

The John W. Fortune Place

This article first appeared in the September 1986 issue of the Backroads newspaper when Saylor Allen and Raymond Fitzgerald took me to the small graveyard of John W. Fortune at the head of Spruce Creek. Over the years, more information has been gathered and will be included with the original story. Special thanks to Jane Allen Gunter, daughter of Saylor Allen, and Kris Gembara, my good friend and reliable Ancestry source.



Saylor Allen and Raymond Fitzgerald the day we went to the John Fortune cemetery

A long time ago, 1866 was the exact year, a Mr. John W. Fortune bought a piece of property from one Walker Manley. The deed said the property acquired totaled eighty acres more or less and was located at the head of Spruce Creek in Nelson County. Many people have owned the land after John Fortune died but it was, and still is, referred to as the Fortune place.

At the time of this writing, Saylor Allen owned the land and was willing to share what he knew about the small family that lived there in the 1800s. He arranged for me to meet Raymond Fitzgerald of Beech Grove, who knew more about the Fortune family history. I combined the bits and pieces of information from these two men plus what I had heard over the years from my first neighbor here in Love, Johnny Coffey, and came up with an interesting history about the Fortune family who lived in this area a long time ago. Although the house and family are now gone, their memory has been passed down over the years and continue to live on in the hearts of those who can still remember them.

John Fortune was born in December of 1825

Oral history records that a John W. Fortune married a girl by the name of Matilda "Tildy" Campbell on April 12, 1849 and set up housekeeping in a one-room log cabin located high on a

ridge at the headwaters of Spruce Creek. John and Tildy had one child; a boy by the name of Johnny. Folks said Johnny was “not right in the head” and the story was that when Johnny was an infant, a tragic accident left him severely limited mentally for the rest of his life.

He was born in the winter and one particularly cold day, a large woman who lived in the area came to visit the Fortunes. She did not see the tiny child wrapped in a blanket, laying on the bed which sat in the one-room cabin. By mistake, she sat down on the infant and either through a temporary lack of oxygen to the brain, or because the baby’s head was actually crushed, the child became feeble minded for the rest of his natural life.

Johnny Coffey told me that after John Fortune, Sr. died, the boy would mount a horse and ride it over across the mountain to the holler where Henry Campbell lived. Henry was Johnny’s grandfather and the brother of his mother. Once the boy got there, Henry would always say, “I better take the boy on home or it will fret Tildy.”

The Fortunes raised all their own food there on the mountain and the land which is now heavily wooded, was once cleared and cultivated farmland. They raised hogs each year and fattened them on the nuts from the Chestnut trees that grew abundantly in the Blue Ridge. In the fall, John butchered the hogs and cured the hams for his family and for those who came to buy them. Raymond Fitzgerald remembers hearing the story about a man who came to buy a ham and told John Fortune, “You know, if you lived near a railroad track you could make a living selling these hams.” John shot back, “I don’t need to be near a railroad as long as there are folks like you who will walk to my door to buy a ham!”

After John Sr. died, he left a will in 1903 which stated, “All of my estate I leave to my wife for life and at her death, to Richard Dodd, as Trustee for John W. Fortune, Jr., during his lifetime. After the death of John W. Fortune, Jr., all the said property shall go to Maude M. Dodd and her children to dispose of as she thinks proper.”



The headstone of John W. Fortune

All three members of the Fortune family are buried on the property with simple fieldstones marking the head and foot of the graves. Raymond Fitzgerald said he had made many a trip up to the old graveyard with his friend, Jerry Falls. “We would walk up there several times a week, years ago,” said Raymond. He also said in years past, the little cemetery was fenced in and well-manicured, along with the land. But growth has covered the earthen plots and the casual observer walking by would slip past the graves without even knowing their whereabouts.

Saylor Allen laughed as he recalled the story about how the old timers were “burning off the mountains,” which was a common practice years ago and necessary for better ground cover. The fires had gotten out of control and everyone knew

rain was needed to extinguish the roaring flames which were covering the mountains. Young Johnny realized what the men were talking about so he got down on his knees in the dirt and prayed aloud to God to send the rain. Everyone was genuinely touched until Johnny tacked on a "P.S." to God which made them laugh with gusto. Johnny's prayer went, "Lord, send the rain, but we want a slow, steady rain, not no _ _ _ _ gullywasher!" Well, I guess there's nothing like being specific in your prayers.

After the Fortune place passed on to Richard and Maude Dodd, they sold it to W. C. "Bill" Campbell and he built a large house on the property. This house was the site of many "entertainments" where people came from miles around to take part in the music, dancing, and fellowship which accompanied such a get-together. People said there was a table laden with food which spread from one room into another.

Over the years, the land bounced back and forth from the Campbells, Zirkles, Massies, and Allens. Saylor Allen owned it in 1986 and when he first bought the property from Harold Massie, he said the old homeplace was still standing on the property. But he said it had, "gone to ruin" so he finally tore it down. In its place now stands Saylor's hunting camp which overlooks a beautiful clear pond and the hazy indigo mountains of the Blue Ridge.

Over the last 150 years, the property has gone from family to family but to this day it still remains, "The Fortune Place."