

Tales Still Told

By Louise Lamica, Staff Writer Wilmington Morning Star
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Supply (Near the edge of the Green Swamp)... The old home sits there---surrounded by forests and fields---weathered by time, its doorsteps sagging, yet the boards of the porch as solid as the huge oak tree which shades the ground.

Inside, so are the hallways, and stairways leading to the second floor. The rooms are small, compared to those of today, and an old smoked fireplace still dominates the front room to the left of the hallway entrance.

The original panes are still in the windows. On each side of the front entrance, a smaller window was built. The glass wavy in spots, its crystal-like flaws tale-telling its age.

A shed kitchen connected to the main house was removed several years ago. A passageway connected the two. Benches on this passage-porch held the wooden buckets always supplies by cool, clear water from the rustic hand pump which still stands in the backyard. Here, the mistress of the house paused to cool, to sit and shell beans in the summertime, or prepare other vegetables from the bountiful garden. Where other members of the household stretched to rest at noonday or in the cool of dusk.

Built nearly 50 years ago of heart and longleaf pine hewed from the forests nearby, the old home---long now empty---is the ancestral home of the Joseph Clemmons family. Clemmons* who served in the Coast Guard of the Confederacy, was once a vast landowner of nearly 1,000 acres of farmland and timberland in this section of Brunswick County.

His land stretched from the perimeter of Highway 17 in 50-500 acre tracts which stopped one mile short of the Green Swamp. He built his first home atop a slight rise squarely in the middle of his lands, a point which, he told his children marked the highest elevation in Brunswick County from the Atlantic's shores. But he was fated to live in his palatial home (by that day's standards) only a few short years. He died in the early 1930's, at the age of 88.

At its peak, under his skillful guidance, the homestead was a beehive of activity. Ten stalwart children** were born to him and his wife, the young Emma Julia Coleman---25 years his junior---who lived a mile or two "over the way" from his estate.

Yet, 80 or 90 years ago, a mile made a big difference when compared with today. Then, it meant crossing Cow Branch and Beaver Dam---by horse and buggy, horseback or on foot. The two branches were small woodland streams which ran rampant and full after a rain, often waist deep.

Cow Branch and Beaver Dam are still there, only a trickle of swamp water tracing their routes on a dry September day, as they still mark the way to the rutted dirt lane which still leads to the old place.

The high banks still edge Cow Branch, but not as steep as once seen by the grandchildren returning to the home, long after its owner had passed on. Children who sat at their mother's knee, listening in fascination as she talked of her childhood there, of wild cows who came lowing to the house at dusk, of bears whose shadows could be glimpsed at twilight, and sometimes in bright noonday.

One favorite story she told them was of a teenage brother, who liked to stay out late at night. On one of these evenings, returning to the homestead somewhat imbued, he sat to rest for a moment on a wooden footbridge across Cow Branch, and fell asleep. He was awakened by the rustling of tall reeds, and waking up, saw a bear parting the canes and peering down at him in the pale moonlight.

Thoroughly awake---and thoroughly frightened---the somewhat errant young man fled toward the big house, such an experience causing him to get home on time for at least the next month.

The rustic hand pump in the back yard is still easy to prime, producing a generous flow of sparkling cold water. It is only 18 feet deep, you remember a member of the family told you.

Under it, strawberries grow in wild profusion. Rich, like the land, which once produced corn, sweet potatoes and peanuts in abundance. Now cornfields surround the old home. This land, so near a great wilderness, is still rich, the tall stalks plainly tell you.

There were other memories the mother passed on to her young. Of days when cows, goats, sheep and other cattle roamed free on the ranges of the estate, and calves were kept in the barn so their mothers would return at evening.

All the seasons were busy around the Clemmons homestead. Corn was gathered in fall, fodder stacked for livestock, and grapes gathered from two huge scuppernong vines for jellies and homemade wines. And always there was a big keg of persimmon wine---complete with a tap---somewhere on the grounds, usually under the shade of the big oak tree.

Fall, too, brought hunters. To stalk pheasants in the woods and fields, to flush quail from their forest haunts, to stalk deer and other wildlife on sunlit days, or frosty winter mornings.

During the hunting season, hunters were always stopping by the homestead, where one could always obtain a bird dog, or a hound to take on his hunt. Clemmons was noted for his raising of these hunter breeds, and their baying was an integral part of the activity around his lands.

His stands of timber also produced turpentine and tar, the first collected in the heat of summer and fall, by cutting deep grooves into the trees, attaching barrels, buckets and the like under the cuts. Once collected, it was stored in barrels and transported to Wilmington by mule and cart, nearly 30 miles away, on overnight jaunts which required at least two or three days and nights.

Tar was produced in winter, by stacking lightwood in a kiln bed dug into the ground for that purpose. Then the stack was fired, and tar was the residue which flowed into barrels set there for the purposes. This, too, was taken by mule and cart through Cow Branch and Beaver Dam and other woodland trails the 30 miles to Wilmington and prospective buyers.

And on these trips, the mother would tell her brood, Clemmons and other men of the homestead—with their fellow farmers and timbermen—would buy bolts of homespun for their women, shoes for the young ones, and other household necessities. Not often did the womenfolk care to make the arduous trip to town. There was no Highway 17 then, only a rutted, dirt trail virtually hacked through the wilderness.

In the upstairs of the home, the landowner kept trunks, one always locked. It contained mementos of his day spent in service in the Civil War; at one time it held a faded gray uniform with shiny brass buttons. Born in the early 1840's, he entered the war against the Union as a young man in his 20's, and much of his service was at Ft. Fisher, where it was said of him he was one of the last men there to throw down his rifle against invading forces.

His grandchildren hold memories of stealing to the attic, while their mothers fixed Sunday meals in the old shed kitchen, long after he had passed away. Others remember their grandmother, the young Emma Julia, whose hair when combed was almost as long as her own petite frame. She was tiny, they remember, yet she reared six giants of sons and four daughters, not to mention a grandchild and a relative or two.

Those children have returned time and again to the Old Place. To stand under the gnarled oak tree, eyes drinking in the fields around it, searching for all the nooks and crannies they remember from childhood, trying to find some remnants of the scuppernong vines.

But those, too, are gone. Along with various outbuildings which once housed equipment, cribbed corn, contained hay and sweet potatoes, and other products of the farm.

So are the stables, although the old smokehouse still stands near the back door. Not too far away is the addition of a more modern day—a tobacco barn, still in use, the pungent smell of cured tobacco still clinging to the rafters.

Inside the old house, some of its rooms have been used for cured tobacco storage. And on the porch, tobacco sticks have been stacked. The old home has been tenanted in recent

years only by soldiers on field maneuvers in the Green Swamp, and by a stray hunter or two.

Clemmons himself is buried in a country cemetery*** near the land on which he was raised as a boy. A military marker denotes his rank and time of service with the Coast Guard of the Confederacy. And near him lies the young Emma Julia.

Only two of his immediate family survives him. Two sons, the youngest around 66, the other nearing 70. His survivors, though, are scattered the width and breadth of Southeastern North Carolina, each one, perhaps, cherishing memories of the old place as it was then, the story told and retold through the passing years. Its telling a never-ending source of fascination, especially to those who hold dim memories of that time.

Deer still abound in the forests around the homestead, and the baying of hounds is still heard on a frosty morn. And sometimes a bear can be glimpsed at twilight, and even at bright noon.

No longer do cows and goats roam the ranges. And paper companies have cut roads across or near Beaver Dam and Cow Branch, almost obscuring the well-rutted lane that still leads straight to the old place.

In the fields around the old home, the winds blow wild and free. And the house sits silently, its memories hovering around it, there in plain view for those who remember as it was then.

How do I know of these fields and this land? The forests and vast stands of timber? Because the soldier-farmer-hunter who wrested them from the wilderness was my grandfather. His young Emma Julia my grandmother.

*Joseph Silas Clemmons was a member of Captain John W. Galloway's Company, NC Coast Guards, CSA. Galloway's Coast Guards was an unattached company, mustered in August 14, 1861 and January 29, 1862 for defense of the coastline from Cape Fear to Little River, SC. They were very serviceable to blockade runners. Clemmons was born February 3, 1844 and died February 21, 1932.

**Joseph Leverit, Bertha, Rushia, Rosa Dewey, Robert H., Irving, Hardy, Addie, Harry Earnest, William E.

***Galloway Cemetery, Supply, NC