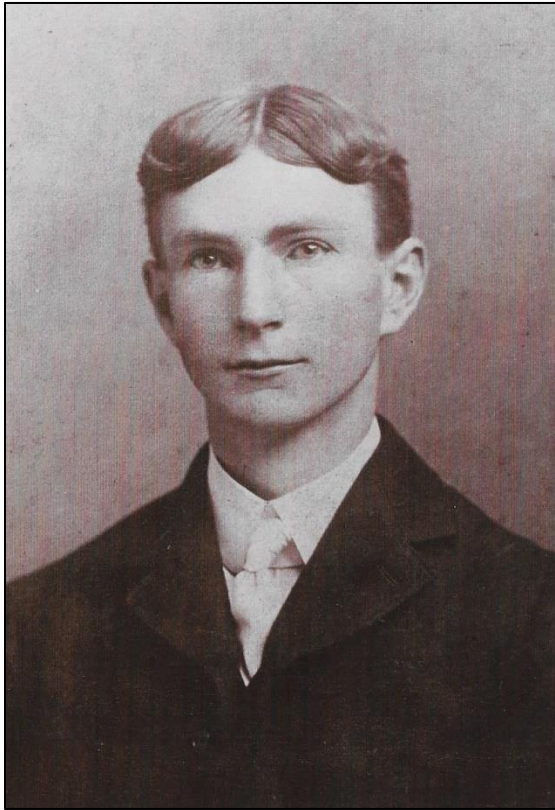


## Eugene Douglas Denny



*In the May 2006 Backroads newspaper, Mary Ann Donohoe of California wrote a family history piece along with photos about her grandfather, Eugene Douglas Denny. It is very informative and I'd like to include the story for the Nelson County Historical Society files about families from Nelson County.*

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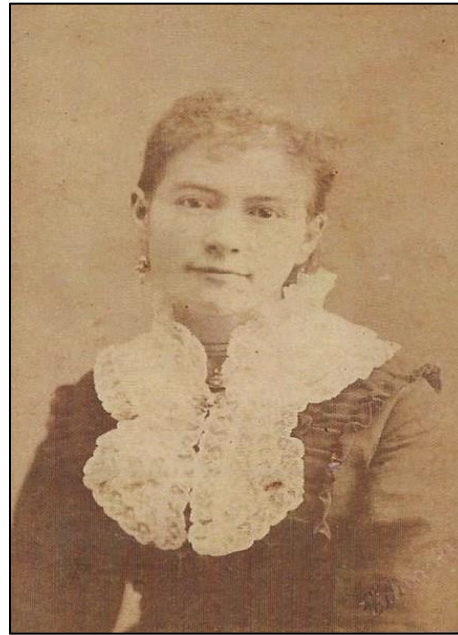
A series of life's trials and adventures brought my granddad to Montebello, Virginia. He had been born on March 3, 1883 to a once prominent and wealthy family, who among most folks in the area had lost near all and everything either during or after the Civil War. If it had not been for the vast land holdings of his grandfathers and help from his mother and father's brothers and uncles who had gone on to Texas and became doctors and judges, heaven only knows what might have become of them. Eugene's father, Douglas Plumer Denny, was a bookkeeper, born in Richmond on November 22, 1843, the thirteenth of fifteen children and his mother, Annie Fisher Shelton, born December 9,

**Eugene Douglas Denny as a young man** 1855, the youngest daughter of Josph H. Shelton and Judith Woods Harris, was born at "Rose Isle."

The Shelton plantation and mansion house where Granddad was born, was known as "Rose Isle" on the Tye River near Hat Creek. Rose Isle was an extensive tract of land along the Tye River, embracing the territory of which Roseland is the center, was granted by an order of the English Council to Rev. Robert Rose in 1735. The mansion house was built in 1776, by the Rev. Robert Rose. I have a photo of some bricks from the foundation with that date stamped on them. The house burned during the Christmas holiday sometime around 1900. There are photographs of the partially destroyed mansion in "A History of Upper Tye River Valley and Mountains: by Catherine Seaman, PhD. There are at least two cemeteries on the grounds and there were graves near the mansion at one time. The owner of the land in the 1960s, Paul Saunders, was removing some locust trees and located three graves which he had re-interred at Trinity Episcopal Church near Arrington; James Leslie Shelton (1852-1930), Elizabeth Brent (1858-1906), who was his wife and an infant. James Leslie Shelton was a prominent man in Nelson County and their son James Leslie, Jr. was Superintendent of Virginia Highway Department. Granddad's 3<sup>rd</sup> great-granddad had been the first sheriff of Nelson County and a member of the Virginia legislature.

Granddad and both of his sisters went to school and church in Roseland. His mother was educated and spoke French. She was the youngest of nine children. Frances Shelton Stevens, granddaughter of James Leslie Shelton, told me in 1994, that she had overheard a conversation at a Shelton funeral long ago, "there's Annie Shelton Denny's grave; she was crowned Queen of May Day long ago

and she's buried right where she was crowned." She was a devoted mother; very hard working and she instilled strict moral ethics and a strong family bond in her children.



**Eugene's parents: Douglas Plumer Denny & Annie Fisher Shelton Denny**

After Granddad's mother died in August of 1904, he went to Washington, D.C. and got a job on the street cars. When he became ill with measles and pneumonia, which turned into meningitis, he was taken to his sister's home in Amherst. Annie Plumer Denny (1880-1926), Granddad's oldest sister, had married Robert Alexander Whitehead (1873-1954) in 1902. It was her tender nursing that saved Granddad's life, as the doctor had given him up for dead. He weighed 60 pounds and his muscles were like string. After recovering from his ordeal, the doctor recommended the mountain air to restore his health. But afterwards, he suffered from asthma for the rest of his life.



**Henry Bartley's cabin where Eugene recovered**

Henry Burton Bartley and his wife Nancy "Jenny" Layton Bartley, had a room to rent in their rustic mountain cabin not too far from Montebello. Jenny was a midwife and Henry was a farmer who had been in the Stonewall Brigade during the War. Recently, through DNA research, we now know that Henry's father was Major Dowell Vines. The Bartley genealogy was in earlier editions of Backroads without this information. When Granddad came up the mountain to see his new home, their granddaughter, Lydia Burton Thompson was hiding behind a door and peeking out to see just what Mr. Denny looked like. Was he handsome? Did he have good manners? Was he different than the boys she knew that had grown up there in the mountains? Well, the mountain girl and the refined sickly man from such different cultures, hit it off and married in 1910.



**Wedding Day 1910. Sitting: Eugene and Lydia Denny**  
**Top: Ed Bartley, Flossie Campbell, their witnesses**

drive today, in a new car, is still steep and curvy with hairpin curves and can be tricky maneuvering in inclement weather.

Times were tough in the mountains and Granddad had a soft heart and wasn't a good businessman. Cash was a rare commodity even before the Chestnut trees died out and Granddad extended too much credit and ended up losing his store. By this time Eugene and his wife Lydia had two children; William Plumer, who's nickname was "Bunny" (later shortened to "Bun", and Edith Wilson "Edie", both born in a rented house not too far from the store. Now it was time to roll up the sleeves on his scrawny arms and figure out how to shelter and feed his growing family.

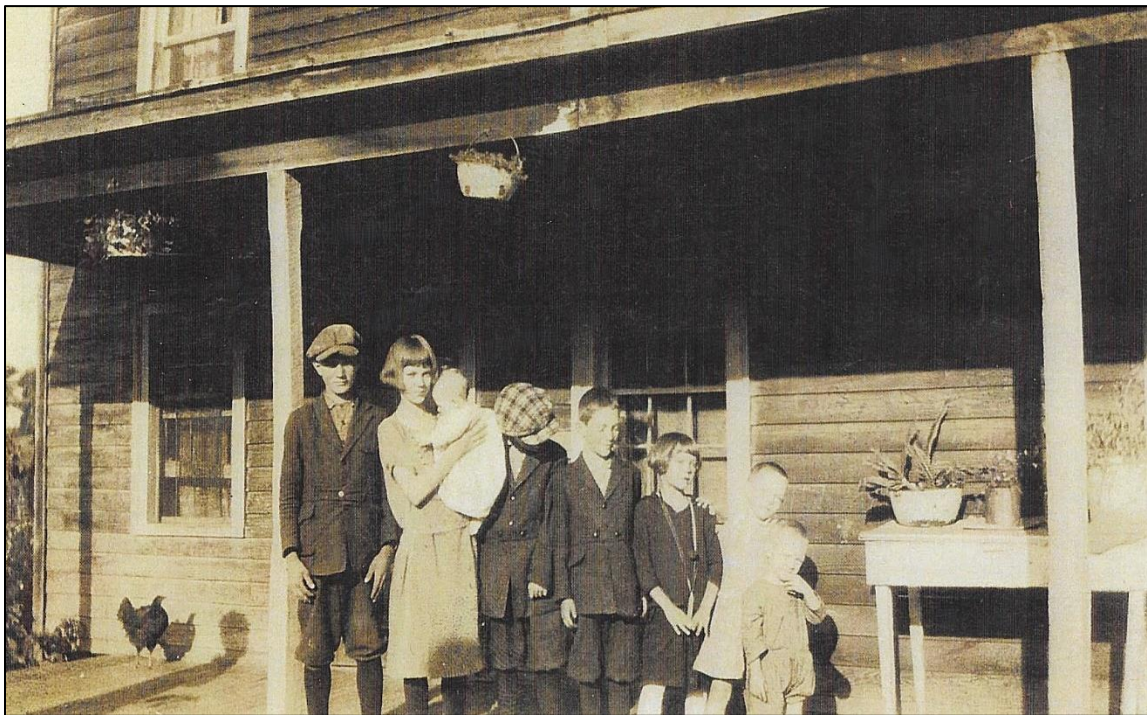
Their first farm was near Staunton in a little town called Annex. Granddad began farming on a 10-acre farm always known as the "Holler." The address is now Hildebrand Circle and the house they lived in has burned down. Edie was 6 months old when they moved there and Robert Ernest was born in 1914, Eugene Douglas, Jr. in 1915, Ella Davis "Diana" born in 1917, and Annie Katherine in 1919 (my mother) who all came into this world in the little home nestled between those mountains.

From the Holler they moved the whole kit and kaboodle to Mr. Snider's farm, closer to annex, in 1920. About a year later they moved on to Mint Spring on the Christian sister's farm. By all

Lydia's family had recently moved off the mountain to Brookwood. Her father, William Henry "Bill" Thompson, born in 1852, came from Lowesville. His parents, Nelson Anderson Thompson, born 1810, and Elizabeth Susan Campbell, born 1820, also had a daughter, Eliza Susan, born 1854, who married Ambrose Coleman Smith, born 1823. Their mother died soon after Eliza Susan's birth and Nelson Anderson married Eliza Betsy Smith and they had Martha, Mary, Ambrose, George Washington, Rose and Mildred Ann. George married Clemmie Fitzgerald and Mildred Ann married Peach Cash. Lydia's mother, Sarah Jane "Sally" was Henry and Jenny Bartley's oldest child.

Granddad went into business by renting a store near Montebello from a Mr. Robertson. He would take his wagon down the steep, rocky mountain road to Vesuvius to pick up his supplies, then turn right around and make the perilous ascent to get on back home. Rain or shine, he had to get the horse and wagon to get his goods and meet the train. That

accounts, the sisters were very sweet ladies but their land was steep, rocky and hard to farm. John Lea, born in 1921, was the only child born at the Christian place and was named for Granddad's cousin Elizabeth Allice Denny who married Mr. Sidney Lea and lived in Danville. The next farm the growing family found themselves on was in Middlebrook; the May place. For the older children it was a wonderful place to be. There was a big barn with a large sloping hill behind that they could slide down and play when chores were done. Edie, the eldest daughter, remembered being told to go across the mill race to the Pangle family to get help because Mama was about to give birth to George Hubert, born in 1924. George was such a beautiful baby that the May family offered to "buy" him for apple butter!



***The Denny children at the May Farm in Middlebrook, October 1924;  
William "Bun," Edie holding George, Ernie, Gene, Ella "Diana," Annie, and John Lea***

Once more it was time to move on and this time it was to Waynesboro. Up until 2003, the small brick house they lived in was still standing in the fenced yard of the water company. Here both Judith Lydia (1926) and David (1928), came into the world. The land here was rich and the crops plentiful. The gentleman who owned the land had a pony and cart and would let the children play with them. For the first time in their lives, life wasn't so hard for the Dennys. Lydia would sing her favorite tunes and rock her babies. She was a wonderful cook and baker and she depended on her oldest daughter Edie for help in the kitchen and with the little ones. The older boys were needed in the fields with their father and there was more than enough to do with 13 mouths to feed and clothe.

Granddad's father was a widower with no home and a small pension. He was a distinguished looking old gentleman who always wore a suit and narrow black tie. He was named for the first Presbyterian minister in Richmond, Rev. Dr. W. S. Plumer. His father, Richard Denny, had helped form the church when he came to Richmond from Philadelphia. His father was in the mercantile

business and Henry Clay had worked for him as a clerk. Grandpa Denny lived with Granddad and his family some of the year. Other times he spent with Granddad's sister, Annie Plumer Denny Whitehead and Judith Shelton Denny Ford. Sister Annie passed away from stomach cancer in 1925 and left her husband and four children in Amherst. Judith had married and moved to Lowell, North Carolina in 1913.



**At their home in Waynesboro, 1926; Eugene, Judy, John Lea, George, Lydia**

1929 was a sad year for the Denny family. We first lost Grandpa Denny in March and my grandmother, Lydia, passed away from a brain tumor in August. Granddad was left with ten children, the youngest being 10-month-old David. When Lydia was a young girl, she had fallen down a well near her grandparent's cabin, where Irish Creek Road and Rt. 56 conjunct. The family always felt the brain tumor must have been a result of that injury. The well is still there on the property but it has been capped off now.

With the devastating loss of his wife and father, Granddad felt it was time to leave the area which had so many memories of his beloved Lydia. He moved the family to Fairfax and with an inheritance from an aunt, was able to buy his own farm. He had to send baby David to cousin Gertie Shelton Clarkson, who already had 13 children of her own, but was more than happy to have one more poor little soul to care for. Judy (3) and George (5) went to Aunt Judith in North Carolina but after a year and without any explanation, George was put on a train with a box of fried chicken and sent back home. At the age of 13, Judy was shipped back home, too. Granddad wanted to keep his family together so he brought David back home at the age of five, when he was old enough to attend school. Granddad never remarried but he did the best he could by his family. The original home on their farm burned to the ground on July 4, 1933, but everyone got out safely. With the help of neighbors, a new brick home was built with the insurance money. Granddad had continuing

health problems with coughing fits and had to burn powders at night to help him breath. Another ailment my mother recalls were deep, bleeding cracks in his hands from harsh weather/ hard work.



***Eugene in later years at the store he worked at as a young man and at his farm in Fairfax***

Granddad is buried at Roseland Bethlehem Church with his mother, baby sister, and many Shelton relatives including cousin Gertie and “Mark” Clarkson, their daughter Laura Shelton Henderson and her husband Emmett who had a store for many years and Uncle John Clifford Shelton and more. He considered himself at home when in Nelson County and went to Easter sunrise services at Haines Chapel on South Mountain. After the devastating flood in 1969, he would read the newspaper article and shed many a tear since he knew most everybody at Massies Mill. The articles were among his private papers when he passed away.

Now my Granddad is gone. The home he was born in is gone and the home he built in Fairfax was taken by the intersection of routes 66 and 50. There are no old homeplaces we can go to and visit to recall his life. Even the Shelton name is almost forgotten in Nelson County, Virginia. The little store Granddad rented from Mr. E. D. Robertson finally slumped to the ground several years ago, but thanks to Lynn Coffey and the Backroads, Eugene Douglas Denny’s memory will live on.

I would like to dedicate this story to the memory of my Aunt Edie, who made sure she shared as many of her rich memories of growing up in Nelson and Augusta Counties as possible, my Uncle John Lea who shared his recollections and stories of the family that they both treasure, and my cousin Shirley Sherwood VanVleet, who had the idea of writing this article to share with the Backroads readers.

***Lynn’s Note:*** And now, Mary Ann’s early article and photos will also live on through the Nelson County Historical Society’s archives of family genealogy.

From the Denny Family Album



*Annie Shelton Denny Whitehead, Eugene Douglas Denny,  
Annie Fisher Shelton Denny, Judith Shelton Denny Ford*



*Judith Shelton Denny, Eugene's sister, top, second from left  
At the Klineburg School*



*Eugene Douglas and wife Lydia Thompson Denny*



*Robert & Annie Plumer Denny Whitehead  
and family. Robert's brother top right*



*Family reunion 1960s: top: Eugene, Judith, Edith, Annie, Diana,  
Bottom: Eugene Jr., "Bun", John Lea, Ernest, David, and George*



*The Denny family at Eugene's funeral in March of 1970, held at Bethlehem  
Church Cemetery in Roseland. All ten children in attendance L/R: Annie,  
John Lea, Judy, Edith, David, Diana, Bun, Gene, George and Ernie*