



Gateway to the West



President's Report

By Becky Jones



2021 was a very difficult year for the Lee County Historical Society. With COVID 19 we could not have some of our meetings and were not able to get together to finish projects we wanted to do. Our water quit working this summer and we have not had the funds to hook up on the public water system with the initial cost and then a monthly water bill. Also, we have trees on the northeast side of the property that need to be removed. The bank has eroded and the trees could fall on the building. We have received some funds from the County that will help take care of some of the cost of the work if COVID will give us a break to do so.

We have had several books regarding Russell County, Virginia, genealogy from a good friend of mine, Sandra Hood. Several books on the War Between the States and on past Presidents have been donated by the family of Judge William C. Fugate, now deceased.

We have received several items from the family of John W. and Betty Laningham. Ken Roddenberry and I were able to meet with John and Betty's

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The Keene Family *by Ed Cress*

(This is a true story but some of the names have been changed as an Editorial decision.)

There was nothing funny about this bunch. From the time they moved onto part of the old Minton farm they were into trouble and causing other people trouble. The oldest son, Bubba, worked with his dad on the farm and did not seem to get into much trouble. The older sisters seemed to be very nice.

But the three younger sons, Jackson, Jimmy and Bascom were all bad apples and they all came to bad ends. Not long after they moved to the farm, Aunt Rose caught the Keene boys picking her strawberries and chewed them out. The next time she was away from home, they burned her house, barn and outbuildings, and left her to live the rest of her life in a tumble-down cabin on her farm. On the first day of school, after the Keenes had moved to the farm, Jackson, who was practically a grown man, came to school and immediately started making trouble for the teacher, Miss. Mary T. Fields.

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Banjo donated to the Historical Society by the John W. & Betty Laningham family.



Various local history and Genealogical books recently donated to the Society.

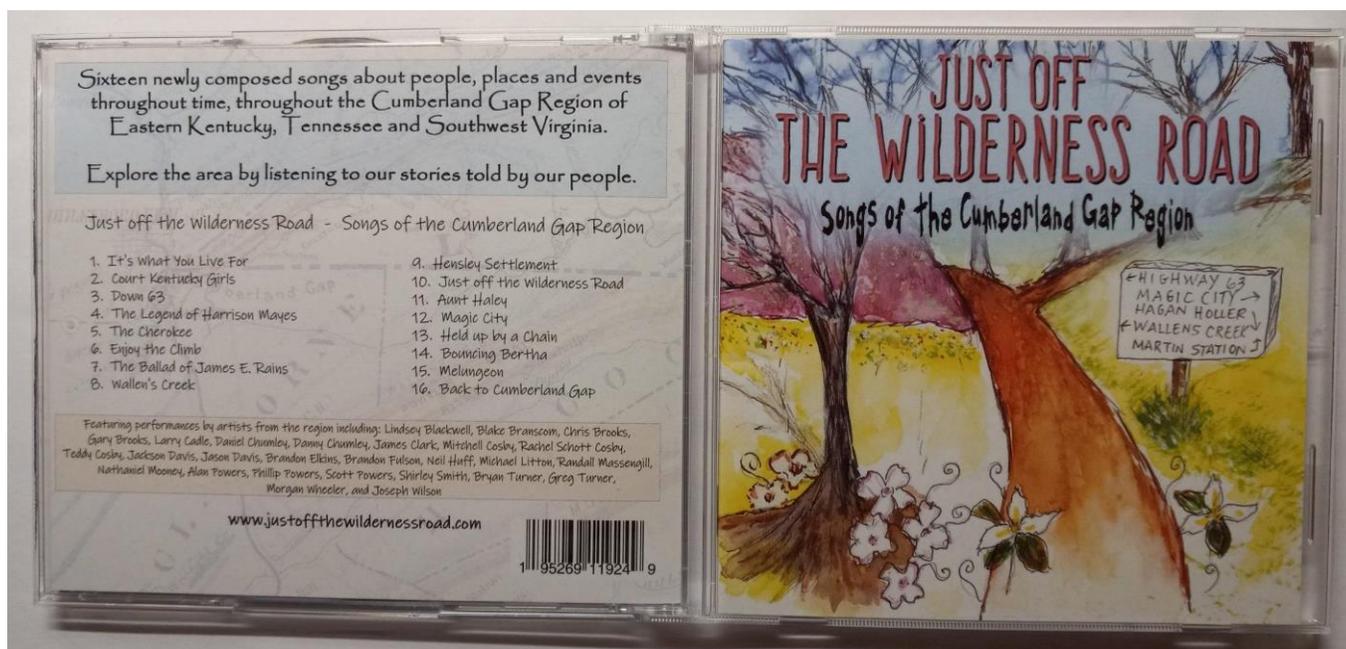
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son, Lee, who provided us with the history of many of the items that were donated to the Society. We have also received several soft-bound books on local family lineage that will be helpful for research.

The Laningham Family also donated a Seth Thomas clock and a homemade banjo. The banjo currently has only two strings, but it is neat to imagine the tunes that it has played.

The Wilderness Road CD is going well. If you don't already know, this CD is a compilation of songs and music written and played by several local people. We have CD's and thumb-drives for sale. The proceeds from this CD are going directly to the Historical Society.

A huge Thank-You to all the members who paid their dues last year and especially to those who sent extra to help pay the bills and keep the lights on. We appreciate your help more than you know. Please continue to pay your dues and support the Historical Society any way you can.



This CD was produced by local artists and the proceeds go directly to the Historical Society. It can be purchased for \$15 at Davis Nursery, Powell Valley News, Greg Edwards Law Office or order it from the Historical Society for \$15 plus \$10 shipping.

The Keene Family continued from page 1 by Ed Cress

The first week, he grabbed a large marble that was a favorite of my brother Billy. When he refused to return it, I reported him to the teacher. The teacher demanded that he return the marble. When he denied having it, Mary T. reared back and slapped Jackson as hard as she could. Jackson flew mad and drew back his fist to knock her down. All of the rest of us students jumped up, grabbing anything we could find as weapons to help her fight him. He stared at all of us, finally decided that he couldn't fight the whole school, wheeled around and left the school, never to return.

Only a few weeks later, Lester McGinis, Ralph Gibson and I were out walking at lunchtime from school and passed through a field near the Keene farm. We heard a noise in a gully, and when we looked in, there was Jackson lying on the ground. He looked up and saw Lester, with whom he had had a disagreement about a boat on the river. Drunk and disheveled, he stood up with a long knife in his hand, cursing as he came at us. We ran away from there so fast it seemed like my feet were only touching the top of the sedge grass.

In the meantime, his brother Bubba, who had been working in a nearby field with their father, heard the commotion and came running to subdue Jackson. At a safe distance, we stopped and watched as Bubba tried to take the knife away from Jackson; which he finally did by knocking him down. By now the old man Keene had arrived on the scene; screaming and cursing; then he started fighting with Bubba. We did not stick around to see how it came out.

Over the years, Jackson was constantly in trouble. He shot a man in the hip from ambush and got away with it. As I recall, he spent a term or two in the state pen for various other law-breaking. In later years, after the Keene family had moved to Indiana (much to everyone's relief), we heard that Jackson got into a fight with someone and they split open Jackson's skull with a hatchet and killed him.

The next oldest son, Jimmy was not so violent as Jackson, but he too, was always in trouble

with the law. For some reason he never liked me and was always starting fights with me. When the teacher caught him at it, she gave him a sound whipping. But Jimmy got his revenge. He came to school early the next morning and threw all of my school books into the toilet pit. We fished them out, cleaned them up, and I used them for the rest of the year!

When Jimmy was about grown, he and another man were caught after rustling a neighbor's steer and they were sent to the state penitentiary for a year or two. In the Army, Jimmy went AWOL, stealing a .45 pistol and other property from a captain. Back at home, he hid out in the woods, vowing never to be taken alive. When the MPs came for him, they told Mr. Keene that it was all the same to them; they had orders to bring him in, dead or alive. Mr. Keene begged them to go back to Jonesville and wait until he could talk Jimmy into giving up; which he did. He was court-martialed and sent to Ft. Leavenworth. I heard no more of him after that.

Bascom Keene, the youngest son also came to a bad end. In school, he also seemed to take pleasure in starting fights with me. By the time he was an adult I was away in the Army, but I understand that he was into various minor scrapes with the law. He also went into the Army, where he no doubt, caused plenty of trouble.

On the way home from the Army, he hired a taxi in Middlesboro, Ky. to take him up to Cumberland Gap. On top of the mountain, on the Virginia side, Bascom attempted to hit the driver over the head with a pistol to rob him. But the driver deflected the blow with his arm, grabbed a .45 from over his sun visor, whirled around and blew Bascom's head off. My Dad happened to serve on the jury at the manslaughter trial of the driver and he reported that he and the rest of jury took great satisfaction in freeing the driver of all charges in only a few minutes.

Uncle Luther Green Morris by Edgar Cress

Luther Green Morris was born in the Crab Orchard (Keokee), Lee Co., Va. on November 22, 1879, died January 3, 1966 at Pennington Gap, Va. He was the oldest son of Dr. Franklin Morris and Martha A. Phillips. He married Elissie Edens (Aunt Liza). There were no children born to the couple. These are the memories of Uncle Luther by his grandnephew, Edgar Cress.

So far as I know, Uncle Luther never went beyond grammar school at Keokee, but he was a self-taught, well-read man who was also something of a Bible scholar. He taught himself to translate the Bible from the original Hebrew and long before the New King James Bible, he claimed there were many mistakes in the earlier King James version.

In his younger days he was a mine safety inspector at the Inman Mines in Wise County, Va. One of his duties was to take a canary in a cage or a mine safety lamp into the mines before daylight to check for gas. If the bird passed out, or the lamp flame changed color he- knew that gas was present.

Uncle Luther was a favorite uncle of my father, Melvin Allen Cress, who enjoyed visiting Uncle Luther and Aunt Liza. As a boy, most of my memories of Uncle Luther were from these visits.

Uncle Luther and Aunt Liza lived on a small farm in Poor Valley, not far from Pennington Gap. Uncle Luther did some light farming, but most of his income came from the sale of eggs from their large flocks of white leghorn chickens. For egg laying the chickens were kept in several large screened hen- houses. To thwart chicken thieves Uncle Luther had lighting and alarm systems controlled from his front room. When we visited Uncle Luther I was warned to stay away from the henhouses, since the leghorns were very skittish. One time, I got too close to one of the henhouses, alarming the chickens, who exploded into a fury of squawking and beating of wings, much to my embarrassment.

In the summertime Uncle Luther and Dad would sit under a shade tree in the front yard and discuss world events and especially the Book of Revelation in the Bible. Uncle Luther loved to expound on the meanings of Revelation and the mistakes in the translations of the old King James Bible from the Hebrew.

I do not believe that Uncle Luther was very religious, but he was certainly a bible scholar. Dad was not very religious in those years, but he also was a great believer in trying to relate current events, (World War II) etc.) to the prophecies in Revelation. Dad and Uncle Luther would have long discussions on these matters, while I sat entranced at their feet. When Dad tried to push these prophecies to Mother, she was put out, because Uncle Luther was not a believer.

Uncle Luther and Aunt Liza kept two large gelded horses for farming and for hauling eggs and chicken feed in the wagon. Uncle Luther going down the Poor Valley Road with a wagon load of eggs was a regular sight.

The two horses were also Aunt Liza's pets. When not being kept in the barn they had free-run of the area around the house and yard. I will never forget the startling scene of Aunt Liza calling the horses while she stood on the front porch. They would rear up on their hind legs and she would feed them a treat of an apple or a lump of brown sugar.

With the horses loose around the house it was something of an ordeal to get to the house, since the horses loved to chase visitors. You eased through the gate at the road and started walking slowly toward the house, keeping a wary eye on the horses. When they ran toward you, you took off in a mad dash to gain the safety of the front porch while they went pounding by, kicking up their heels.

On one occasion, Uncle Luther was in a barn stall when one of the horses started crowding him against the wall. He was about to be crushed, but he managed to get hold of a pitchfork and jabbed the handle into the horse's side to get him off.

At one time, Uncle Luther and Aunt Liza kept Aunt Liza's brother. He was usually calm, but one night Uncle Luther awoke to find him standing over his bed with a large stick of stove wood raised over his head and a wild look in his eyes. Uncle Luther rolled out the other side of the bed and calmed him down after taking the wood away from him. After that, at night they chained his ankle to the cot with a light chain. He died a few years later.

The saddest event at Uncle Luther's farm was the

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Aunt Susie *by Edgar Cress*

This is a true story of our great our aunt Susannah Fitts Gibson, b. 1857, daughter of Andrew M. Fitts who had a large farm, a corn/wheat mill and a large two-story log house at the mouth of Wallen's Creek. The mill is now gone, except for the mill dam and the house has fallen in. Aunt Susie married the Baptist minister, Robert M. Gibson and they inherited the farm, mill and house.

In the late 1930s, when we lived on our farm, I was often at their home since we visited often and Mother's 20-acre Dowery strip from her mother, Lavinia Fitts Minton (sister to Aunt Susie), joined the original Fitts farm.

Aunt Susie was famous for her cooking and her delicious cakes. She also grew her own strong old-timey burley tobacco in her flower garden and smoked it in a clay pipe with a reed for a stem.

On one memorable occasion we were visiting at her home, along with her son, Ernest and her grandsons, Robert and David. J (My second cousins). After a sumptuous Sunday dinner, Aunt Susie gathered we children around the fireplace to tell stories.

Before starting, she carefully stuffed her pipe with the tobacco while we waited expectantly. From a box of kitchen matches, which she struck on the stone fireplace she lighted her pipe and puffed a few times and started telling a story.

The pipe soon went out. After lighting her pipe several times with matches while she talked, we interrupted her several times with questions, her grandson, Robert, couldn't stand it any longer, held up his hands and said, "Everybody hush while Grandma gets her pipe lighted" much to Aunt

Susie's amusement.

Another time, Dad and I were working in crops on the Dowery strip and Dad sent me with a glass gallon jug to get some cold water from their water pump. Aunt Susie saw me and brought me out a piece of tasty white cake, which I ate on the way back, washing it down with the cold water. When Dad started to drink, he said, "Where is my cake?" (Some of my cake crumbs had gotten into the water jug).

More about Robert and David: On one occasion at Aunt Susie's, I was almost killed by Robert. We were playing cowboys and Indians, while Robert was the sheriff in the open basement. As I rode by, he yanked me into the basement. He had a piece of pipe in his other hand and a wild look in his eye, I can tell you I scrambled out of there in a hurry.

Robert's father, Ernest Gibson, was on the Draft Board during WWII and to avoid the appearance of favoritism, he wrongly allowed Robert to be drafted into the Army. Robert suffered severe battle fatigue/mental breakdown in North Africa and spent the rest of his life in the Veteran's Hospital at Roanoke/Salem. Apparently, he was better in later years, but he never wanted to leave the hospital and died there in recent years.

David Gibson (my age) lives in Kingsport. His wife died in her forties and he never remarried. His mother, Bess Parsons Gibson died only recently in her nineties. David still owns the original Fitts/Gibson farm. Later, oil companies drilled for oil on his creek bottom fields, but no oil has been produced that I know about.

Uncle Luther Green Morris *continued from page 4**by Edgar Cress*

burial of his nephew, Paul Morris, who was killed in a plane crash during World War II. After the funeral in the Methodist Church in Pennington Gap, Paul was brought to Uncle Luther's farm to be buried in the small cemetery on a high knoll above the house. It was a struggle to carry the heavy casket up the steep knoll. The military funeral with the folding of the flag, the playing of taps and the echoing of the rifle volleys in the valley sent cold chills up my spine.

When I visited Uncle Luther with Dad and Uncle Rader Snavelly in later years, I was sad to see that Uncle Luther seemed much reduced in mental capacity. I don't know if he had suffered a stroke or it was just old age. This once brilliant, voluble man just sat quietly in a corner, hardly saying a word. I never got to see him again.



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Caving in Lee County by Edgar Cress

There are many limestone caverns in the rocky areas of Lee County. As a boy, I was always crawling into small caves to explore them. In the field across from our house was a "bottomless pit" leading to a cave. Dad kept it covered with fence rails to prevent cattle from falling into it, and we kids were sternly warned to stay away from it.

One fall, Dad and Garret Burchett decided to find a dry cave in which to store their large crop of sweet potatoes. Dad decided to explore the "bottomless cave" as a possibility. They cut down a slender cedar tree and trimmed the limbs off, leaving short spikes to form steps. They dropped it down into the pit and Dad climbed down into the pit, which was only about 20 feet deep. Shining his light about, at first, he saw only small passages leading down at steep angles. Stooping down and shining his light under an overhanging rock he saw a large room. After breaking off the rock, he peered into a long narrow room that was about 40 feet long by 6 or 8 feet wide. For many years this was our "cellar" for storing potatoes. My brother Bill and I became quite adept at climbing down the cedar ladder to get a mess of potatoes for Mother to cook.

After I was married in 1947, we lived with my in-laws for several months. On their farm there was another "bottomless pit", called Fox Cave. When a rock was dropped into the pit it seemed to go on bouncing and falling forever. Using the cedar pole ladder trick, it did not take me long to get to the bottom of the pit. There were two passages leading off from the base of the pit. The larger left passage went to several large rooms, with beautiful formations. While exploring this passage the first time, I had gone for some distance into the cave when I heard a strange eerie noise that sounded like some kind of animal (there were fox droppings in the cave). Scared, I came back out of the cave and went to the house for my shotgun.

Back at the mouth of the cave, I was ashamed of my fear and left the gun topside. Back in the left passage, I made my way steadily toward the eerie keening noise that echoed through the cave. Finally, I rounded a bend in the passage and found that the noise was caused by water dropping from a stalactite onto a thin shell of rock.

While exploring the right passage, I had to work my way downward over a series of small waterfall formations. Without looking first, I started down over one of these falls and dropped my flashlight. It bounced downward, fell into water, and went out, leaving me in the total blackness found in a cave. Hanging on with my hands, I suddenly realized that I did not know how high the drop was. I could not let go to reach the spare light on my belt. Finally, I had to let go, and fell about three feet into a pool of water up to my waist.

As this passage went downward into the cave, it got lower and wetter, until I was on my belly crawling through mud and water. But it was worth it; at the end of the passage, I found a large room with a chandelier like stalactite high on the ceiling pouring a steady stream of water. I was a bedraggled, muddy mess when I came out of the cave, but I had seen things never seen by anyone else. In later years, I realized how dangerous it had been to violate the first law of caving - never do it alone.