, was presented the DAR Community Service Award from the Major George Gibson chapter NSDAR. Recipients of the award must have contributed to the community in an outstanding way. Judy is involved in several organizations.

One of our members William Smith has done a lot of research on his Smith family. In April he talked about Skeletons in the Closet.

Greg Edwards is not only a good treasurer, but a

good Civil War Historian. He talked to us in May.

Wilma Parsons grew up in Calvin. She talked to us about growing up in the coal camps and the history of Keokee.

Lee County is privileged to have two chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution: Lovelady Chapter in Pennington Gap and Major George Gibson Chapter in Western Lee County. Histories of the two Chapters are included in this Newsletter.



Historical Society Secretary Judy Davidson (right) with Linda Lawson of the Major George Gibson Chapter of the NSDAR.



Becky Jones took this photo of a Cardinal outside her home while looking through a window.

Why Sports History? *Continued from page 3*

• Articles about sports were in the early editions of the Powell Valley News. The April 14, 1922 edition lists an article about Flatwoods coming to Jonesville for ballgames. In those days, entire schools visited another for games; the girls played a basketball game on an outdoor court just prior to a baseball game played by the boys. On this day in 1922, the Flatwoods girls won the basketball game 16-4. The Jonesville boys won the baseball game, 4-1. S. T. Davis was the principal and coach of Flatwoods. Prof Russell was his counterpart at Jonesville.

Though I have included some very interesting things here, I know that the real value of Lee County Sports has always been the keen and fierce battles between the communities both at the high school and other levels. Being privileged to compete and coach here and in many other areas of the country, I can tell you that nothing compares with the rivalries here in Lee County that played out on a court or a field. It's the stories of this competition that creates legends and that is exactly what I want to capture.

Please help me!

Dave Audia was born 1947 in Leona Mines

(VIC), Va. He started school in a one room school in VIC, then attended Monarch, Pennington and St. Charles Elementary schools before attending and graduating from Pennington High in 1964. Dave played sports in high school and at Berea College where he graduated in 1969. He served in the Air Force as a Jet Engine Mechanic from 69-73. After his Air Force time, he settled in Woodstock, Cherokee County, Georgia, where he taught and coached Baseball for 23 years. The last 17 were at Sequoyah High School. Dave retired in 2007 and is married to Patricia Evans Scott Audia. They have 7 children and 12 grandkids.

Dave became interested in writing a history of sports in Lee County when he met a friend who had written a history of sports in Cherokee County, Georgia. Lee County has produced great sports stories with unique people, parks and competitions. These need to be recorded before we forget and before those who remember pass on.

Dave's website is: www.leecountylegend.net. He can be contacted at dave.audia@gmail.com, phone 404-290-6357, or mail: 444 Campground Road, Jonesville, Virginia 24263.



1951 Miners' Baseball Team, Pennington Gap photo courtesy of Peggy Willis

Skeletons in the Closet continued from page 1

across a marriage certificate which was to throw the David and Sallie Romains marrying in Ireland into confusion. One of the earliest marriage certificates on record was that of David Smith and Sallie Romains marriage December 10, 1801. The marriage was performed by a Baptist minister probably at the home of Sallie's father Jacob Romains near Marion (Royal Oaks), Virginia.

The second hint came during a conversation Henrietta and I had with a cousin from Knoxville while we attended the funeral of Dennis Smith in Middleborough. We were discussing the lost location of David and Sallie's burial site when he chuckled and said "You know we have a little Melungeon in us don't you?" He offered no further information but the Knoxville Smiths had done extensive research on the family. Then another version of David and Sallie's background came up with the publication of the book *Generations* which chronicled the migration the Ledford's from North Carolina to Cranks Creek, Kentucky during the latter part of the 1700s. Verbal tradition among the Ledford's had it that David was the son of Henry and his wife, Elizabeth Ledford Smith. Elizabeth was the sister of Aley Ledford. Aley was to play a major role in the history of this particular Smith clan. Although *Generations* is an accurate telling of the Ledford family, their version of David began to fall apart after more research became available through such sources as Rootsweb.com. It is now generally agreed that Henry and Elizabeth Ledford married about 1792. Keep in mind the marriage certificate in Abingdon courthouse proved David and Sallie married nine year later in 1801.

The final nail in the coffin for the Smith and Ledford stories of the Smith entry into the Cumberland Range came when a cousin, Wix Unthank, invited me over to a ceremony at a cemetery near Cumberland, Kentucky. The ceremony was honoring a Revolutionary War veteran by the name of Jonathan Smith with a national marker. The genealogical researcher who had located the grave site was Ronald Collier, who was connected with the Southeastern College at Cumberland. When explaining the connection with David and Sallie Smith, Collier remarked that Jonathan Smith, the first European to settle in Poor Fork, was David's father. After following this avenue of discovery, it turned out Jonathan's father was Hugh Smith, an Anglo Irish Quaker who left Pennsylvania in the mid-1700s and taking the Great Wagon Road, ended up near the present day Hillsboro, North Carolina. There he met a beautiful olive skin girl by the name of Jane Bunch and united in marriage according to her Saponi Indian heritage. The Bunch family was a racial mix of native Indian and some say Portuguese descent. If the Portuguese is involved, it would represent a healthy racial mix of every people who bordered the Mediterranean for thousands of

years. They later became known as Melungeon. This union got Hugh kicked out of the Society of Friends. After they moved west to the banks of New River, near the present day Jefferson, North Carolina, the Smiths prospered holding large tracks of land in the area.

Now getting back to David Smith, grandson of Hugh Smith, it turns out that the family had him leave the Poor Fork Settlement, probably because he was an alcoholic. Thus David and Sallie ended up back across the Cumberland in Hubbard Springs. As a young man, his son, Noble Smith decided, with no promise for a future under the family circumstances, to cross over into Cranks Creek where his sister, Minerva, had married Isaac Burkhart. A local landowner, Aley (Alexander) Ledford, met and liked the boy. He had a daughter, Nancy, about Noble's age and soon arranged their marriage.

At this point in the telling of the Smith line, Aley came up with a land grab idea which was to make three people, his son John Ledford and his son-in-laws, Noble Smith and Henry Skidmore, very wealthy landowners in their own right. His sister's son, Jim Farmer, had become the official county surveyor. Together with the chosen three, Jim surveyed the Cumberland rim from Cranks Creek to Cumberland Gap and then made a generous circle to the north and came back to Cranks Creek. All unclaimed land within this survey, some 86,000 acres, was entered in a land grant and signed by Governor William Owsley of Kentucky making three men very wealthy.

But there was one big problem. In 1834, the Melungeons who had settled in the Clinch Valley in Tennessee shortly after the Revolutionary War and were Noble's kinsmen, were declared free people of color by the Tennessee legislature. This status gave them no legal rights with European settlers. Therefore, they were forced to give up their fertile river bottoms and move up on Newman Ridge which was less desirable for agriculture. This occurred only a few years before the aforementioned land grab. Aley would have known of Noble's Melungeon heritage. His neighbor, Isaac Burkhart, had married Noble's sister and would have known about his wife's background. Edward Pennington was making himself known across the gap from Cranks Creek and was a nephew of Jemima Pennington Smith, wife of Jonathan.

Aley was not about to risk 86,000 acres over the Kentucky legislature following Tennessee's lead. He conveniently had a brother-in-law by the name of Henry Smith so he would rewrite Noble's family history and make Henry his father. Trouble was Noble's side of the family didn't check Aley's creation and created the legend that David and Sallie had come directly from Ireland. And it took Henrietta Smith digging around in the courthouse basement in Abingdon to begin unraveling the stories of Aley Ledford and Noble Smith's family.

History of the Major George Gibson Chapter of the D.A.R.

The Major George Gibson Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution (NSDAR) was organized July 25, 1917 as a family chapter, members being limited to the descendants of Major George Gibson. The inspiration for its founding came from Mrs. Elizabeth Ball Kincaid, the mother of the organizing regent, Mrs. Nannie Lee Kincaid Stickley, as a way to honor their distinguished ancestor, Major George Gibson. In the summer of 1916 Mrs. Elizabeth Kincaid invited a cousin, Miss Marcia Moss of Williamsburg, Kentucky, who was also interested in genealogy, to visit her and help secure Major George Gibson records.

Mrs. Kincaid, being very frail, delegated the task of going over rough roads with Miss Moss, interviewing older members of the family and searching through Bibles and other records to her daughter, Nannie Lee. After securing the necessary records, they then consulted the State Regent, Miss Althea Spiral of Norfolk, who advised them how to proceed to become members-at-large. In February 1917, they became National members, which paved the way for the Major George Gibson Family Chapter.

On July 25, 1917, Mrs. Nannie Lee Kincaid Stickley, whose mother had died May 2, 1917, took up the work of organizing by inviting all cousins within reach for a Spend-the-day Party (remember the poor roads). Fourteen cousins came and these became the charter members of the new chapter. In addition to the hostess, they were Mesdames Anna Gibson Campbell, Olivia Morrison Orr, Cornie Gibson Fugate, Elizabeth Gibson Harman, Lucy Gibson Ewing, Minnie Pridemore McGeehan, Annie Bales Kincaid, Amelia Gibson Carr, Elsie Harman Risque, Misses Lula Campbell, Bartie Gibson, Lucy Gibson Bales, and Nanette Gibson.

Mrs. Stickley (Mrs. Ross Stickley) was elected the first regent of the chapter. It remained a family chapter until June, 1946, when it was decided that "we were not

being very democratic and that there were more lovely women whom we would like to have join us. So we opened the chapter and invited others to become part of our National Society."

George Gibson, born in Cork County, Ireland, 1732, came to America with his parents, Robert and Isabelle Gibson. They were among the army of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, who immigrated to America before 1743. They settled in Augusta County, Virginia, where George married Elizabeth Smith, daughter of Zachariah Smith about 1776. They had eleven children. George died April 3, 1819 Gibson Station, Virginia. Elizabeth died March 2, 1826, also at Gibson Station. They are buried near the site of the old Fort on a knoll at the foot of Cumberland Mountain.

Young George served as Lieutenant at the battle of Point Pleasant, under Captain George Matthews, in the Southern Division of Lord Dunmore's Army. He was commissioned a Captain, February 2, 1777. He served with distinction in Scott's Brigade during the terrible winter of 1777-1778 at Valley Forge. Migrating to Washington County after the Revolution, he then settled in Lee County about 1800. He purchased land at twenty-five cents an acre and built Gibson Fort near Cumberland Gap, the pass in the mountains used by all going west.

Organizing Chapter Officers 1917 - Dues \$2.00

Regent - Nannie Lee Kincaid Stickley (Mrs. Ross)

Vice Regent - Miss Lula Campbell

Corresponding and Recording Secretary –
Miss Bartie Gibson

Treasurer – Mrs. Amelia Gibson Carr

Historian – Miss Nanette Gibson

Registrar - Olivia Morrison Orr (Mrs. J.W.)

Chaplin - Cornie Gibson Fugate (Mrs. C.D.)

Can You Help?

We have a request from Historical Society Member Chester Bays regarding the following:

"A relative, now retired, graduated from high school in Norton. Her favorite teacher was Lennie Blankenship, who graduated from Jonesville High School, class of 1910 or 1911. Do you know anyone who might have a 1910 or 1911 Jonesville High School annual, or know where Ms. Blankenship lived or anything about her?"

If you have any information please contact Becky Jones at 276-346-2010, Judy Davidson at 276-346-2335 or contact Mr. Bays at ChetBays@aol.com; or email us at Leecovahistsoc@hotmail. Thank you!

Reprint Now Available!

Due to an exceptional number of requests the Historical Society has reprinted the first book:

A Pictorial History of Lee County

The book is \$49.99 (tax included) and can be shipped for an additional \$5.00. Check or money order is acceptable.

The book is also available at the following locations:

Powell Valley News – Pennington Gap

Greg Edwards Law Office - Jonesville

Rose Hill Pharmacy – Rose Hill

The Peoples Bank – Rose Hill

We are still working on the second Pictorial History!

Lovelady Chapter of the NSDAR

by Ruth Gilliam, Regent

Lovelady Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution held their organizational meeting on November 9, 1946 at the First United Methodist Church of Pennington Gap. The menu for the organizational meeting was "tomato juice, fried chicken, gravy, candied sweet potatoes, cauliflower, pickles, green salad, hot rolls, butter, apple pie, ice cream and coffee".

Mrs. George C. Taylor was the organizing regent and she presented three names (Lovelady, Powell Valley and Yokum Fort) to the National Executive Board from which to choose and approve a name for the new chapter. The board approved "Lovelady" and Powell Valley" and the Organizing Committee of the chapter chose "Lovelady". One of Mrs. Taylor's friends sent her a letter telling her "I am so thrilled with the name of your new chapter. It is quite fitting that such a romantic English name should be chosen by a DAR Chapter located in the section of Virginia which claims the purest strain of English blood now existing in the USA".

The following is a brief history provided by Mrs. Taylor: Some of the DAR members having heard older citizens who resided near Lovelady Gap tell the story of Thomas Lovelady, who with other pioneers, passed

through Lovelady Gap sometime near 1770. The story that follows was told by Captain Joshua Hobbs, whose grandfather, Vincent Hobbs, was a friend of Thomas Lovelady.

"Thomas Lovelady and his wife, with a party of pioneers, made camp at a Gap in Wallen's Ridge. Thomas Lovelady's wife, who was ill, could not continue so he remained at this camp with his wife who died and was buried near there. Thomas Lovelady, not wanting to leave the grave of his wife, remained here, lived in a cabin alone, made friends with the Indians and his cabin became the stopping place for many pioneers on their way from Watauga settlement to Kentucky. The Gap became known as 'Lovelady Gap'."

Lovelady Chapter meets on the third Saturday of every other month beginning with January. Notices of meetings are placed in the newspapers and visitors are welcome. If you are interested in learning more about DAR, go the website www.dar.org or contact any member of the Lovelady Chapter. Lovelady DAR is interested in preserving the genealogy of Lee County and will be honored to provide assistance in this effort.

Submitted by Nell Newman



Beech Springs Masonic Lodge No. 265, Dec. 4, 1909. William Neff, father of Willie Sergent, is the second man from the left. We would appreciate any information on any others that can be identified. Photo courtesy of Judge Birg Sergent.

My Last Visit With Earl Johnston *by Aubrey Lee*

Sometimes we put off visiting folks when we hear they are ill. I took some time on April 4 (2013) to visit with Earl. I'm glad I did. Earl is one of those special people who had an extremely positive influence on me and the lives of many others he crossed paths with during a long, productive, and fruitful life.

We talked at Cathy's house in Kingsport. Earl was staying there a few days before going back to Pennington Gap. He was weak, but still as sharp as ever. He obviously enjoyed talking about his life, but not as much as I enjoyed listening.

Earl smiled when he talked about his childhood. He talked about growing up near Robbins Chapel, one of those Appalachian communities that sprung up during the coal boom.

Earl was one of eight children, the son of John M. and (didn't catch her name) Mrs. Johnston. John M. had a team of horses that he used to log timbers for the mines. I had the good fortune of knowing John M. growing up and spent the night in his home with John Paul a few times. He was elderly but still possessed the strength of character seen in many folks who made a living in the Appalachian coalfields when hard work was the cornerstone of the economy.

Earl was a 1939 graduate of Calvin High School. He talked about his sisters, Lorene and Alice, and how they were good basketball players. Alice was left-handed which made it hard to guard her. Earl recalled a game against Flatwoods where she had a particularly "hot hand." Calvin didn't have a gym except for a half-court goal in the basement of the building. They had to play their games in the other county high schools.

Earl spoke fondly of Clyde Bailey and said Clyde lived "just over the hill" from the Johnston family in Robbins Chapel. He said he was speaking with Clyde "about every day now" and noted that growing up he and "Clyde were like twins."

He left Robbins Chapel in 1940 and to attend Hiwassee College. After Hiwassee, he went to work in payroll at Rhoda Coal Company in Wise County, not too far from Appalachia and near Stonega. This was when the coal industry was flourishing, he said, and noted that sometimes it took a long time just to drive through Appalachia it was so crowded.

Earl talked about the traffic in Pennington Gap now, saying it took a long time "just to drive a across town to visit Georgie." (I'd like to mention how he met Georgia. We didn't discuss that.) He said Pennington was the "deadest town he ever saw" and said he couldn't figure out "what all the traffic was about."

After working a while for the coal company, Earl was drafted into the Air Force. He and Snook Shelton left Pennington on the same day and they were in the service together for a while. Earl was recruited and assigned to meteorologist school, "weather school" he called it.

He graduated meteorologist training and shortly thereafter went to "cadet training" which was the term used to describe flight school. He said he really didn't want to go flight school but they drug him out of bed one morning, "ripped the blankets and sheets" off him to get him up to take the test. He said there were 150 questions on the test and he finished before most of the others. The officer grading the test made a "whooping" sound when he finished grading his, so Earl thought he hadn't done well. The officer said he had made a "d __ good grade" and Earl was on his way to flight school. Some of the training took him to the University of North Dakota. He graduated and went to war in 1944 to fly four engine B 17 Bombers.

He said things were "real hot" when he got to England to be deployed. He talked about flying across the English Channel and seeing the White Cliffs of Dover. Earl had vivid memories about his missions. He said "We would wake up about 4:00 in the morning and you dressed and everything was ready. You had to dress in two or three minutes so you could get everything and go. A truck picked us up and we'd go eat breakfast. They did feed us good, we didn't leave hungry. But, anyway, we would go down to the field and we had briefings for the pilots, briefings for the navigators, briefings for the gunners, in different groups."

Earl described how some of the newer pilots had crashes when they first arrive, but he didn't have any trouble. "It was just a great experience for a country boy like me," he said. Many of Earl's missions included heavy bombing Berlin. He also was involved in missions in France during the Battle of the Bulge and told a story about that at my Dad's funeral. He said: "I had no idea George Lee was over there. I had no idea anything about where he was or anything like that."

But, I was telling George and some other fellows about the Battle of the Bulge and how we tried two or three mornings to do this mission and it was so cold. It was 50 some degrees below zero when we were up there. And the plane was frosted all over and we had to have gloves on before we could touch anything on the plane. So, I was telling George about it, about how cold it was that morning, so many degrees below zero, and he just sat there and listened. He never made a sound, no nothing. And when I got through my big tale he said, 'I was right down there on the ground when you dropped those bombs.'"

Earl recalled the statement "war is hell" and talked about the times he wondered if he would get back from bombing missions. "There were times when we could see up ahead of us and the Germans had 90 millimeter guns and other firepower right where we were going. Flying to Berlin was pretty risky."



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We're on the Web!

See us at:

www.leecountyvahistoricalsociety.org

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My Last Visit With Earl Johnston continued from page 9

We would come back home and we would barely have enough gas to fly from here in Kingsport to Pennington Gap."

After the war was over, Earl had planned to come directly home. But a meeting with a colonel scared him when his discharge orders were changed. His orders to return stateside were put' on hold, and he was offered a job that would involve staying in Europe to train new pilots coming over to be involved in post-war missions. He thought about it hard, said he was "in a tizzy" for a couple of days, but decided it was time to come home and see his family.

So Earl came back home and enrolled in UT. But he said he had a "round" with one of the professors when he was "already on the edge." He left UT, came back home and bought a store in Woodway with his brother-in-law, Claude Ely, who had just been discharged from the Navy. Both he and Claude were married by then and he pointed out that Cathy was born in Woodway. (I wondered if this was correct. Cathy, were you born at home?)

After he and Claude sold the store, Earl went to work for Jim Jessee at Jessee Chevrolet as Sales Manager. He talked about going to Cincinnati to sales training meetings and being taught how to get in peoples' "front pockets." Earl worked there for around 14 years and described his time there as "pretty interesting."

After leaving Jessee Chevrolet, Earl started a credit union in Big Stone Gap and ran that business for three years. He then took a position with the Lee County School Board. Earl said he didn't particularly like that job and left to start another business with Claude - J & E Motors.

But what I remember most about Earl was his leadership in his community and his church. He taught the high school class in the Methodist Church for many years, and probably served on every board and committee as well. And you could always count on Earl for a word of wisdom anytime you talked to him. Wisdom borne out of experience, hard work, and a sincere desire to help whenever he could.

A few years back Tom Brokaw wrote a book called the "Greatest Generation" that chronicled the lives of those who served in World War II and came back home to build the nation. If you haven't read the book but knew Earl Johnston, don't worry. Earl's life exemplifies exactly what Brokaw described.

Aubrey Lee, July 8, 2013



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