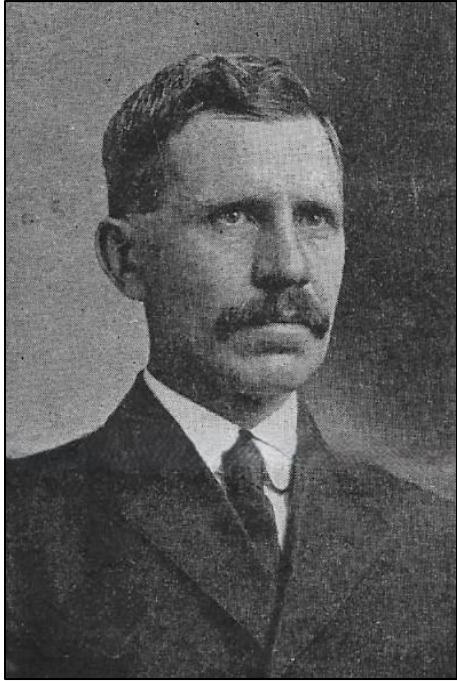


## Henry Davis Coffey: Mountain Preacher, Man of God



Born on the North Fork of the Tye River, Nelson County, Virginia, on November the 16<sup>th</sup>, 1861, Henry Davis Coffey was the firstborn son of Andrew Jackson and Rebecca Campbell Coffey. His grandfather, Henry B. Coffey, was a pioneer preacher in the Blue Ridge Mountains who rode horseback over the ridges of Nelson County preaching the Old Jerusalem Gospel, visiting the sick, marrying and burying people without pay, and taught his grandson to memorize scripture which turned out to be a great advantage to him later in life as he, also, began a long career in the ministry.

The first recollection of H. D. Coffey (known as "Davis" closer to home) that I have is a 1909 photo of the Sned School in Love given to me by my neighbor, Nin Coffey. In addition to all the children, teachers, and other individuals shown in the picture, there was a mustached, distinguished looking man standing inside the schoolhouse. I asked Nin who the handsome man was and she informed me it was Rev. Henry Davis Coffey, who preached in many of the Christian Churches in our area. He is the man shown in the window on the right side.



## INTRODUCTION

“From the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a sturdy man went forth to the Civil War, leaving behind a young wife with an infant in her arms. The life story of that baby is the theme of H. D. Coffey’s book, *My Life With God*, published in January of 1938.

Born to these parents in such trying times, the child knew nothing of the soft luxury of the modern home, but was disciplined to hard work, and knew the full meaning of thrift, industry and sacrifice. And, too, he drank the very strength of the majestic mountains that towered around him.



*Grandfather, Henry B. Coffey      The humble cabin where Henry Davis Coffey was born*



*The Coffey cabin shown around 1900*

His ancestors were strong and hearty people. Mountain pioneers by choice, they dug and carved their living from the eternal hills. This was their home.

Also, this oldest son of a large family had a large share in all that it took to raise the growing family. Educational advantages were few. He learned his letters and to read from an old hymn book and from the Bible at his mother's knee. Like Lincoln, he toiled by day and studied by night—the flickering pine knot or fire his only light. As a young man he was both student and teacher of other aspiring youth. Thru it all, his mother, a rare and wonderful woman, was his chief teacher and guide.

Religion, genuine religion, was the vital breath of that home. Bible study, prayer, faith in God and service to man were the heavenly manna feeding these growing souls. His grandfather, Henry Benjamin Coffey was a pioneer preacher of the mountains.

He drank deeply from the fountain of spiritual inspiration. Before he was ten years old, he became a Christian. Without delay he began to witness for the Lord. His was a growing and fruitful life. Soon God's call to preach was upon him. With still further earnestness, he prayed, studied, and worked. Thus began his wonderful ministry which was continued with increased zeal through 54 years.

I have read the manuscript of this volume with keen and increasing appreciation. It is the amazing story simply told of what God can do with human life, in spite of normal handicaps, when freely given to His service. Only eternity can measure and only God can know the results.

I have never known a living soul who has given self more fully to the Lord.

Surely his is the path of the just that shineth brighter and brighter to the perfect day.”

*J. T. WATSON, Craig County, Newcastle Virginia*

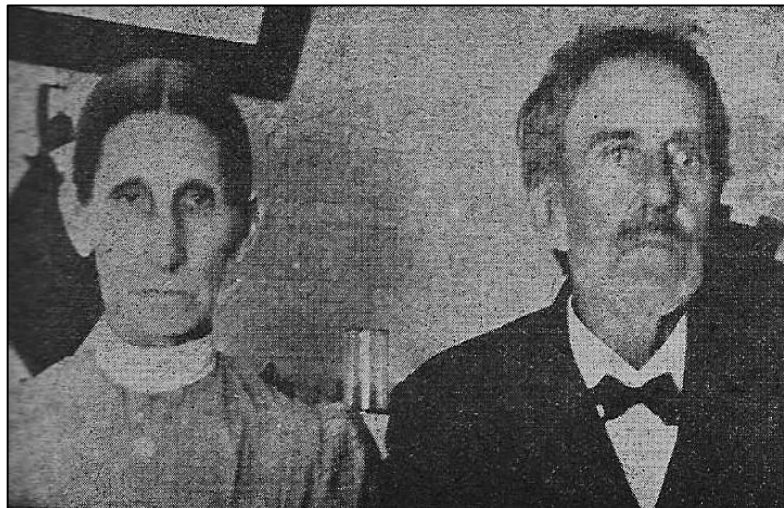
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**The following excerpts of H. D. Coffey's life are taken from his book “My Life With God”**

### **MY MOTHER**



*Young Andrew and Rebecca*



*Andrew Jackson & Rebecca Coffey in later years*

My mother was the best woman that I ever knew. From an earthly point of view, I owe all that I am, or have done, to her. She and my father, Andrew Jackson Coffey, were converted and baptized by L. A. Cutler, the silver-tongued preacher of Virginia, before I was born. My father was forced to the army in the Civil War and left when I was about six months old and I did not see him for about four years.

Mother had a hard time providing for her child. After the war, father came back and built a log house and went back to work for his family. We were happy together, singing, reading the Bible, and father telling about the war, and especially the Indians, as part of the time, he had been fighting them. (Andrew became a Union soldier who opposed slavery so he was sent out west to fight Indians instead of joining the Confederate Army. He was the last Union soldier to be buried in Nelson County; see the two prior articles about him).



*Coffey cemetery on the North Fork*



*Gravestone of Andrew*

Books were scarce, and no schools in that section. But mother taught me the alphabet from an old hymn book, using the first letter in the hymn. Then she taught me to spell from an old primer, and to read, from a second reader.

Then she taught me to read the Testament. The print was small and my eyes gave me trouble. We borrowed a large print Testament from my great-grandmother, who lived to be ninety-seven years old, and who could read or thread a needle without glasses. My mother knew the Word, and kept me reading while she was spinning, knitting, or stringing beans, and corrected me if I did not read or pronounce correctly.

Mother controlled me by love and kindness. While she lived, I would write her on my birthdays. After I was forty years old, she wrote me a letter and said, "Davis, I don't know that you ever willfully disobeyed me, or gave me one hour's trouble." I prized that letter much. She lived to be 85 years old and went home to Heaven. I have heard her say, "When I was raising my family and kept at home with the children, I thought I was doing little for the Lord. But when I saw all ten in church, I supposed I was doing as much at home as I could have done at church." She said before dying, "Don't look down in the grave for me. I will not be there." Jesus said, "Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise."

## EDUCATION AND TEACHING SCHOOL

After schools were opened in our section I would attend after crops were housed. I was anxious to go to school and enjoyed it. I would study at night until ten and twelve o'clock, and sometimes until two, though I had to be the first one up in the morning to make the fires, feed, and cut wood for the home.

One year we had no school on our side of the mountain and I would take provisions and walk across the mountain to Augusta County and then walk three miles to the school. On Friday evening, walk home, reaching there after dark and on Saturday, cut wood for the following week, and then on Monday morning, before daybreak, start up the dark hollow of the Blue Ridge for school again.

I went to school until I could get a certificate to teach and then taught in the same school I had attended. (possibly the Snead School in the above photograph).

Childhood is the time to sow good seed in the fertile soil of the person's mind before the evil one sows the tares. Teach them of God when young and they won't forget. If we save the church, the nation, or the world, it must be done through the children.

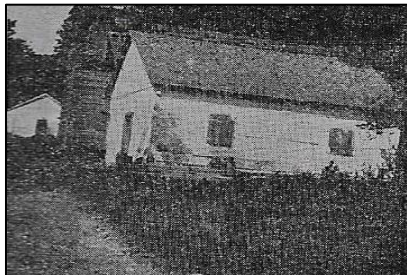
## MY CONVERSION

I was converted and baptized by that consecrated man of God, G. W. Abell, before I was ten years old. Though young, I would lead in prayer, address the Sunday school, and do what I could in the church. I had faith in God and in prayer. Influences around me strengthened my faith and kept me in the right way.

## ORDINATION

My great desire was to attend college but circumstances prevented me, and like Moody, Howard Cadle and others, I had to get along without this. But I studied the Book, read much and doing what I could in the church and Sunday School.

E. R. Perry, Evangelist in Piedmont district, held a meeting at Evergreen, my home church. We had a great meeting with many conversions. I took part in these services. I was teacher, Superintendent of Sunday School, and leader in the church. It was known that I intended to preach. Later, Perry came back for another meeting and I was astonished when he announced that I was to be ordained to preach. Arrangements were made and I was set apart for the ministry. I preached my very first sermon at the old Evergreen Church.



*Old Evergreen where Davis preached*



*Evergreen Christian Church today*

## COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE

I had many friends among the ladies but Miss Lydia Susan Campbell was my choice. She was the daughter of F. J. Campbell, who was Class Leader of the United Brethren Church and Sunday School Superintendent for more than fifty years.



*Henry Davis Coffey, his wife Rebecca and their seven children*

Miss Lydia was a beautiful girl and she said she wanted to marry a preacher but not a Campbellite preacher. After a year of courtship, we were married on January 22, 1885, in Nelson County. She was a helpmeet indeed, a faithful worker in the church, a sweet and loving wife and a devoted mother. Her greatest work was in the home. I had to be away most of the time but she kept up the Family Altar, gave thanks at the table and taught the children the Word of God. After she lost her eyesight and the doctors said she should not go out, she would get her cane and try to go to church. We lived together thirty-three years and were sweethearts to the last. She suffered much but died rejoicing, saying, "I will be waiting for you when you come." She died in Lynchburg, Virginia, on October 24, 1918.

We raised seven children, one daughter and six sons. Standing left to right; Clyde Elmore 1896; Pearl May 1889; Leonard Newton 1887; Roy Temperance 1891; Lester Francis 1893; Sitting, Raymond Anderson 1900; and the youngest, Shelby Hopwood 1904.



*Early photograph of Davis and Rebecca*

## **EVANGELIZING PIEDMONT DISTRICT**

From 1884 until 1894, I preached locally in Nelson and adjoining counties, while making my living in the lumber business with my brother. We made turbine water wheels, ditched the water around the mountain hills, built sawmills, then cut and saw those mountain poplars, sometimes getting 7000 feet out of one tree. With oxen, we would log the hills and haul the lumber nearly 20 miles to the station or across the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Several times I held revivals with success. Then E. R. Perry, District Evangelist, arranged for me to go to a mission church in Albemarle for a meeting. Arrangements were made and a man was to meet me at the station. The man took me home in his buggy and later that night at the meeting we soon had converts. I could only stay a week but during that time we had 20 baptisms and the church was greatly revived. While there, I visited nearly every home in the community.

## **WORKING FOR THE LORD UNDER THE STATE BOARD**

I preached for a group of churches in Hanover, Louisa and Goochland Counties. While in the pastorate in Louisa, William Jackson Shelburne came through that section in the interest of State Missions. I took him to the churches for which I preached. He went back to Montgomery County and soon I was called to evangelize in the New River District of which Shelburne was Chairman. We had fine meetings and several hundred were converted. After a year or two, my work was turned over to the State Board and I was to work anywhere within the state. My first work was in Carroll County, holding meetings at Glade Creek Church.

## **REVIVALS AND CHURCH BUILDINGS**

From there I went on to preach at Madison Heights and helped in building Lynchburg College. Some of the churches I preached at over the years were in: Belmont, Roanoke, Saltville, Covington, Iron Hill, Grundy, Hopewell, Union Grove, Gretna, Rocky Mount, Midway and Melrose, Mountain Top, Beech Grove, Wintergreen, Union Christian, Horse Pasture, Fort Trial, Mountain View, Pleasant Grove, Antioch, Bethany, William's Chapel, Green Cove, Interior, Ground Squirrel, and Springfield,

## **MY SECOND COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE**

In 1894 I held my first revival in old Bethany Church. Brother E. R. Perry was with me and we had a great meeting with about 40 converts. One day after I had preached and the benediction was pronounced, I noticed a little girl crying. I inquired the cause and found she wanted to make the confession and become a Christian. She was only eight years old and her sister was trying to hold her back but she would not be persuaded and refused to leave the church until she had made the confession. I called for a song of invitation and

she came forward at once, along with her sister and cousin. I baptized them in a pool near the church. As the three little girls came down into the water, dressed in white, I thought they looked more like angels than anything I had ever seen. I did not dream what the future had in store for us.

Many years later death came into that home and left the poor hearts sad and lonely. In July of 1910, the father, Mr. Duggins, died.

In July 1911, the mother became seriously ill and died.

Then in 1912, Erma, one of the little girls I had baptized 23 years prior, lost her husband, Willie P. Cocke, when he fell and was killed instantly. Erma was left with a little boy, Wilmer, and for about three years her health gave way. She told her sister she wanted to write, choosing as her subject, "When do we need Jesus most?" A pastor came to visit and she showed the article and he said to send it to the Virginia Record. She never heard back for about six months so she deemed it not worthy for publication.



*My second wife, Erma Lee Duggins Coffey  
and our adopted daughter, Alice Marie*

In the meantime, my wife had died and I was almost crazy with grief and loneliness. My health was failing as I was grieving myself to death. One day I picked up the Virginia Record and read the article that fitted so nicely into my life. When I read the name of the writer, I was shocked. I thought of the little black-eyed girl of 23 years past and wrote her a letter at once and during the next twelve months, I had written her more than 200 letters

and she the same. I was working in Southwest Virginia and she lived in the Eastern part of the state. She had been a widow for eight years when I started coming to see her. When she wrote the article, she had no dream of the result but one of her friends tried to joke her by saying, "That was just an advertisement for a husband." Without letting him get the best of her, she replied, "If it were, I got what I wanted!"

We married in Louisa County on July 14, 1920 and we have been sweethearts for 18 years and plan to continue to remain so, as long as we live.

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## OBITUARY



Rev. Coffey, a true soldier of the cross, died at his home in Louisa County, on September 6, 1947, at 86 years of age. The funeral was held in the Euclid Avenue Church, Lynchburg, Virginia, on September 8<sup>th</sup>. His obituary states, "He rests from a long and victorious ministry."

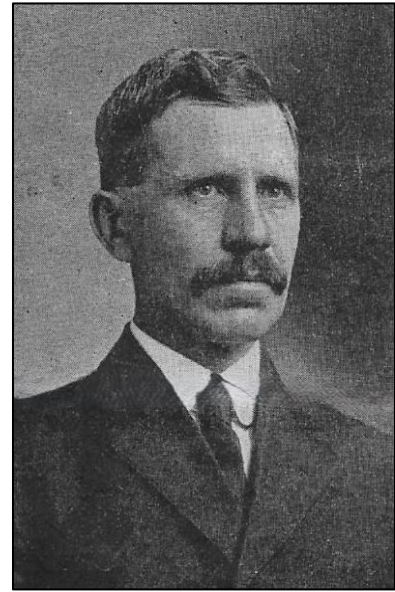
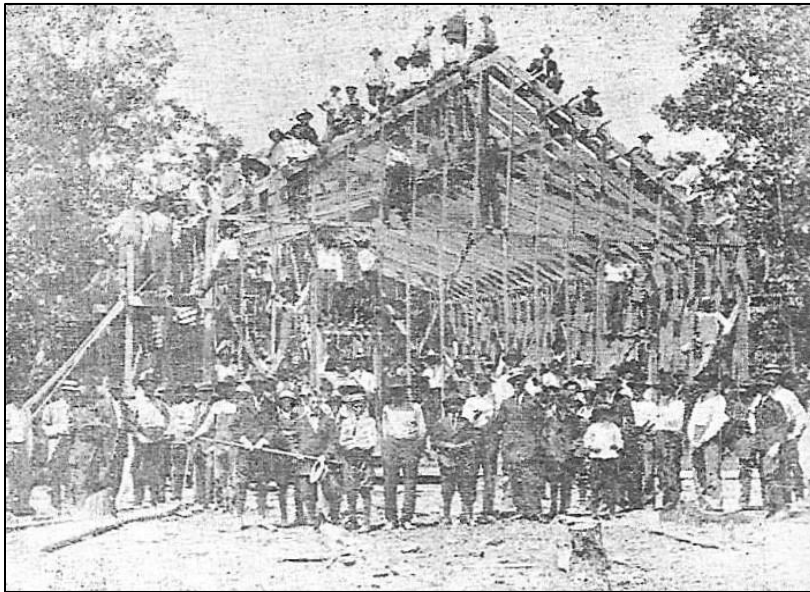
Before his death, Rev. Coffey, in November of 1945, wrote encouraging thoughts on what it means to be a Christian. In these perilous times, his words give us comfort and hope.

*"How time flies. Days, months, years and ages pass never to return. Infancy, childhood, youth, manhood, old age and death pass on to another life. What life has been and what the life beyond will be depends on what we do with this life. To make life happy and successful we must have an Ideal and follow it.*

*We must have one who knows the future as well as the past to direct us. No one but God can do that; no one else can do all that we need. Only by living with him and following his directions can we get the best out of life and have a home with Him in Heaven. We must read God's word and obey it. Then we must live in communion with him day and night. We must pray to him and ask His advice. We must let His spirit guide us in what we do and say. We should count our blessings and read God's many precious promises and not be always complaining and thinking about our troubles. We should not think about getting old. Youth is a matter of mind. Some are old at forty, others young at eighty or one hundred. But if death should take us, it should be the best friend a Christian can have. But we do not have to wait until after death to have all of heaven. Where Jesus is, is heaven. To talk with Him, walk with Him and make Him a constant companion day and night makes a heaven on earth. Death is the only boatman that can take us across the river, to where God and Jesus and our loved ones have gone."*

**(For a more detailed account of Henry Davis Coffey's life, his book "My Life With God" gives facts and stories too numerous to include in this month's Backroads blog on the Nelson County Historical Society site. But this Godly man is worth remembering as one of Nelson County's most influential men between 1861 and 1947).**

## Information about Union Grove Church in Pittsylvania County, VA



The above photo, which was mistakenly thought to be the building of Evergreen Christian Church at the confluence of Rts. 687 and 56, on North Fork Road, is actually the beginnings of Union Grove Christian Church in southwest Virginia. The photo and a description of when it was taken is written in the book, "My Life With God," (pages, 54, 55, & 56) by Rev. H. D. Coffey who pastored many of the Christian churches in Virginia. The book was written in 1938 and here are some excerpts about the church by Rev. Henry Davis Coffey:

### ***BUILDING A CHURCH IN A DAY: UNION GROVE***

*"Prof. Hopwood appealed to me to go to a point in Pittsylvania County for a meeting about 1911. He arranged for a Miss May Leake, who was then a student in Virginia Christian College, to go and sing. Several hundred came at night and listened. Seats were made in a grove and gasoline torch lights were hung on trees. The meeting continued for more than two weeks. We began with two members there and closed with 102.*

*Then we planned to build a church. I told them that churches were being built in the West, in a day and could be in Virginia. People said it could not be done but I was not discouraged. I made bill for lumber to be cut, bought finished lumber for the inside, windows, doors, tin for roof and had them charged to me.*

*Material was put on the ground and we sent out a call for carpenters and workmen. Some came 100 miles from North and South. We laid the foundation, cut the framing and framed the rafters in pairs, in one day. The next morning, we met at 6 A.M. We laid down the framing for one side and fastened it, then the other side and one end, leaving the other end open to get rafters in.*

*These sets of rafters, turned upside down, were placed on the frame while men below pushed with poles, and those on top pulled with ropes. I was always on top. When the rafters were in place, two men nailed at the bottom while one spaced and fastened the top. By that time, another set was ready. In one hour, all could be up without scaffolding. Then a crew of men, with carpenters, were placed on each side and end and a crew, on each side of roof, were putting on sheeting. Tinnners were crimping the tin and about 2 P.M. they began putting in the roof. Other men were dressing lumber and making pews. We worked 149 men that day and none of them charged for their work, all giving their service.*

*When the picture was taken, I was on top and like many others in trying to get too high, I got my head cut off. We did this twice in the same year in Pittsylvania County, building the churches to seat 400 people.*

*We had dinner on the ground, using a table 40 feet long. Provisions that were in boxes under the table and in buggies were piled up on the table. We ate dinner and supper and much of the provisions were taken back to homes.*

*I was almost too tired to preach that night but we had about 400 people out and five converts. It was estimated that more than 1000 people came to see the work and many of them came to see us fail. But we had a great work there.”*

*By Rev. H. D. Coffey  
Nov. 16, 1861 - Sep. 6, 1947*