

PART V — My Alabama Roots

A Visit to Winston County, Alabama

We finished cultivating the crop in August of 1936. Dad said the other work could wait a few days, so he let me go to Alabama to visit my maternal grandparents and my cousins in Winston County. Two of the Hunter boys, Wesley and Harley, were driving to Alabama to visit relatives for a week, and they gave me a ride as far as Haleyville, where they turned left to go east to Addison. They drove a 1931 Model A Ford, an elegant car for the time.

From Haleyville, I set out to walk the 10 miles to Double Springs and another two miles to my destination. After walking a mile or two, I got a ride to Double Springs and then walked the rest of the way, carrying a small suitcase and my new .22 caliber rifle.

My roots are in Winston County. When Alabama withdrew from the Union over the Civil War, citizens there held a meeting and proposed withdrawing from the state of Alabama. During the meeting someone yelled, "Free State of Winston." In the end they did not withdraw, but the term became a nickname for Winston County. That was Alabama hill country, and many hardheaded people lived there. Some say I have inherited those genes.

I was born July 6, 1920 in a wooden house in the middle of a cotton field in Natural Bridge, a tiny mining town in northern Alabama. It got its name from a rock formation in the shape of a short bridge. The bridge later became a tourist attraction, but the local people referred to it as the Rock Bridge and did not think it was all that special.

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My father was Joseph Clark White, and my mother was Ida Lewellyn Reeve (no s). He was a farmer both before and after he was a coal miner, and she was a school teacher. I carried the Jr. after my name for many years but dropped it a few years after my father died at age 69 of melanoma cancer. My mother died at age 44 of typhoid fever. Somewhere in my ancestry there was a Cherokee Indian on my father's side of the family. I don't know whether it was a man or a woman but I am 1/64 Cherokee Indian.

Dad eventually quit mining because his body could no longer stand the strain. The miners had to go far underground and dig the coal with picks and shovels. Often the seam of coal was not thick enough to permit them to stand erect, so they had to work either on their knees or stooped. They brought the coal out in small cars that ran on narrow rails from the mine. Their only light was from carbide lamps mounted on their caps.

A carbide lamp had two compartments. The one on the bottom held dry lumps of carbide and the top compartment held water. An exterior adjustment on top controlled the amount of water it released slowly to drip into the dry carbide. The mixture of carbide and water caused a flammable gas to form and be forced out through a small nozzle in the middle of a little round reflector in front. A small wheel near the nozzle had notches all around the circumference and rubbed against a little piece of flint when turned. Spinning that wheel with the thumb produced a spark that ignited the gas coming out of the nozzle and produced the flame that created the light for the miners. Increasing the flow of water made more gas and made the lamp burn brighter, and shutting the water off completely turned off the lamp.

They blasted with dynamite to loosen the coal so they could take it out with picks and shovels. First, they drilled a hole in the coal big enough and deep enough to hold a stick of dynamite. Next they fitted a dynamite cap on the end of a long fuse and stuck the cap into a little hole in the stick of dynamite. Then they put the dynamite deep into the drilled hole. Finally they lit the fuse from the flame of a carbide lamp and scurried out of the tunnel before the fire traveled down the fuse and reached the cap.

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The flame from the burning fuse set off the cap, and the exploding cap detonated the dynamite. Dad said the smoke from the dynamite gave him headaches.



Visiting Winston County brought back memories of my childhood. The first thing I can remember is sitting with Dad on the front edge of the porch of a country store. We sat on the floor with our feet resting on the steps below. I asked him to buy me some candy, but he said he had only a nickel and asked me if I wanted him to spend his last nickel. I remember thinking about it a while before finally telling him to save it.

I also remember riding in a wagon loaded with furniture when we were moving from Natural Bridge to Nauvoo, Alabama, where we lived for a year. We then moved to Lawrence County, Tennessee where Grandpa White's sister and her family lived. She was married to Bob Rooker, who had a big house and farm on Fall River Road between Gum Springs and Lawrenceburg. I was 5 years old. I'm told that we moved in an old borrowed truck that broke down on the way. We made the rest of the trip in a wagon.

William N. White of Henagar, Alabama, has studied the history of the White Clan. He told me Bob Rooker was convicted in Alabama of making moonshine whiskey and served a year and a day in jail. After that, he couldn't face his neighbors so he sold his house and moved to Lawrence County, Tennessee where he was not well known. Then my grandparents and my parents followed him to Tennessee because of our relationship to his wife. We had another connection on my mother's side because Mr. George Roberts of New Prospect was married to my mother's aunt.



My maternal grandfather was English and my grandmother was Scots-Irish. They always lived near Double Springs, the county seat. Their names were Noah and Lucy Reeve, and they were

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farmers and schoolteachers. By the time of my visit, Granddad was in his 70s but still working his farm.

A sandy dirt road ran in front of their house, and a weather-beaten wooden barn sat on the other side of the road, facing the house. Wooden double doors opened the barn middle to a hallway running through it. The doors were wide enough and tall enough to accommodate a two-horse wagon loaded with hay or with enough seed cotton to make a bale.

Inside the barn, doors on each side led from the hallway into stalls and stables for the livestock. The first stall on the right had a wooden floor and served as a storage place for harness for the mules and for various pieces of equipment and small tools. All the other stalls had dirt floors. The ridgeline ran from front to back, and the tin roof formed an A when viewed from the road. The loft held hay, fodder, and corn tops for livestock feed. A built-in ladder provided access.

Two huge black walnut trees stood between the barn and the road. The walnuts had thick, shiny-green hulls at first, and when they matured they softened and turned dark brown, almost black. Once the hull was off, the dark nut was slightly smaller than an English walnut, and was harder to crack. Removing the hulls was a messy chore because of the dark stain that came from inside the hulls. That stain was almost impossible to remove, and Grandma Reeve sometimes used the hulls to make a dark brown dye. The chunks of walnut meat were bigger than those in hickory nuts, and they were easier to get out. They also had a heartier flavor than hickory nut meat and you could fill up on walnuts fairly soon.

English ivy covered most of the house, and English sparrows nested in the ivy. The house resembled an upside down T, with the stem of the T extending to the rear of the two rooms across the front. An open porch ran across the front, and another open porch along the T in the rear. It was on the right side as you faced the house from the front.

Fifty feet straight out from the side porch, Grandpa had built a springhouse that covered a good spring. It furnished all the water for the household, and it kept milk and butter cool in the summer. A pipe ran from the spring to a wooden trough where Grandpa watered the mules when he brought them in from working in the fields and before he took them out to work. The spring flowed constantly, so the trough was always full of fresh, cool water.

Along the outside edge of the back porch he had built a long bench about 3 feet high. He cut holes to fit two porcelain washbowls and a water pitcher, and they held the vessels in place on the bench. A community dipper rested in the water pitcher. It had a handle long enough to stick out above the top of the pitcher when the dipper was on the bottom.

The front, back, and side yards were sand. Mixed with the sand were hundreds of small stones, so smooth and shiny they looked almost glazed. Grandma had many flowerbeds and several small plants, but no grass for a lawn.

Grandpa Reeve had built the two front rooms with a puncheon floor—split logs with the flat sides up—and he built a fireplace of large flat rocks that he picked up on the farm. He prepared the house to have a place to bring his bride, and they had lived there ever since. She had been one of his students when he was a teacher, and every member of that family except Roy had been a teacher at one time or another. A high school graduate could teach in elementary schools then, and often a teacher would be only 5 or 6 years older than a student.

I liked the kitchen best. Rows of shelves held jars of jellies, jams, and preserves, plus many jars of assorted vegetables. I remembered earlier visits when my Uncle Roy parched (roasted) peanuts in Grandma's oven in the kitchen, with all the kids sitting around and asking him every few minutes how much longer before they would be ready to eat.

Roy Reeve was the only boy in the family. The girls were Alice, Eunice, Ruby, and Ida (my mother). Twin boys died when they

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were babies, and another girl, Pernie, died in childhood. Alice married George Robinson and later moved to Giles County, Tennessee. Eunice married Tom Bailey and lived near Jasper, Alabama. Ruby married Stacey Abner, who earned his living singing and writing gospel songs. Ida Reeve married my father and later moved to Tennessee, where they had seven children, six boys and one girl (I was the first. There are only two of us still living in 2003.). Roy married Iris Prestige and built a home 200 yards up the road from Grandpa's house. It was square, with a wide porch on all sides. He used wooden shingles for the siding and never painted them. They had three children: R.B. Jr., Lavene, and Bessie Lou.



Uncle Roy and R.B., Jr. were avid hunters, and they had a liver-and-white colored pointer named Queen. She responded to whistle and arm signals, and she went anywhere they directed her. She was an outstanding bird dog, and paid no attention to squirrels or rabbits when they were hunting birds. But when they left the fields and went into the tall pines, Uncle Roy gave her a signal and she switched to hunting squirrels.

When Queen ran a squirrel up a tree, she stood there and barked until Uncle Roy came and shot it. She also watched the squirrel. If it jumped to another tree, she followed and always barked at the base of the tree where the squirrel was. They could depend on her never to bark up the wrong tree, as the saying goes.

Uncle Roy hunted with a 12 gauge Winchester Model 12 pump shotgun. He hunted mostly quail, squirrels, and turkeys. When R.B. was a teenager, Uncle Roy bought him a gun exactly like his dad's, except it was 20 gauge instead of 12 gauge. It was considerably smaller than Uncle Roy's gun and shot a smaller shotgun shell, but they were alike in every other respect. Winchester also made a 16 gauge gun, but the 20 gauge was popular with women and young boys. It was light, easy to carry, and more comfortable to shoot.

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I took my new rifle and went squirrel hunting with them at first light one morning. They got two or three with their shotguns, but I got nothing with my rifle. About eight o'clock Uncle Roy suggested we go back to the house before it was too late for dough biscuits. He and R.B. liked to eat biscuits before they were done, when the dough was still sticky in the middle.

About 300 yards in front of Uncle Roy's house, across an open field, past several big trees and across a little creek, the Overton family had an operating gristmill. A dam created the millpond and a waterway made of wooden boards guided a stream of water from the pond to an overshot water wheel. The turning of that wheel provided the power to turn the grindstones. As needed, Uncle Roy—or sometimes R.B.—took a bushel of shelled corn on his shoulder to the gristmill. There he waited while Mr. Overton ground it into meal. Overton kept a portion of the meal as payment for the grinding.

Like all things, my visit came to an end. At the appointed time and place, I met the Hunter brothers and rode with them back to Tennessee.

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