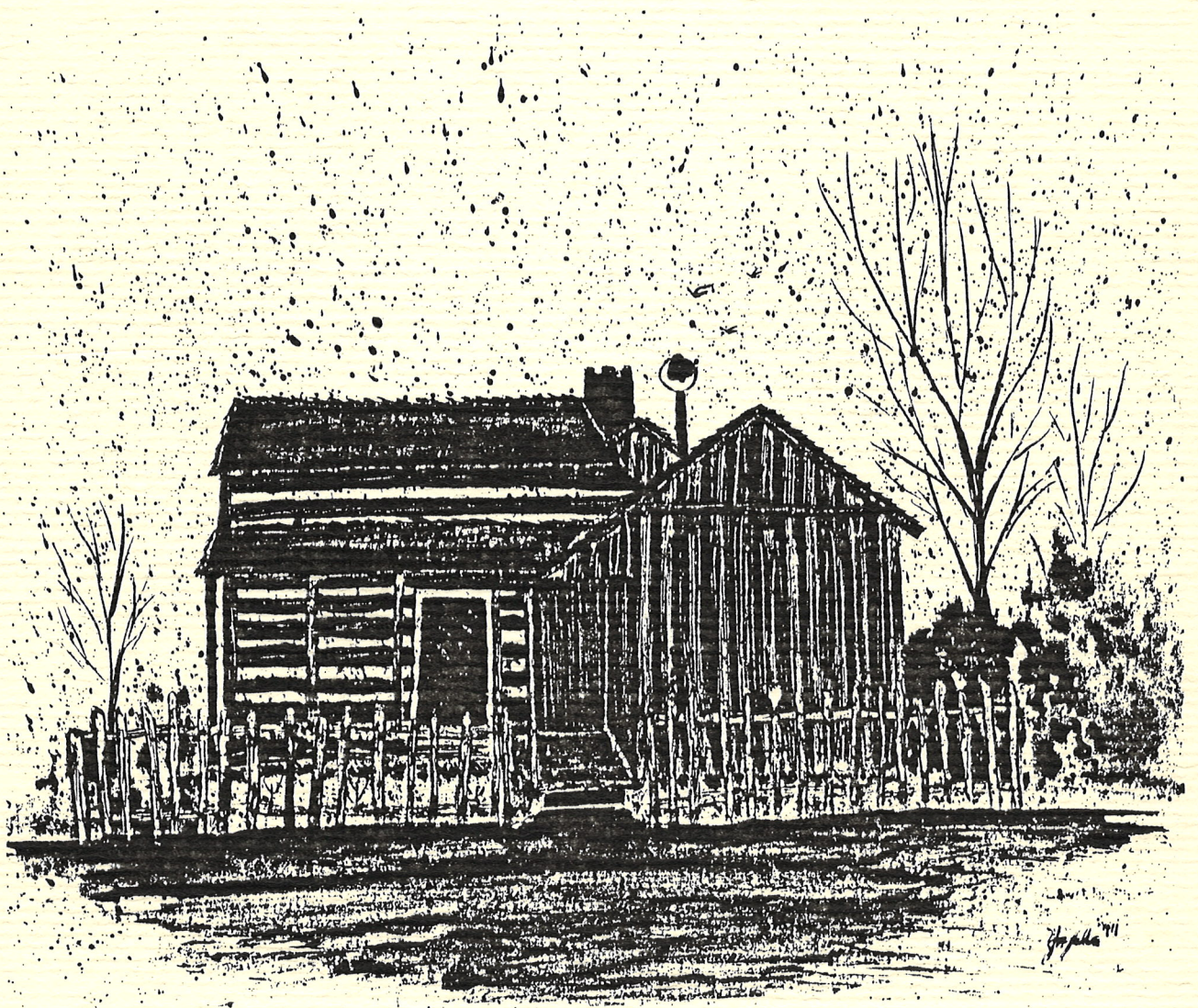


Millers Fork



By

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The people living here are seemingly homogeneous with the nature of their environment. The rugged country, ingrained family traits, poor economy, and lack of communication have kept them underprivileged to a better way of life. To simply describe this country as "Appalachia" would cover some details. It was in those days a pioneer type of life living with nature.

The land up Millers Fork was the roughest -- steep hills, rock and scrub brush. Roads sometimes turned into a morass and were barely usable. Farms or homes were handed down from one generation to another with little change in their accommodations. Intermarriage of families induced strong ties to keep relatives close by and the families stationary.

When I was very young -- four, five and six years of age -- I was sent to Grandpa and Grandma Sansom's (HUGH WASHINGTON SANSOM) to spend the summer months. The general nature of the country with its wilderness and the despairing surroundings left a memorable impression upon me.

Occasionally I heard tales of the wild game that once abounded in these hills. There was a time when the doves flying in flocks darkened the sky. Deer had paths to nearby salt licks. Woodsmen cut forests and floated the logs to the mill. I interpreted these stories as a beginning of time, as I had no other references to past history.

Grandma and Grandpa had twelve children, and their lives were too full to talk of the family history generations back. There was little association with other neighbors. Only on Sunday when a congregation met at church were there any social contacts. It seemed there was an estranged feeling, like a suspicion or a defection, that prevailed.

In just recent years I have learned from UNCLE HUGH (the twelfth child) of a tragedy that struck the family in 1906. OKEY EWING (the second child), grown to manhood, married and father of two boys, was working a crew of men cutting timber and floating it on the spring floods to the lumber mill. On a day when he drew money from the bank to pay his workmen, he disappeared. Word was brought to the family that he had drowned. On searching for his body he was found buried in a sand bar along Beech Fork Creek. The man that had worked with him was suspected of murdering him and taking his money. The man was OKEY'S first cousin. Reflecting back to my childhood, I am happy that I was never made aware of what happened except to be told that he drowned. I suspect this was the cause of distant feelings between two branches of the family.

I acclimated to wading in the creek and finding my way up the hollows and over the ridges. There were two deep hollows, the Chestnut and Lick Hollows. I ran scared when I travelled these places alone, always on the lookout for snakes and wildlife. Occasionally I was sent to bring in a horse that was out on pasture. Other chores were hoeing corn, which was chopping weeds, and helping with planting tobacco, an unusual experience.

Passing the family graveyard always filled me with mixed emotions. I had witnessed a burial there of my sister, MARTHA EUNICE, when I was two. I remember a group of men singing hymns. I believe this is the first memory of anything that I can recollect.

On top of this hill, overlooking the graveyard, was a beautiful long ridge. Here I loved to view the surrounding countryside and tell myself that I was on top of the world.

The work of planting and harvesting each year was laborious. All the work was by hand and with the aid of a horse. The horse would pull the plow to turn the soil and pull the sled to haul in the harvest. It seemed like a fight for survival. Barter was the means of exchange. Money was almost nonexistent and very scarce. At this present time, although seventy years past, I believe those conditions were an aftermath of the Civil War.

The mail was delivered on horseback to a box that was placed at a road junction near the church/school. This was one mile from their house down Millers Fork. The building, church/school, served a dual purpose. The one room for school served all grades. My first experience with school began there where conditions and facilities were primitive. The school year began in summer and ended in early spring to accommodate help with farming. Teachers were without degrees and hard to get. Maybe ten or twelve children would attend. I was reaching age six and due to enroll at the Eastern School in Chillicothe that fall. Grandma hoped that this would benefit my future. The old man teacher ruled with the rod, and I was too scared to learn anything. I dropped out when my summer stay ended.

Church services were held regularly every Sunday. Usually the services were highly emotional about Hell's Fire and the Ten Commandments. Every Sunday I listened to the songs and preaching. There was a song that had a refrain "God is Everywhere." As I interpreted this, I found myself thinking that I might find Him, or His spirit, along any lonesome path. Now I know there is the voice of the Great Spirit in the wind that gives life to all the world.

Travel for individuals was on foot or via horse. The nearest railroad line was through Wayne. This was so far away one could not hear the sound of a steam whistle. There were no electric or telephone lines. Fuel for the home was coal dug from the hillside or firewood.

These people, uncomplaining during the years of my experiences, are worthy of much credit. Their endurance and effort to make the best from what they had sufficed their needs. They reared a sturdy, healthy family.

The disaster of the Civil War brought a total upheaval of the way of life in the South. Families suffered financial ruin and wounds of heartbreak that could never heal. At the time of the Civil War my Grandmother's parents (JOHN BLANKENSHIP and SARAH STEPHENSON) owned all of the land up Millers Fork. He was a prominent man of his time, a real worker, owning a store and mill. They had plenty. With the advent of the war came raiding parties into the border states. After one such experience, he is said to have hid a man's sock full of gold. He later died not telling his wife or anyone where he hid the gold. Following his death, his widow was swindled out of the home place. This was his second wife, MATILDA. The settlement of his estate is recorded in Will Book #1 on Page #370 at the Wayne County, West Virginia, Courthouse.

My Grandmother (SARAH BLANKENSHIP) received her inheritance of land at the age of 16 and time of her marriage to HUGH W. SANSOM (September 2, 1874). Their home was a two-story log house with hand hewn shingle roof, built about 1850. As their family grew, a frame structure was added on for a kitchen and dining room. The house was meagerly equipped. The living room had a large stone fireplace and mantel. The furniture consisted of a bed for Grandma and Grandpa, a rocking chair, a straight back chair, a striking clock and coal oil lamp on the mantel. There were no curtains to windows; no rugs on the floor. Other rooms were for sleeping and equipped with double beds. The inside walls, needing a covering, were sometimes covered with a fine cheesecloth netting and then papered over with newspaper ("The Toledo Blade"), using flour and water for paste. In the kitchen was a cast-iron wood-fired range for cooking and heating water. The dining room had a large home built bench-table with a cabinet in one corner for dishes and utensils.

At the time of SARAH BLANKENSHIP'S birth, her mother died. Her father took a second wife, but it is not clear who cared for and raised Grandma. Her father's Will reads, "My sister, MRS. CROCKETT, (that is his sister ELIZA who married ANDREW JOHNSON CROCKETT) takes the youngest child of my first wife's children." The youngest was SARAH. She was known among acquaintances as "AUNT SAC."

Grandpa Sansom had a physical impairment that he suffered since childhood. When a baby, he had been lifted by his left arm causing a separation or dislocation of the bone joint at the shoulder. The damage was not corrected (no medical assistance available), and he lost the use of his arm.

As a young man he taught school. One day, during the Civil War, he was enroute to school when he was captured by a raiding party. They thought the lunch he carried was food he was taking to an enemy soldier hiding out. They accused him of being an enemy sympathizer and decided he should climb a nearby tree. He knew this meant that when he reached a certain height they would shoot him down. He reasoned with them and displayed his lame arm. They not only realized his difficulty to climb, but began to believe his story and allowed him to continue on to school.

When I visited them, Grandpa and Grandma were getting along in years. The three youngest (of their twelve) children, FRANK, MYRTLE and HUGH, were still at home. They entertained me and cared for my welfare. With seven boys and five girls to raise it had been a never ending job, but Grandpa and Grandma, by the necessity of helping relatives, took the three orphaned children of JOHN WESLEY BLANKENSHIP and AMASETTA SANSOM BLANKENSHIP to raise also. Their names were VALERIE, ROLAND and OTIS.

I would like to pay due respect to a close companion when there, a dog named SHEP. He was a small, brown dog, much like SANDY. Once, when down the road near the adjoining farm of Jim McSweeney, I ran into trouble. A son named Ross, about my age, apparently judging me "a foreigner" decided to run me back home. I stood my ground, and pretty soon we were down in the roadway wrestling and fighting. At this crucial moment, SHEP came to my rescue. He understood the situation and, taking Ross by the hair of his head, he rolled the crying boy off the road and down an embankment. SHEP and I triumphantly went home.

I enjoyed the experience of farm life. The horses, cows, hogs and chickens all got some of my attention. Because I could "hold on," I became a horseman. A mill about a mile up the creek was owned by JOHN BLANKENSHIP, Grandma's nephew. It operated on certain days to grind corn. I was put astride a horse with a sack of corn and sent to the mill. There, JOHN would help me off of the horse and grind the sack of corn to meal. He would keep one-half for his pay for milling. He would then place the sack of meal on the horse and swing me up to mount the sack. I would then return, completing the journey.

All things change with time. My parents separated, and I no longer visited my Grandparents. The years passed and for 50 to 60 years my contacts with any of my relatives were very rare. About the summer of 1933 I wanted IRENE to see and know Grandma. I took IRENE and FLEURY to the home place for a visit. I am sorry to say that this was the last time that I ever saw her.

Death has taken its toll, and now none of that family survives. I can take the time now to reminisce about my roots. The past five or six years I have visited in West Virginia, renewing acquaintances and obtaining bits of family history.

How wonderful it seems to think back on childhood and the amazing world then around me. I was blessed by my family ties to these devout, hard working forebears which gave meaning to my way of life.

ADDENDUM: There seems to be a theory about the success of the third generation. The tradition indicates there is an "up and down" characteristic that gives the third the advantage for better accomplishments.

I have dug into the past to show how your generation came "out of the woods."

M.M.S.

I am anxious to offer my grateful thanks to my daughter, Fleury Means, whose valuable time and expertise have so materially presented these reminiscences, in this narrative, for a lasting keepsake.

*Maston W. Sansorn
June 1986*

