

## THE LEASBURG I KNEW

by  
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My first awareness of Leasburg must have been at about the turn of the century, at which time I was four years old. I am sure I had visited Leasburg from our Person County home in the arms of my mother from babyhood, since her mother and father lived there. He was a retired Methodist preacher; she a daughter of Reverend Solomon Lea. As the name Leasburg should disclose, it was, or had been a Lea center. Solomon Lea was born there and spent most of his 89 years there. His father before him and other ancestors had lived there. At this particular time a maiden daughter, Wilhelmina, (Aunt Willie) and a bachelor son Edward, (Uncle Ed) were all that were left except of course, Grandma.

There were other relatives, Walter L. Thomas, my mother's brother, married to Mollie Dixon, my father's half-sister, with their children was another attraction. Then my father's father, J. W. Dixon, Sr. lived no more than a mile north-east of Leasburg. We frequently visited there.

About 1904 Leasburg was particularly glamorous to my country-boy eyes: Uncle Walter and Uncle Jerry Dixon (J. W., Jr.) together had erected a roller mill in the valley back of Uncle Walter's store. This was the closest roller flour mill to us and this made for more trips to Leasburg. What a wonderful thing to watch the various machinery in operation, and to watch colored Tom Stanfield fire the roaring monster of a boiler with green puncheons from the sawmill.

Then John Pettigrew, one of the widely known Pettigrew brothers of Roxboro, all blacksmiths like their father, had moved to Leasburg. He had a new blacksmith shop at the crown of the hill descending to the great mill. Now, patrons of the mill could have their mules and horses shod while waiting for their wheat to be ground. Pettigrew also did wagon repairing, such as shrinking tires, making new whiffle-trees, or even rebuilding wheels. To my youthful eyes, things were humming.

It was the next year that my father bought the Sidney Thompson home and farm at the east end of Leasburg and in November 1905 sold our Person County home and moved to Leasburg.

Like many of the homes in Leasburg, ours was built before the war - the Civil War. Part of it was said to be 150 years old then; the newer part only 75 years old. We had occasion to cut an opening for a door through a wall and found 6" x 6" studding fastened with hickory pins.

We have been told that when the father of Mr. Sidney Thompson was sending all of his sons to Chapel Hill for University education, Sidney insisted that what he wanted more, was plenty of good farm land, and enough money to build the prettiest house in the village for the girl he loved. (He got what he wanted.)

It was a sturdy piece of construction. The first floor was fourteen steps from the ground level, with two finished rooms underneath. One, later used as a bedroom was probably built for the owner's office; the other was the dining room, reached by an inside stairway. The kitchen was in a separate building in the yard, as was customary in ante-bellum days. The residence and surrounding buildings were in Caswell County, but most of the farm was in Person County. The county line was Cobb Creek, which provided water for the stock and cattle as they grazed in the meadow along each side, and very importantly, to me, it furnished the makings of a swimming hole where I

learned the art of staying afloat.

The population of Leasburg at that time was given as 175, but I can't begin to count that many. RFD hadn't started then and maybe the surrounding country was counted as Leasburg. Mail had to be brought from and delivered to Semora, the nearest railroad point - nine miles away.

Our nearest neighbors were the George Thompson family. Mr. Thompson was deceased but his third wife lived there with the children of his three marriages. Of the first family was Miss Bessie. Miss Bess was a particularly good friend of my mother, for they had attended school together as girls in Solomon Lea's academy there in Leasburg. At this time, she was still teaching school. The horse was hitched to the wagon, and with a little negro boy, Dave Curry sitting beside her, grinning like a "cheshire," she drove off to the school over near Mr. Charlie Winstead's home on the road to Olive Hill. Sometimes she rode the horse side saddle, with Dave behind her. Miss Bess was the organist at Leasburg Methodist Church and teacher of the grown-ups, the biggest class in the Sunday School.

Then there was Miss Annabel of the second family. She was the man of the house and did a bit of farming with the help of the same Dave Curry. She wore a man's hat and coat when doing these farm duties but at other times was the acme of simple neatness and good taste. She was Sunday School teacher of the boys' class, my group, for years; and a good teacher she was.

At this time, except for the widow, the third family was away from home. Graves was in his last year at A & M, now N.C. State University in Raleigh, and Miss Ella was a student at Meredith College, where she later taught. There were other members away too: Miss Bess had a brother, Sam, a tobacconist in Kinston; Miss Annabel had a sister Ida, a nurse in Durham, and a brother, Jimmie Neal, manager of a hotel in Greensboro. Mrs. Thompson was mistress of the home - all a wonderful family - wonderful neighbors.

Around the corner from the George Thompsons lived William Stanfield and his wife Lucy, his son Fletcher and wife Rosa - unusually well bred negroes. Uncle William was already past middle age; he was an excellent carpenter, I would say a cabinet maker. He could do, with simple tools, what many today cannot do with machine tools. I loved to be around him when he did work for my father. I remember coming past his house from Sunday School one Sunday and hearing hammering in his back yard. I investigated and found that he was making a coffin for a negro child that had died the night before. It was a nice job he was doing, as always. Fletcher, his son, was a powerful man in his thirties. He was the best wheat cradler I ever saw. He liked to use a special home-made cradle of my father's and could he cut a swath! He was also the best ax man I ever saw. Rosa, Fletcher's wife, was one of the Bigelow girls from western Caswell County. They were half-white - all seamstresses and smart. Rosa sewed for my mother and others.

A little farther west and across the street was the former home of Dr. Jake Thompson, general practitioner for a widespread community. He was dead, the family scattered, and the house vacant. His son, Dr. Joe returned after graduation from the medical school of Kentucky University and practiced around Leasburg for a year or two before marrying and locating in Creedmoor. Dr. Joe had his office over Connally's store. There he once treated my leg for a pretty bad dog bite. I still have the scar, but no other ill effects. Al Wade eventually bought the home of Dr. Jake Thompson and settled his family there.

Farther west and across the street was the home of my mother's parents, Reverend M. C. Thomas and his wife Henrietta Lea. Grandpa wore a peg-leg necessary since a fall from a high load of hay. He was living here in retirement, already in his seventies. He was a strong minded Methodist. I used to wonder if he thought any other denomination

stood a chance for heaven. He was a prolific writer, had scrapbooks all around, and could do a pretty good job at poetry. Grandma was a very quiet, religious person, but very alert and intelligent.

A little farther west and across from Grandpa was the old Hambrick home. All the Hambricks had married and moved away and Mrs. Nannie Stephens, a widow, lived in this house with her three youngest children. Voss, who later married my older sister Annie, Lula Belle, a very good friend of my same sister, and John, one of my boyhood friends. Mrs. Stephens had the only telephone in town. It was a party line as most country phones were and she would literally talk by the hour with friends, in a true "party" conversation. Stella Tapp, over near Roxboro, was one of her favorites.

Up the hill was Connally's store, managed by Mr. H. T. Connally, and adjacent, was the Connally home, one of the finer homes in Leasburg. Here lived fiery, but likeable, Mr. Henry Connally, wife Sallie, daughters Mary and Mildred, and sons, George, Edgar and Walter. None married, although later on Miss Mary was married to Judge Womack and Walter married the school "marm," as I shall relate later, and lived across the "street."

North from the Connally's, on a knoll, in a beautiful grove of oaks, was the R. I. (Bob) Newman home. Here the school teacher roomed and boarded. It was convenient for the one-room school house was not more than a couple of hundred yards away. There were two sons, Rob and John - John was another of my boyhood friends, and there were still four of the pretty daughters at home - five including Evie, who married my Uncle Jerry and thus became one of my favorite aunts.

Down the gentle slope and across the Semora road, stood the school house with a line of cedars along the road in front. The one teacher was Miss Virginia Underwood, who reigned over all the grades made up of thirty-five to forty pupils. There were no formal grades. One started to school at age seven, learned to read, and advanced year by year until upper 'teens when boys just didn't come to school any more, chiefly because they became more valuable on the farm. Rare indeed was the boy who went on to higher schools. The girls, however, frequently went on to college. They, of course, trained for the teaching profession.

Miss Underwood, as we called her, was an excellent teacher. How she maintained discipline over that mixed up group and drilled a little education into their heads is beyond me. Her commencement exercises at the close of each school year became something of a tradition. To me, coming from an even more primitive country school, these exercises were wonderful. They were held in the church as the only building in the village large enough. All pupils took part in commencement. I fell into it good and proper, my first school year. In trying out for parts, boys were called in one by one to find one who could sing. I got the part as Reuben in "Reuben and Rachel" with Mabel Stephens as Rachel. Our performance was a great hit - the crowd went wild with applause.

Miss Underwood didn't escape romance. We began to see Walter Connally taking her for a drive after school and the girls began to get excited. Sure enough, they were married the following summer. Then the problem arose, what should we call her as a teacher. "Mrs. Connally" just wouldn't do. She settled it by informing us that she was Miss Genie Connally forever. She was indispensable in the social and religious life of the village, a lovely lady.

South of the school, was the Lea home, originally home of my Great-grandfather Solomon Lea, now the home of Uncle Ed and Aunt Willie, neither married. Aunt Willie was a talented musician. Not only could she play the piano well but she composed music and poetry as well. She gave piano lessons and both of her pianos were busy before and after school. Uncle Ed was quite a scientific farmer and used many advanced ideas on his farm. He read widely, was an interesting talker, and was quite a drawing card as he sat on the store porch to dispense his wealth of knowledge.

The church, Methodist, stood as now at the intersection of the Semora Road with the Roxboro-Yanceyville road; the parsonage alongside, to the west. There five churches in the Leasburg circuit; besides Leasburg church, there was Salem, Bethel, Hebron, and Union. I am not sure how one preacher made the rounds, I do know he preached once a month in Leasburg in the morning, and at 3 p.m. most every other Sunday, as well as Sunday night. He also conducted meeting every Wednesday night. Uncle Ed used to say the Wednesday night prayer meeting was Leasburg's "matchmaker," it provided such comfortable opportunity for the boys to escort the girls to and from church. The modern "date" was unheard of at that time.

Adjacent to the parsonage was the Joe Pulliam home and across the street was "Pulliam's Store." West of Pulliam's Store was the home of W. L. Thomas, (Uncle Walter) and on the west edge of Uncle Walter's lot stood his store. Facing Uncle Walter's was J. T. (Brud) Bradsher's home and store. This store was not very busy, for its stock was rather run down. It was the only store that pretended to carry any drugs. Once when my father was in bed with a deep cough, and threat of worse, he had Dr. Love, who then lived west of Leasburg, in the country, come to see him. When Dr. Love left he took me along to Bradsher's Store, where he looked over the various drugs on the shelves, selected two or three and mixed a cough medicine which I took back home. It seemed to be effective.

Across the street where the mill road turned left toward Prospect Hill, lived Mr. Addie Stephens, our Justice of the Peace. Farther on lived the Fuquas, and later the Bill Wades, Al's parents. Across the street was the S. P. "Pink" Newman home. Mr. Pink worked in Banner Warehouse in Danville, Va. during the tobacco season, but came home weekends. The son, Will, was my age. There were also three pretty daughters, Sallie, Annie, and Mary. Next to their home lived the Ben Stanfield family. Their only son, Bennie, studied at Trinity (now Duke University) and became a Methodist minister; the rest were attractive girls of whom five were still at home, Ruth, Anna, Bettie, Ethel, and Hattie Irwin, or "Irvin" as she preferred to be called. That leaves, at the west end of the village, only the Vince Morton home. (The original Gabriel Lea home.) Mr. Morton was deceased but his widow still lived there with sons Monroe and Wheeler. Voss Stephens, Mr. Morton's grandson, later acquired this home and lived there.

But Leasburg had a suburb of sorts off to the south known as "Sugar Hill." Here about all the colored citizens, except William Stanfield, lived. To mention a few, there was Aunt Fannie Elliott with two daughters and three sons, that I knew about. Henry, the oldest son, married our favorite cook, Nora. Henry worked for Uncle Ed Lea. After Uncle Ed's death, I am told that Henry practically ran the farm and his son, Robert, faithfully looked after Aunt Willie until her death at the age of ninety-two, the last year or more bedridden with a broken hip. Henry's sister, Mary, married Tom Swan. Tom worked for my father several years. He was powerfully built, good natured, and more intelligent than average. He had a rumbling, deep voice and sang the bass part well. I have heard him joining in the singing at baptizings held on Cobb Creek just below our home. He was something to hear; Uncle Ed Lea said he had the best bass voice he ever heard.

I am reminded of an incident involving Tom. A dentist in Milton, Dr. Hurdle, used to tour the surrounding country once a year with his foot-powered dental engine and other equipment and take care of dental needs of people in these small towns. When in Leasburg, he used a one-room office building in the southwest corner of the Henry Connally yard. Now Tom had very bad teeth and determined that he would have them all pulled out and get artificial dentures. He later told me about going to Dr. Hurdle for the job. Dr. Hurdle set about pulling the old snags and stumps in Tom's mouth. Cocaine was not used in that day. Tom said he endured the pain of extraction until the last tooth, a particularly tough one. That one hurt so bad that he involuntarily threw up his hand and struck Dr. Hurdle, not a large man, and knocked him across the room onto the floor. Tom jumped after him, picked him up as he would a child and stood him by the dental chair, then Tom took his seat to have the job finished. He got

a beautiful set of plates which improved his genial smile.

Beside the Elliotts and Tom, there lived on Sugar Hill Grant Smith, the negro school master and not far away, Rich Williams, who I believe had nine sons, all grown, enough for a baseball team, they used to say. Rich was a good shoemaker. He actually made shoes; I wore a pair as a boy and they were comfortable.

My Uncle (W.L. Thomas) Walter's store was also the Post Office. Uncle Walter was one of the two Republicans in town, as far as I knew. That might account for his having the Post Office. He was a great admirer of Teddy Roosevelt. The other Republican was Uncle Ed Lea. Uncle Ed pinch-hit as postmaster when Uncle Walter had to be away on business. Uncle Ed subscribed to the New York World Tri-Weekly. After he had finished reading it, he gave it to me. I delighted in the serial story it carried. I remember one "The Man in Lower Ten." It was a crime mystery and a hair raiser.

Mr. J. W. (Joe) Pulliam, owner of Pulliam's Store, was one of the finest men I ever knew. Not only was he pleasant and friendly in his business relations, but he was a mainstay in the church. As long as I lived in Leasburg, he was Sunday School Superintendent. I can still see Mr. Pulliam standing back of the organ, with Miss Bessie Thompson at the organ, and Uncle Ed Lea seated just back and to her right. There was no choir. Everybody sang. Uncle Ed led the singing. Mr. Pulliam sang a good bass. Walter Connally usually sat nearby; he was our only tenor; he had a beautiful voice.

Connally's store was mainly operated by George, the bachelor son. George was a favorite with lady customers, for he carried a good selection of dress goods and accessories and he had a knowledge of just which of such items would be becoming to his customers. He kept individual tastes in mind when he made buying trips to Richmond. He also had a pleasant manner and voice, which customers appreciated. It would be amis not to mention the great service George Connally gave the church. He took it on himself to act as custodian and kept the church in spic-and-span condition, rang the bell, provided and arranged flowers for services, and on cold days, started fires in the two stoves that heated the building. He was also Sunday School Secretary, and part of the time, was Treasurer. Mr. Henry Connally was a bit eccentric at times. I have heard a story of how a crotchety old negro argued with him over a thirteen-cent item that was marked two-for-a-quarter. Mr. Connally grabbed a penny, went out to the woodpile, laid the penny on a block and chopped it in half and handed the negro a half and told him to "get." He put in a soda fountain for his own pleasure, but we youngsters revelled in it too.

Connally's Store was rallying point for the young men on Saturday afternoons when farmers took off and came to town. The baseball field was across the street, in the factory lot, and in the summer this was the center of interest. The field was shortened in center field by the old factory building. Many hotly contested games were played between Leasburg and surrounding communities. These communities centered around a country store usually, such as Hester's Store, Edgewood, and Bushy Fork. The teams were mainly made up of farmer boys who had worked hard all week. But we knew nothing better and thought it was good baseball.

No mention of baseball can be passed without referring to the Briggs boys. The Briggs family lived west of Leasburg, in the Caswell county hills. They were all natural ball players, but chiefly noted for their prowess as pitchers. There were Will Cleve, Oscar, Ashley, and Lem. Will was the oldest and many claimed he had been greatest of the family, but he was done as a pitcher when I knew him. He usually played first base; he sometimes caught or backstopped in a pinch. No doubt he taught his brothers much about the art of pitching. Cleve was rather tall and a bit slender. He had an assortment of curves fit for a big leaguer. He threw an in-curve that must have been something like Christy Mathewson's fade-away. But Cleve didn't have the speed and power of Oscar, who was more sturdily built. Oscar not only had the curves but he simply overpowered the batters with his speed. He was the hero of us boys. Ashley and Lem had not developed when I left Leasburg.

The white people of Leasburg were mainly Methodist. The negroes were Baptist.

Their big annual event was the "Sossation." There was a white Baptist church east of Leasburg named Ebenezer. It was Primitive Baptist. A Reverend Oakes was the preacher. He used to drive past our house on Saturday mornings in his fringe-top surrey and drop off a bushel of corn to be ground in our grist mill and he picked it up on his return from the Saturday Service. The whole family went along. He had a rather pretty teenage daughter that we boys eyed with interest.

It fell the turn of Ebenezer Church to have the Association. Crowds came from far and near to attend; some with honorable motives; some not so honorable. In town, Connally's Store was busy. Some of the second variety were on hand there. One of these was a Warren from out south in the Hester's Store area. He was a noted trouble maker and fight picker. He was on horse back that day and mean drunk. He rode his horse up the front steps of the porch and tried to urge him inside. Mr. Henry Connally would not back down from any man; he came out of the store with a pick handle and drove them back down the steps. So Warren dismounted and entered the store on foot. He staggered and stuck his elbow through a show case. He then took a swing at Fate Brooks a much smaller man, also from the South Country. He had picked on the wrong man that day; Fate drew his pocket knife and with one swipe slashed Warren across the chest. Warren walked slowly down the road in the direction of Ebenezer. A negro took him in his buggy to the church grounds.

This was all reported to me by eye witnesses. But about this time, my father decided he and I needed some association atmosphere, so we drove out there. Not too far from the church I saw Warren reclining against a big oak with his bloody chest exposed. Dr. Love, with customary cigar in his mouth was stooped in front of him sewing up the gash, that looked at least a foot long and more than half an inch deep. I thought "you are wasting time - he can't live." But he did live, and I heard he was in another fight six months later.

There were still veterans of the Civil War living when I lived in Leasburg. Dr. Jake Thompson had been a surgeon in the war. Bob Smith, was there and the Whitlow brothers, "Boy" and "Pink;" and Henry Connally, though young, had served during the last year of the war. There was George Sawyer with his hearty "HOWDY PODNER." The Civil War was only about forty years behind us in the first decade of the twentieth century. Here in 1968, we are already fifty years away from World War I.

Summer in Leasburg was exciting. Then the wandering returned home. There were the Joe Pulliam married daughters with their children; Lea relations came to visit Aunt Willie and humor their nostalgia in the origin of the Lea families. There were the Thompsons, the Newmans, the Stanfields and the Mortons. The college girls were home from college; Sunday School and church service rang with practiced voices; picnics and evening lawn parties enlivened our days and nights. Many of the families in Leasburg were inter-married and kin. Bob Newman and Pink Newman were brothers, sons of Banks Newman still living. Mrs. Joe Pulliam was their sister. Mrs. Bob (Nannie) Newman and Mrs. Henry (Sallie) Connally were sisters of Mrs. Joe Pulliam. J. T. Bradsher was sister to Aunt Mollie Thomas's mother, and of course, the Leas, Thomas's, and our family were closely related.

Leasburg must have changed in the more than fifty years I have been away. I hope the change has been beneficial, but I suppose it is characteristic of old people to dwell on old times and the fine people they knew - most of whom are scattered or passed on. It causes a tug at the heart strings, at least it certainly does for me.

Loyally,

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