

Remembering the Family Stories

— Noel W. Tenney

The past is like a foreign country until we explore every nook and cranny, hear every voice, and seek out all the tales that have been told. Sometimes, until the stories have mellowed in our minds, they are only what someone speaks. Yet, as they mellow and are told and heard over and over, they become a rich thread that weaves through our thoughts and memories that connect us back to those we've heard tell the tale and on back to those whose voice we've never heard but have had their stories passed down in the family traditions.

I never met my grandfather, Samuel Bethuel Tenney. He died in 1931 when my father, Lloyd William Tenney was only fifteen years old. My grandfather had been sixty-three years old when my father was born. He married my grandmother, Nora Ann Butcher, from Webster County, for his second wife when he was fifty-one and she was twenty-nine. There were two daughters, Aunt Zona Carter and Aunt Lula Reed, from my Grandfather's first marriage and they were almost as old as their new mother. The second marriage produced four more children, three daughters, Flora Riggs, Leila Ours, and Hilton Mason, and my father who was the youngest and only male child that had lived past infancy. My grandfather so wanted a male heir to carry on his family name.

Their farm was on the connecting road that led over the hill from Goodwin Station to Tallmansville. They worked hard and raised lots of crops, animals, and garden truck. I always heard that my grandfather was a very kind and caring person. My grandmother was a strong, sometimes slightly stubborn, hard working woman, whom I remember well from my youth. Our family often attributes our work ethic to the two of them. I often recall that as children we had some difficulty with two of her favorite sayings: "It is better to wear out than to rust out," and "while you're resting, why don't you go ahead to do this or that," mostly heard in the garden when she worked us hard.

My grandparents were not in any way prejudiced against people who had some difference from themselves, especially to the color of their skin. In the early 1900s, the Coal and Coke Railroad was being built through their area

as well as coal mines were being opened. The workers building the railroad were mostly Italian and African American men. As transient workers, even my grandfather thought they were pretty rough people. My grandmother lost several of her nice fat geese that she usually shipped to Baltimore by train when the railroad workers would pass by their farm and lure the geese away with a grain of corn fastened to a hook on a fishing pole.

My very favorite early family story that was told

over and over to our generation concerned two black men and my father when he was two years old. Two men from the Pittsburgh area had been hired to open a coal mines in Tallmansville. They were both African American, Mr. Sterling and Mr. Folkes. One of them was a graduate of Tuskegee Institute.

When they arrived in our community, no one would provide room and board for them, for various reasons, mostly prejudice. My grandfather said, "how could you call yourself Christian if you harbored hard feelings for strangers just because of the color of their skin," and so the two men boarded with my grandparents for nearly a year. My father was about two years old at that time when the first big round of polio made its way through the area. My father was very ill and my grandparents were greatly concerned. Mr. Sterling said to my grandmother, "Mrs. Tenney, if you'll do what I suggest, I believe we can save the boy." Mr. Sterling had worked out west as a

cowboy and had seen cases of polio before. He advised my grandmother to gather peach leaves, boil them, make poultices, and wrap my father's body in them, changing them often. Over the course of a few days, this was done over and over. When the fever was gone and the wrappings were removed for the final time, my father had no evidence of paralysis. My grandfather was so relieved and thankful. His response was "what goes around—comes around," kindness was repaid with kindness.

My grandfather didn't get to see my father grow to manhood, marry our wonderful mother, Macie Irene Mills Tenney, and produce his family of six off springs and a dusting of grand and great-grandchildren. My father lived to be nearly ninety and my mother made it to one hundred.



S.B. Tenney and Nora Butcher Tenney
(Photo courtesy of Noel W. Tenney)