

A STORY OF MY FATHER'S LIFE AND MINE FROM 8 TO 88

By John Stanley Dawson

My father was a farmer; evidently a good one judging by his success. My father's father died when he was seventeen years old and did not leave a will so my father was appointed administrator of his estate, designated by his mother and five other heirs. Four of them had left their home. He had to take care of his mother and young sister. The estate was sold; his mother, young sister and he got three-sevenths of what the real estate of the estate sold for - \$14,000. He and his sister pooled their interest and bought a farm at the base of a mountain some distance from where they had lived and land was cheaper. His mother was given all personal property that included a colored family of four, a man, his wife and two girls.

My father married his cousin, Millie Brown Childress, in 1858 when he was 22 years old. My mother said when she arrived at her new home father's mother greeted her with a smile and kiss saying, "Millie, I am going upstairs now. If you need me to help, call me." She did often, feeling it a courtesy due her and she did need her advice. She lived to be 93, was never in the way, always cooperative.

My grandmother lent her brother \$2,000 to buy hay to sell the Confederate Army. Another man had lent him \$3,000 holding first mortgage so the farm was sold by him. My father bought it and moved to it in 1873 (Cool Springs) when I was five years old. This farm was not as hilly as the one he moved from; a large creek flowed through it, a gristmill was on it, which was my father's delight to own. At that time there were four mills on that creek – one ground wheat, but not one of them is in operation now.

My father grew tobacco extensively, had a large flock of sheep – said the sheep and lambs aided by the wool helped bring in money for taxes and improve his farm. He grew long leaf dark tobacco cured by open fires in trenches under it. As soon as it was cured, he began stripping, sorting and tying it in bundles. He sorted it in three grades: lugs, short and long leaf. An elderly colored man did most of the sorting; young men tied it in bundles, folded a leaf and wrapped it around the stems and packed it in bundles while it was soft. As soon as this preparation was finished, it was packed in hogsheads made of long riven oak boards strapped with hickory and white oak saplings split and notched to hold them together. My father and a colored man did the packing in the hogsheads. My work was to help bring it out of the shed and hand it to the packer. They had lard in a container on the platform, and we put some on our hands frequently to prevent gumming and sticking. Then a prying head was put in at intervals and pryed [pried] down to pack it tight, a thousand pounds or more in a hogshead. He would get it all packed to ship early in April. He said that the majority of tobacco had been sold earlier; it being scarce at this time would bring a better price. He shipped his tobacco to Richmond on boats on the James River, Kanawha Canal, on Captain J. L. Pitts' boats. Captain Pitts had three boats; his sons, John L., Arthur, and Luther, were captains of the boats.

My father would go to Richmond on the boat that carried his tobacco. He had a store at his home, would have a list of goods he wanted for it and buy from the wholesale dealers in Richmond; said if he had staple goods that people needed, he could always get hands. Country stores were not so numerous then.

He told me when we were packing the crop for shipment in April 1877, that I could go with him to Richmond when it was shipped prior to the second Monday in April. His tobacco had been hauled to Warren, Virginia, our nearest loading point on the canal. Captain Pitts notified my father that his tobacco would be loaded on Monday, the 8th, on his son Luther's boat, if he was going to be there early.

My mother cooked a ham, baked a fat hen, loaves of light bread, spice cake, put in a jar of peach pickle and jar of preserves. What we carried was given the boat's cook to supplement the meals on the boat.

The boat was pulled by two mules in tandem, driver rode the rear mule. In the front of the boat was a compartment where tow mules were kept; at the front end a compartment the steersmen and cook slept in; next the cook room, next the captain's room where there were two bunks and table or shelf for the captain to eat on. My father and I slept on the lower bunk, Captain Pitts on the upper. The steersman blew the horn for loading point and locks, westbound boat or packets. The packets carried passengers and baggage; an express packet was pulled by three horses hitched tandem. The driver rode the rear horse. When we met a westbound boat or packet, the towrope was taken off the horses, dropped in the canal; the eastbound boat steered to the left, then back to the right. As soon as we passed, steer[s] men got the pole with hook on it, pulled up the two ropes and hooked it on the horses. When the boat came to a lock, the two ropes were unhooked, east gates closed, west gates opened, the boats glided in. East gates opened, then the boat glided out to the lower canal.

We were two days in travel, arrived at Richmond Tuesday p.m. The boat tied at the wharf and horse-drawn drays began loading and hauling the hogsheads of tobacco to the warehouses. The grade and shipper's name had been marked on each hogshead. They were rolled on scales and weighed; gross weight marked on each hogshead; one head taken out, hogshead taken off and weighed; tare weight marked under gross weight, then net weight. A crowbar was pushed in the center and near each end; a bundle was taken out of each opening and wrapped to keep it soft. A tag was tied on the bundles – hogshead number, price, tare and net weight, name of shipper and commission merchant that sold it at the auction market. Tompkins Brothers, commission merchants, sold it for my father. A tag was tied to the bundle – hogshead number marked on it and its grade, net weight, price per hundred pounds sold for and total of sale, in buyer's name. Mr. Tompkins recorded that in his book. When all of my father's tobacco had been sold, Mr. Tompkins gave my father a statement of gross and net amount after freight, drayage and commission had been deducted. Lugs bought \$3.50; short leaf \$8.00; long leaf \$12.00. My father said it was a good average price. Mr. Tompkins gave my father a check and went with him to the bank to get it cashed. Farmers didn't do banking then as they do now.

My father went to the wholesale houses then to buy for his commissary – to a wholesale grocery store for the following: 1 barrel light brown sugar, 2 sacks of green coffee, 1 –10 cent, 1-12 cent lb., 1 –112 lb. keg loose soda, 1 barrel decapitated and disemboweled corn herrings, 1 barrel roe, 1 barrel seed sweet potatoes, 5-224 lb. sacks Liverpool Salt, 2 –50 lb. boxes stick candy and ball candy, bulk grain, black pepper, grain allspice, nutmeg, cloves, and cinnamon. At a hardware store he bought the most used size cut nails made by the Tredegar Iron Works, long flat bars of iron for wagon and buggy wheel ties, 1 box of IL, 1 box of Barlow, 2 blade knives, and copper rivets for mending harness. Then he went to M. Black and sons Leather and Shoe finishing where he got sole leather, wood pegs which were used when making and half-soling boots and shoes, flax thread bristles to make waxed thread to sew boots and shoes, peg and sewing awl handles and bits and shoe eyelets. Next he went to a wholesale shoe store where he bought a case of brogan shoes for men packed loose in wood case, not pasteboard boxes. He bought me a pair of red-topped front and brass capped toe boots. My father then went to a wholesale dry goods and notion house for a bolt of Kentucky jean for men's work clothes, Hickory stripe cotton cloth, one bolt yellow cotton cloth, two bolts of calico for ladies; dresses, boxes of back and white sewing cotton, box of knitting cotton, 1 box of white bone pants buttons, 1 box black pants buttons, 1 box each of white buttons for shirts and dresses, porcelain, 1 dozen broad-brimmed palm straw hats, 1 box shoe laces.

Mr. Tompkins asked my father if he wanted to go to Rockets wharf where ships loaded and unloaded. Thursday a ship was loading flour and unloading coffee. Three barrels of flour were rolled on a ramp extending from the wharf to the loading hold of the ship. There was a heavy rope looped around the barrels and a hook on a rope running through a pulley wheel on the end of a crane out to the loading hold of the ship; a horse hitched to the rope was led forward to raise the flour and then the horse would walk backwards and let the flour down in the ship's hold. Men in the ship's hold would take off the rope and rack up the flour, then put three sacks of coffee in the rope, loop it around the coffee, rope in the loop, then the horses walked forward and pulled the three sacks of coffee out of the loading hold of the ship. Men then would pull it to the loading ramp. Men would then carry the coffee and pile it under the shed on the wharf. A ship was loaded and ready to pull out, loaded with large poplar logs on deck.

Mr. Tompkins found out that the ship would pass one coming in down river. Then my father and I could go down the river on the outgoing ship, and when we met the incoming ship we could transfer to the incoming ship and come back to the wharf. When we met the ship, it glided up beside the incoming ship and was snubbed and we transferred.

Soon after we got to the ship, the Captain, Mr. Craig, said that dinner was ready and invited us to dine with him. That is where I saw and ate my first oysters. Captain Craig had asked my name. He saw that I hesitated eating the oysters and he said, "Eat them, John. They are good." They served crackers and black coffee with the oysters and apple pie for desert. I asked the waiter for a second helping. He said that they only served desert once. Mr. Tompkins said he did not care for any desert and told him to give me his slice of pie.

I kept looking up the rope ladder up the mast. Captain Craig told me not to climb it as I might fall. I had to content myself by sitting on one of the lower rungs.

The ship was pulled by a tug. There were large flocks of ducks and wild geese on the water. The tug and ship would shove out waves on the flock. I could not see why they did not drown. I asked Captain Craig why they did not drown. He replied, "Did you ever hear the expression, "You can pour water on a duck's back but cannot drown it."

When we got to the wharf, we went to the boat landing. Captain Pitts said that he had received father's freight and took out the bills of lading, compared them with my father's bills; they checked okay. Captain Pitts said we would leave the next morning, Friday.

We were three days in transit going west up the river to Scottsville, arriving there Sunday p.m. My older brother met us there. I was wound up like an eight-day clock telling him where we went and what we saw. He was in Richmond the fall before attending the State Fair.

The following Sunday we did not have preaching at our church, but we attended Sunday School. I wanted to wear my red-top brass boots. My mother said I must not wear them as boots were for winter wear. The Sunday School Superintendent asked me to tell them about my trip. I was backward in starting but like the eight-day clock again, I did not know when to stop.

I have traveled in parts of thirteen states. I walked around the tree in southwestern part of Virginia where you can walk in three states, namely Virginia, Tennessee and Kentucky. I have been to Virginia's three nature curiosities, namely Natural Tunnel, Natural Bridge and Luray Caverns, and Niagara Falls of New York; have ridden on Pullman plush seat cars; eaten in Pullman dining cars; attended the inauguration of a governor of Virginia and West Virginia, namely William Moorefield and Osband Dawson of the same surname as mine, but no relative. I have never seen anything that interested me as much or afforded me as much pleasure as riding down the James River and Kanawha Canal on the boat pulled by mules and a ship down the James River tidewater pulled by a tug, and my first oyster meal I ate on the ship and sitting on the mast rope ladder of the ship. Why doesn't life seem now, as I am past 80, as interesting as then? The boy isn't there.

John Stanley Dawson dictated the above to Edith Cocke Dawson, a niece by marriage. John was born on 26 Nov. 1868. In 1898, he bought Maple Ridge Farm on Rt. #6 in Esmont, Va. John's older brother was Benjamin Brown Dawson, owner of Poplar Branch & Preference Farms near Faber, Va. The youngest brother, William Andrew Dawson, inherited Cool Springs Farm on Dawson's Mill Road in Esmont, VA. Their parents were Mildred Brown Childress Dawson and Andrew Jackson Dawson, 5th Va. Cavalry & 49th Va. Infantry, CSA. Cool Springs passed out of the Dawson family at William's death in 1949. It is now owned by The Wildlife Foundation of VA and called Fulfillment Farms.

-Mary Roy Dawson Edwards, Preference Farm, Schuyler, VA 22969