

# The Diary of Clara Jean Fitzgerald Molosky

## North Fork of the Tye River -- Part I



*The pages of Clara Jean Fitzgerald Molosky's diary and family photo were lent to Backroads by her brother, Lewis Fitzgerald of Waynesboro. Clara's family lived on the North Fork of the Tye River, near White Rock. The pages of the diary began in the October 2003 Backroads and ran consecutively through December of that year. The photo at left was taken around 1938 and shows left to right: Maybelle Phillips Taylor, Margaret Taylor Ross, Mary Taylor Fitzgerald holding her son Lewis, and Alice Fitzgerald Coffey, wife of Holloway Coffey. The two girls in front are Clara Jean and her sister, Annie Fitzgerald Adolphson. The diary was found by Clara's daughter, Betty, after her mother passed away.*

My earliest memories are of my family. My mother said I couldn't remember because I was not even four years old. I was born the oldest of four children back in the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, right across the ridge from the Shenandoah Valley, at a place called Tye River. There were a few families scattered along this small river. I remember living several places along this river, almost from one end to the other. My dad and mom never owned a place of their own and my dad liked to move from place to place, but during my early years we never went far. So, I saw the same friends and went to the same school and church. Most of the people I remember from back there farmed a little or mostly gardened. They raised their own cows, pigs, and chickens and picked apples and peaches in season to add to their income, to get through the winter. They cut paper wood and railroad ties, trapped, hunted, and fished.



*An early photo of Mary Huffman Taylor and Clemmer Walter Fitzgerald*

My parents were born along with river in July and August of 1904. My mother's name was Mary Huffman Taylor and my dad was Clemmer Walter Fitzgerald. They knew each other all their lives. They married in July of 1928. I was born on October 10, 1929. I had two sisters and a brother. I've been trying to get this written down on paper for a long time. I feel drawn back to a place that only exists in my memory now. I find that all the things we want to change when we are growing up are the things we cherish when we grow older and suddenly find these things are all gone. I remember wood burning stoves, kerosene lamps, outdoor plumbing, and carrying water from a spring and spring houses built over a cold mountain stream to cool things in summer.

These were poor and simple people; good people. We had our upper, lower, and middle class; each group with their own special ways. There were at least two families in this little hamlet that had a little more money than the others. They were looked up to and they sort of looked after the rest. When all else failed, we went to these people for help. We sometimes got a lecture but they would never let anyone go hungry or cold if they could help it.

There was a one-room school that taught seven grades. It was called the White Rock School. The county sent in a teacher every year. I remember the same one would usually come back for a few years. Anyone desiring further education had to go to a larger town, somewhere near Lynchburg. I don't remember knowing anyone who went any further in school until I moved away.

We also had a one-room church right next to the school called White Rock Church. We didn't have a regular pastor but we had pastors come in, in good weather. The church elders kept things under control and we had Sunday School every Sunday, weather permitting. When we had a pastor come in, you would not believe the people who walked out of those hills to hear God's word.

I remember some very hard times, but just as many good ones. I like to call this time and place "pre-Waltons." We had a little store and two gristmills. I remember them grinding corn and

buckwheat but never flour. I don't think they were equipped to grind flour. Also, a great uncle who lived on the mountain above the river grew sugar cane and had his own mill with which he made molasses every fall. That was a big event because we were all invited to these gatherings.

I also remember each family having an apple butter boiling. Several families had large copper kettles and wooden stirrers and they would go around from home to home with their kettles. They didn't like to let them out without going along, as these kettles were very important to them. The butter boiling's usually turned into social events. It took two people to stir these large pots, usually two young people, boys and girls.

All the entertainment was simple at that time, but somehow people seemed happier. I think back to those wonderful people. First of all, there was my Grandma Taylor (Marietta "Nettie" Fitzgerald Taylor). I was told my Grandfather Taylor died when I was eleven months old. I understand he was totally blind in one eye. He built a log house for them shortly after they were married. He built the chimney out of the native stone found in that area, which is beautiful. We never saw that stone anywhere else. In doing so, he got hit in the eye by a piece of rock, which blinded him. That chimney stands today, a work of art, along with most of the original log house. It was added on to over the years as their family grew, but the additions have long since gone. That chimney and what's left of the house, to me, stands as a monument to a lifestyle long gone.



*Nettie Taylor's cabin on the North Fork*

would walk the short distance back and fry the fish and I would eat most of them! I seldom left any for him. Being the kind and gentle person he was, he never said a word. But one morning he cleaned the fish and left the heads on them, then fried them up. Of course, one look at those eyes staring back at me and I wouldn't touch them. It was years later before I realized he knew that was the only way he'd ever get to eat any trout. Strange, after living at home all those years, when my grandmother died at 97, he went to live in a nearby town. Four months later he dropped dead on the street, as if his mission in life was over.

My grandmother came from a large family, one brother and six girls. The brother died young. I never knew him. The girls all lived to be well up in years. One died in her late sixties. They always said she died young. My grandmother and her other sisters lived well into their nineties. One died a few years ago at almost 102 years of age (Teressie Fitzgerald Coffey). Her mind was as clear as could be until after she was 100. I remember visiting her before she died and telling

My grandmother and I were very close. I remember spending a lot of time with her. I recall the fireplace that went with that chimney, roasting potatoes and onions in the ashes, making popcorn, and making soap in an iron pot that hung on a hook over the fire.

Then there was my Uncle Tom. He never married but stayed home and took care of Gram. We lived with them for a time and I remember getting up early and following him fishing. He'd catch a couple of trout and we

her I would be back in May. When something came up and I didn't get back until October, I stood in her doorway, watching her brush her teeth. When she turned around and saw me, her first words were, "You're late; you were supposed to be here in May!" She had the most beautiful complexion I have ever seen. To look at her face no one would believe her age.

Another strange thing; all the sisters were widows. I remember the rest of my mother's brothers. They were such kind, gentle people. Mom had one sister who died at eighteen in childbirth. There was my Uncle Boston who lived close to Grandma. Most of them lived no more than a couple of miles away. I would follow my Uncle Boston around his garden and the barn. He was a quiet man and we kids used to ask him a million questions so he would have to talk.

My Uncle Elmer was a special friend to me, but then they all were. There was Uncle Jimmy. He lived in the nearest town and we would all go at least once a year and spend a few days with him and Aunt Dolen and their family. Their kids were older than us so we got lots of attention from them, which we loved.

My grandma and Uncle Boston lived on one side of the river and we walked across a footbridge to the other side where there were other people. I also remember they kept their cows on the other side in the summer. There were two bridges; one for low water and a very high one for floods.

My Great Aunt Alice (on Gram's side) and Uncle Holloway, lived almost directly across from Gram. He was a very tall, distinguished gentleman. He was sort of one of the leaders of this little hamlet. He had one of the two gristmills that existed there. He also had a store nearby but it was closed by the time I came along.

Up on the hill from them lived my Uncle Arthur and his large family. I remember Aunt Hannah, who was his second wife. His first wife, my dad's sister, (Leona B. Fitzgerald) had died, leaving him a daughter and two sons; Wilmer Newton, Mary Magdelene and Robert Lee. Then there was my Uncle Elmer who lived down the road. I remember his wife, Aunt Pearl, who was also a second wife. There were an awful lot of the women who died back then, leaving young children.

There were also a number of my cousins who lived with various relatives. I used to feel so sad for them. Some had good homes and some, no one seemed to want. I never understood that. Maybe they just couldn't take care of another child.

When I am stressed out and depressed, I long for those bygone days that were so gentle and peaceful. I sometimes wonder, since I am remembering these times through a child's mind, maybe the grown-ups back then were just as stressed as we are today, but I don't really think so.

## Part II

I remember summers, especially. The winters were harder. The times we didn't live with Grandma Taylor, we would walk to her house on Sundays, go to church, and have dinner with her or Uncle Boston and Aunt Nellie afterwards. Chicken and dumplings, corn fresh out of the garden, or whatever vegetables were in season. I helped clean the chickens and pick the vegetables. We kids had swimming holes at various places along that little river. I suppose being small, a better name for that river would have been a creek but we never called it that. In the summer we usually spent the afternoon playing in that stream.



*Clemmer & Mary in later years*

We would go across the stream in the evenings to visit Aunt Alice and Uncle Holloway. They had no children so they took in a cousin of mine and raised her. That is a story in itself as she was one of three girls whose mother had died. She was fortunate. The other two were moved around from place to place. My Gram and Pap Fitzgerald took the youngest sister and cared for her lovingly as long as they lived. People took for granted the older girl, being a teenager, would take care of herself. I think she lived with her dad, who had remarried. I never knew why he didn't keep the younger kids. With all the tragedy and sadness, I am amazed that those people kept their faith. As I said, each family was a story in itself.

Uncle Elmer's wife and all but one of his children died. He remarried and had a least two children, when he suddenly died from what I think must have been a heart attack. He and his brothers and a couple

of uncles went coon hunting one night. It was cold and they passed by some apple trees. He ate one of the frozen apples and got chest pains. Everyone thought the frozen apple killed him. They didn't have much medical knowledge and seldom, if ever, saw a doctor.

My family moved away from the mountains when I was about eleven or twelve. The war came and the young men went into the army and a lot of the girls went away to the cities to work in defense plants. One by one most of the families moved away, except for a few older people, who stayed on as long as they could. Modern times caught up with this little place; phones, electric, and more people had cars. They fixed up the roads some but never paved them. I guess there wasn't enough traffic to pay them to do too much.

There was also a flood. August 19, 1969, a hurricane named Camille brought lots of rain to the eastern part of the United States. By then I was living in Pennsylvania and we even had floods there. Someone told me they took the one couple left out there by helicopter (my aunt and uncle). They lived at the lower end of the river going towards a large town. The flood changed the landscape a lot and it really doesn't look the same now. There are several summer or hunting camps now and various relatives have been trying to buy land there, including my brother. I always want to go back there when I visit home and I do from time to time, but like I say, that beautiful little haven only exists in my fondest memories. Now I simply close my eyes and I can see every tiny detail just as it was so long ago.

As sort of a postscript to this story; several years ago, people from out of state came to this area and bought up a lot of the mountain land. It seemed strange to every one because they did not let

people come back to look around as we had always done. My brother and a lot of others went into those hills to hunt every year. Suddenly you were turned away and things weren't the same.

A cousin of ours who owns a hunting camp in this area was trying to buy my Gram's log cabin. If he succeeds, he plans to restore it in detail, we are all excited about that. I sure hope he can get it. We have pictures that will help in the restoration. But I think our memories could do it alone.

When my parents died, six weeks apart, in 1991, they had been gone from those Blue Ridge Mountains a long time. They had moved into the valley to a place called Waynesboro and lived there for over fifty years. They had made a new way of life and many new friends over the years. My sister and I went home to visit usually three or four times a year and relatives or friends from back in the mountains came to visit or got in touch with my parents. You have to keep in mind that these people had also left the mountains and had gone all over the country, some even to foreign lands, into all walks of life.

When we went to the chapel for my dad's viewing, there was such a crowd you would not believe. There were so many; many of them the children of those early people. Many were also distant cousins that we had not seen for over fifty years. My parents were the last of both their families. I don't even know how they all knew he had died. It was the same when Mom died six weeks later. We know that most of those people we probably won't see again, but it gives you such a good feeling to know they still cared.

My brother made the remark one day that being in their eighties, he didn't think Mom and Dad really knew what the world was like outside. He and I talked about it and decided maybe it was a good thing they didn't. I miss my parents terribly, but realize we were lucky to have them so many years. One cousin said to me at Mom's funeral, "Clara, we are the older generation now." So many years have passed and so much has changed, but the precious memories we will always have.

### Part III

I want to keep on with this story. We always told people I was a frustrated writer. I know I'm no pro, but I feel good putting things on paper. Someday I would like to take each family along that river and write a story about each one. When I visit in August, my brother and I hope to go visit the Nelson County Courthouse and see if we can find any records of where these people came from and why they settled in that place. We, along with several other families, have a private cemetery on a beautiful hill where my ancestors are buried. We go back there to check from time to time. It's called the Garden of Love. I wonder if my parents should have been taken back to their place of birth for burial.

As I sit on my back porch and listen to the evening sounds, in my mind I go back many miles and many years. I find the older I get, the farther back I go; back to a peaceful mountain community where I remember only the good things. I know there were bad times, too, but strangely enough, I don't dwell on them. They seem to fade from my memory.

I remember sitting on another porch where my Grandmother Taylor had her log home. This place was by the Tye River with probably a dozen houses scattered from one end to another. There were a few houses in the hills above the river and I am reminded of the lines from an old song,

“When It’s Lamp-Lighting Time in the Valley.” We would watch for the lights in other people’s houses to come on. They seemed to live in a cluster of about three houses. The homes were not real close together back then.

There was a long garden between my Gram’s house and my one uncle’s. They each would plant one end. I loved my Gram Taylor so much and we were very close. I think it was because we lived with her for a time.

I loved my Fitzgerald grandparents, too. But they were different. Pap Fitzgerald was soft-spoken, kind and gentle, and totally devoted to my Gram. My Gram Fitzgerald was both gentle but firm. We ran in and out of Gram Taylor’s house and helped ourselves to whatever she had to eat or drink. With Gram Fitzgerald, we waited to be asked. I was always thrilled to be ushered into her presence. I felt like I was having an audience with the queen.

Gram Taylor dried apples for the winter. My Uncle Tom built her a little shed in the back of her house that was against a small hill and it had two or three steps to reach the roof. She would peel and slice the apples, then spread a white sheet on the roof and put her apples up there to dry.

The men used to cut a section of bark from a tree. I don’t remember what kind but it came off all in one piece. From the bark they made a barrel-type of carrier out of this, strapped it on their backs, and went into the mountains and came back with a load of huckleberries (blueberries). The container had a name but I can’t remember what it was called.

My dad told me how they raised hogs when he was a child. There were lots of oak trees in the mountains so they branded their hogs and turned them loose in the woods to fatten on acorns. In the fall they would get together and round them up, pen them and feed them corn until the weather got cold and they could butcher.

So many things have change since those long-ago days. I’ve had a full life and mostly a happy one. Like everyone else, the good outweighed the bad. I got married and went to Pennsylvania to live forty-six years ago. We have seven children, eleven grandchildren, three great-grandchildren, with three more due this October. They have been such a joy to us (and sometimes despair) but they are all loved greatly. I’ve heard people say they love all their kids the same. I don’t think that is quite true. I believe we love them all as much, but in different ways, because they are each different and need us in different ways. This is my opinion.

It’s August of 1992. I am hoping to come back for a visit sometime in September if I can leave my husband for a weekend. I want to go back to those mountains so bad it’s like a magnet drawing me. I’ve missed my parents more this summer than last. I guess I had not faced the loss last year when both of them died; Dad on March 7<sup>th</sup> at age 86 and Mom on April 18, also at age 86. I have to keep in mind that we had them so many years. I was in my sixties and my sisters and brother were all past fifty, so compared to a lot of our cousins who lost their parents earlier, especially their mothers, we were blessed.

We are fast coming upon the fall of 1992. I often wonder what it was like back in those hills in 1892. I can imagine their busy lives as they prepared for the coming winter. With all the hard work they must have had a tremendous faith to see them through.

I know I shouldn't wish to go back to those times and I don't, but I cherish those memories and bring them out on the days I need a lift.

## My Grandparents: A Tribute in Memories

By Kenneth Megginson,

*(taken from the January 2006 Backroads)*

Clemmer Walter Fitzgerald was born on July 9, 1904 in Nelson County, Virginia, to Joseph Cyrus and Mary Jane Coffey Fitzgerald. He was one of nine children and retired from Basic-Witz Furniture Company in Waynesboro.

Mary Huffman Taylor was born on August 30, 1904, also in Nelson County, to John E. and Nettie Fitzgerald Taylor. She was one of six children and a housewife and homemaker, for which retirement is never possible.

They were both baptized at the age of twelve in the Tye River and were joined in marriage on July 12, 1928, in Nelson County, in Mary's parent's front yard.

They were born 52 days apart and they died 42 days apart; he on March 7, 1991 at age 86 and she on April 18, 1991, also at age 86.

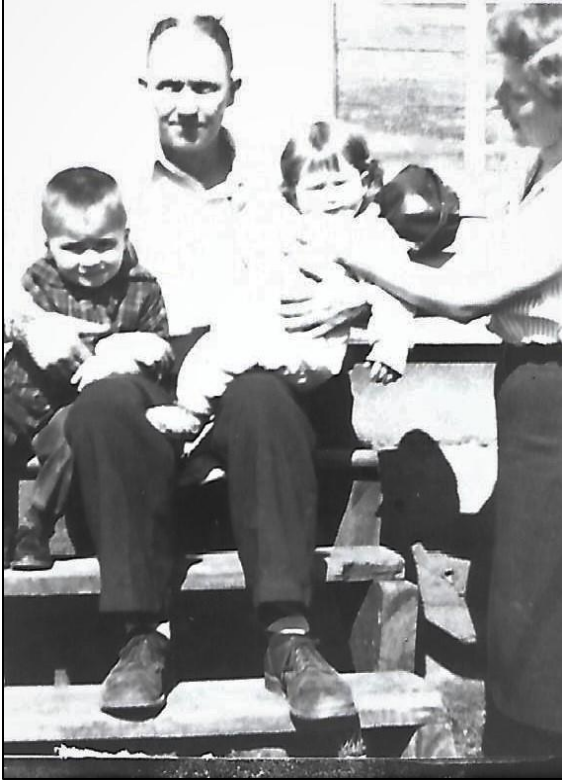
They were married for sixty-two years and left behind four children; Clara, Anne, Lewis and my mother, Kathleen, along with seventeen grandchildren and numerous great-grandchildren; all of whom cherish their memories of "Mamal and Pap," as they were called by the family.

My name is Kenny Megginson. I am forty-nine years old and the eldest son of their youngest daughter, Kathleen. It's been told that as a child, I attached the "Mamal and Pap" label to my grandparents and it stuck, becoming the names they were most identified with.

My memories of them, now fourteen years gone, dim not, but remain strong; becoming fresher, warmer and clearer each time I look at their pictures, hear their names or pass by their old home. I remember lying in bed, under their tin roof, and being lulled to sleep by the symphony of the rain from above and the warmth of their woodstove within. As a child, my family often stayed with them due to certain unforeseen circumstances.

The aroma of Mamal's homemade gravy and biscuits and the frying of bacon and eggs would wake us in the mornings and set our mouths to watering. She possessed an unshakable faith in God and read from her Bible every day. She never drove a car, never had a license and tried to go to church every Sunday, walking when she didn't have a ride.

Pap would sit by the woodstove, in his favorite chair, chewing his "pigtail" tobacco and telling talks of his youth that would always captivate and fascinate me. He was a self-taught carpenter and craftsman, who made his own hand saws and table saws. He made picture frames and wooden wagons. One of my fondest memories is of riding in these wagon as he pulled it to the local landfill, where we would search for discarded treasures.



*Pap, me, sister Joyce & mom*



*My mother, me, Mamal and sister Joyce*

Together, they always had a garden by the house that they would tend to. Mamal loved to can vegetables and fruit. I would help her at times to snap and clean green beans. And I can still taste the rhubarb jam she used to make. For a number of years Pap would plow and tend the garden, using the homemade implements that he made. As with our heroes, the passage of time has a way of mythologizing loved ones who have passed on. We tend to exaggerate their attributes and minimize their imperfections. But we love and miss them no less, only more so. Their lives reside in our past. The values they instilled live on and continue to nurture. Simple people who lived simple lives? Yes, they were, but in the end isn't that the best way to live one's life?

I have written these memories fifteen years after their deaths and are my tribute to my grandparents. Ultimately, the person I am today, is because of them and my mother Kathleen, their youngest daughter. Mamal and Pap, I miss you both and love you still.

--Kenny



*Clemmer and Mary Fitzgerald in later years*



*The Fitzgerald Children: Clara, Lewis, Anne & Kathleen*

## Backroads 1988 Interview with Clemmer and Mary

*Lynn's Note: In addition to Clara's diary and Kenny's tribute to his grandparents, I was fortunate to sit with the Fitzgerald's at their Waynesboro home in November of 1988 and publish their life story in the December Backroads. I won't attempt to print the interview in its entirety because it duplicates what has already been written, but there were some remembrances from the couple that are more in-depth and I thought were worth repeating to round out the article for the NCHS blog.*

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Clemmer's parents, Joe and Mary Jane Fitzgerald, lived at the head of the hollow behind the White Rock School and church where the present Appalachian Trail Putman cabin now stands.

Mary recalls with fondness their early school days and the teachers who taught them; Della Eunice, Pearl Allen and Sal Hatter. She remembers walking up to the spring behind the school for a bucket of cold water. This water was used for drinking purposes and had a dipper in which the children used communally. A one-hour recess was held during the noon dinner hour and Mary said, "As soon as we could, we'd head for the mountains to play. A lot of times we would get in trouble with the teacher for "forgetting" to come back to class when the hour was over. We'd go up there and throw rocks, play ball, or play a few games like hide-and-seek or drop the hankey.

Early on, ball playing was a big part of the children's lives. There was a certain social status attached to being picked for the White Rock ball team and the youngsters practiced to get as good as they could possibly be. The coveted spot of being a regular team member was something the boys hoped and dreamed of as they got older. There were teams, in addition to White Rock, from Beech Grove, Montebello, Vesuvius, Lofton and Nash. People came to watch the games up at Tom Coffey's ball field on top of the mountain near Squarmouth Rocks. They came up the steep mountain in Model T Fords, on horseback or on foot to root for their home team and visit with friends and relatives who came out for the games. Clemmer played on the White Rock team along with Johnny and Forest Coffey, Boston Taylor, Hercy Coffey, and the Carr boys. Players from White Rock boasted a first and second-string team.

Church played a big part in people's lives. Mary can recall walking to the night meetings held at the old log church and the Dunkard church at Love. They walked, carrying lanterns, but more often than not, they walked by the light of the moon. Davis and Petitt Coffey preached at these meetings. Mary laughed as she told about the time about twenty young people were coming home from one of the meetings. "Several of the boys were hungry and snuck over to Tom Coffey's cucumber patch and helped themselves to some juicy cukes for the walk home."

Both Clemmer and Mary were baptized at twelve years of age, in the "baptizing hole" just below the Massie Camp. Aubrey Coffey baptized Mary while Riley Fitzgerald baptized Clemmer.

The church at White Rock was so well attended, they built an addition over the years. They had not one but two organs and Nellie Taylor played for most services. Homemade chestnut shingles made by Eli Coffey were used to cover the church roof. A lot of men preached at the church but Mary said the most popular were men by the names of Harris, Crist, and McKinney.

When asked about the Fitzgerald's wedding, Mary told me they were married on July 12, 1928, under the shade of a big walnut tree that stood in her parent's front yard. "I wore a purple dress and Clemmer wore a white shirt with his blue serge suit. Preacher Emmett Perry married us and all our friends and family were there. We were both twenty-two at the time. Clemmer got a job digging iron ore at the Red Bank Mine near the Saint Mary's River. They hauled the ore out on a "dinky" railroad and carried out of the mountains. Clemmer worked there five days a week and stayed at the mine camp they had for the men. He came back on Friday night and left to go back on Monday morning. He also worked in the apple orchards for Johnny Coffey who had a big crew

that did the picking. Sometimes I would go over to stay with Johnny's wife, Nin, and we would do her winter canning while the men were at work.

When I was a little girl my daddy was blinded while he was working on a rock chimney when a piece of loose stone flew up and hit him in the eye. He didn't work too much after that. I helped out by doing washing for the folks in that area. I would do a huge kettle of wash for fifty cents."

Today, Clemmer and Mary live in Waynesboro, a far cry from the early life they knew together in White Rock. But as we sat reminiscing about how things had changed over the years, it was plain to see that distance had nothing to do with the storehouse of memories they had tucked safely in their hearts....