

Carl Franklin Coffey

Growing up on the North Fork of the Tye River

My introduction to Carl came much later than the rest of his family. In the early 1980's I remember going to his mother's house on the North Fork with a group from our church, to sing hymns for her. His brother Ralph and Ralph's son Jeff cut the logs for a cabin I began building while still a single gal. I took a picture of Jeff at his grandmother's house that was published in the *Backroads* newspaper when he was 12 years old. In years past I met Carl's sisters, Charlene and Elda, but it wasn't until Carl moved back home after retirement that Billy and I met him and his future wife, Debbie. We were up Coxes Creek attending Clemon and Peggy Lawhorne's pig roast when we were introduced and the first thing I noticed was his stature. Carl is a giant of a man, standing six feet five inches tall, with a quiet demeanor and much good humor. Debbie is petite and pretty with a warm and engaging personality. They seemed like a perfect match and the longer we've known them, our first impression of their relationship was right on the money.



Carl at home with his faithful sidekick, Sassy

Carl is a successful business man and he is the first to say that God has blessed him abundantly. He is a humble person who doesn't brag about what he has or what type of man he is. But those around him notice his giving and generous spirit and have many nice things to say about him. Close neighbors cannot say enough about the favors Carl has done for them over the years; how accommodating he is and how he notices what they need done and then quietly goes about doing it without fanfare or expected payment. Carl is known for how fairly he treats others and how far-reaching his hospitality extends throughout the community.

Junior Thompson is a good friend Carl has known for many years. Junior knew Carl as a young boy and watched him grow up and took him bear hunting as a teenager. In talking with Junior he had this to say. "Carl Coffey has done well for himself. He left home and started his own business. But with all the material success he's had, it never went to his head. He's still the same old guy. Yes, Carl is a great guy."

They say if you want to know the worth of a person, ask his friends. I did, and their words reflect the love and respect they have for this special man. Enjoy Carl's story about a poor boy that left the mountains to make a better life for himself and his family, only to return to the peace and solitude of the place he's always called "home."

In talking with Carl about his lineage, I found I had a vast amount of information people had sent me over the years, much of which belonged to his particular branch of Coffey genealogy. I realize that someone buying this book who lives in Alabama might not find this bit of family history as interesting as us folks who actually live here, but for the Nelson County natives who were born and raised here, it is a future record that may be lost if not written down. For that reason alone, I am including what I have concerning Carl's family line so it will not be lost. Carl's paternal grandfather was Benjamin Franklin Coffey, who was born on September 26, 1847 and died on September 14, 1926. Benjamin was the son of Henry B. and Polly Campbell Coffey. Carl's paternal grandmother was Elizabeth M. Fitzgerald Coffey, born on July 14, 1855 and died February 20, 1937. Her parents were Moses and Polly Coffey Fitzgerald. Benjamin and Elizabeth are both buried in the Coffey graveyard located on North Fork Road to the left of the first bridge over the Tye River, near their homeplace.



**Benjamin Franklin Coffey family, early 1900s l/r Front: Benjamin, Eva, Elizabeth.
Top: Zandy, Patrick, Marshall, Aubrey, Martha not pictured.**

Carl's maternal grandparents were Bennett Franklin Fitzgerald, born August 3, 1878 and died September 4, 1960. He was the son of Martin Luther (June 24, 1854-April 2, 1913) and Mary Elizabeth "Lizzie" Carr Fitzgerald (September 20, 1854-May 5, 1941). Bennett's wife, Mary Etta Fitzgerald, was born on May 9, 1880 and died on February 27, 1966. She was the daughter of Hugh and Sophia Campbell Fitzgerald. They are buried in the Fitzgerald family cemetery located on Fork Mountain Road in Montebello.

Bennett and Mary Etta's daughter, Quincey Eunice, was born on September 14, 1909, and married Patrick Henry Coffey sometime in the 1920s. Patrick was born on February 20, 1879, and was thirty years older than his bride.



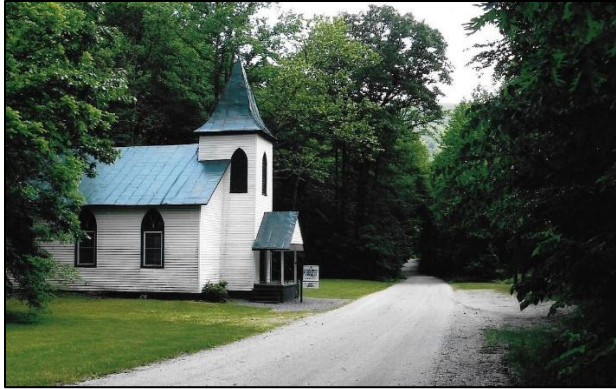
Patrick and Quincey on their wedding day

Pat and Quincey were Carl's parents and the couple had four children before Pat passed away on October 19, 1948 at sixty-nine years of age. The children, by order of birth are; Charlene Marie, born on April 4, 1931; Carl There was quite a group of people up at the house and they said my dad was putting a stick of wood in the fireplace when he had the stroke." Franklin, June 2, 1940; Ralph Davis, July 11, 1942; and Lecy Elda, born on April 29, 1944. Elda was named after Leasy (Lecy) Snead Adams, the midwife who delivered most of the children in that area at the time.

Carl was only eight years old when his father died of a massive stroke, leaving him and his brother Ralph, age six, the "men" of the family. Carl remembers, "It was early in the morning and I had gone to school. I didn't know anything had happened until I got home that evening and Frank Zirkle met me out at the road and told me my dad had died. Back then the bus stopped at the bridge and we had to walk up the road a way and up over the hill."

Although Carl was very young and can't remember exact details of his father's death, he said, "He never left the house after he died and was laid out in a coffin in the back room until the funeral," which was the tradition at that time. He does remember the hearse taking Pat's remains to Evergreen Christian Church for the funeral and afterwards, to the Coffey family graveyard up on the mountain, across the road from their home.

Carl said, "As they left the house to take my dad to the church, his little dog, Brownie, kept following the hearse. A lot of people commented on that, along with my mother.



Evergreen Church on the North Fork Road



The Coffey family cemetery

After Pat's death, the two brothers went to work cutting, splitting and bringing home massive amounts of firewood the family needed for warmth and cooking purposes. "My dad had cut timber and had a few tools, but not many because we were poor as snakes. We had a cross-cut and some kind of bow saw we used to cut wood with. It was extremely hard to keep wood because we had no way of bringing it down to the yard. We had no vehicle and although my dad had a horse, after he died my mother gave it to my grandfather because we weren't big enough to handle it. I remember Lena Zirkle, who was a neighbor, was always so good to us. She lost her husband about a year after my dad died and never remarried, raising her four children alone, just like my mother. I always respected and honored her. It was rough living and we struggled along but actually, it was fun.

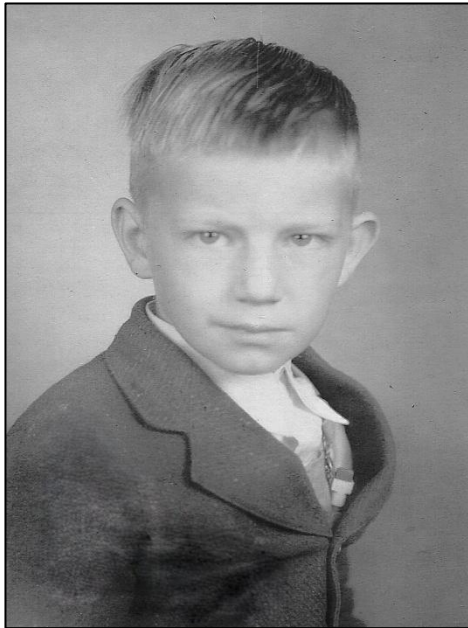


Photo of Carl as a young boy

I would act like a horse and Ralph and I had this wooden thing that we'd hook up and drag it out of the woods. We burned wood exclusively; no other heat. We had a fireplace and that's what heated the whole house. We had a room that was supposed to be the family room but it was turned into a bedroom because that's where most of the heat was. After my dad died, my mother and all us kids slept in the same bed for the longest time. All our meals were cooked on a wood cook stove that had a warming closet on top. It was pretty nice to come home from school and grab a warm biscuit and go squirrel hunting. My dad had a gun but I don't remember what ever happened to that gun. When Ralph and I were 12 and 10 years old, somebody bought us a .22 rifle and we used that. Then Charlene's husband, James Morris, and another relative gave us a shotgun when we were 14 and 12 years old and that's what we used to hunt with. Before that we'd borrow a gun from Elmer Carr and use that to hunt. We didn't have many bullets; Mom would go down to Junior Hatter's store and buy ten .22 bullets or five shotgun shells and give us one or two and we knew we better bring



Quincey Coffey and her children; Charlene, Ralph, Elda and Carl

something home! We had three gardens; one down by the road and two at home. Basically we raised everything we ate. We grew lots of potatoes, beans, tomatoes, corn and cabbage. We usually raised a couple of hogs that were butchered and we ate on but the hams were always sold to get a little extra money. Mostly they were sold to my uncle, Aubrey Coffey, who was a minister in Logan, West Virginia. Some of the hog meat, like sausage, spare ribs and backbones were canned. The rest of the hog was salted down and kept. We had a few chickens and one milk cow but eventually it died and then we didn't even have milk. All of our water was dipped up out of the creek and brought to the house in buckets for washing which was done with an old scrub board. In the winter, you had to break the ice to get a drink of water. We didn't have electricity until I was about 17 years old.

Later on, we got help. Elmer Carr, Boston and Tommy Taylor came to get in wood. As we got older, they would come and help us log. Ralph and I started logging when we were quite little. That's when we and Lester Fitzgerald raised an ox named "Mike" and that was our method of plowing the garden and hauling in the wood. It takes a lot of patience to train an ox. We didn't have a yoke to put on him and the top of Mike's neck was bigger than the bottom so we took a horse collar and turned it upside down and used it that way."

I remember talking with Ralph when I published a logging issue of *Backroads* and him telling me how he and Carl and Lester would cut logs and drag them from the woods down to a landing with the ox. They were so little that other men were hired to take the logs to Bland Lawhorne's sawmill and the boys would pay them out of their earnings. They continued to cut with hand saws and didn't get a gasoline powered chain saw until they were older teens. Carl laughs at the



“Mike” the ox the boys logged with



Carl as a young teen with Brownie

memory of Boston and Tommy Taylor, who were the first ones on the North Fork to get a chain saw. “They bought a McCullough saw that you’d pull on for a half a day to get it started. Ralph and I bought a used Homelite that started just like that (snaps fingers) and we were the top of the crew for a while.”

Carl continues, “After Dad died we were extremely poor and were struggling to get by. My mom and we kids worked in July and August at the orchards, picking peaches for fifty-cents an hour; ten hours for five dollars. I remember a fairly large peach orchard on Campbell’s Mountain Road that I picked at (Andy Coffey’s orchard). We worked for Sam Saunders’, S. P. Bethel, and J. S. Jordan. In elementary school I was large for my age and Walter Hoffman would take me after school and on weekends to pick peaches at his orchard on Dickie Road that I own now. Mom worked for these same orchards picking apples after we had gone back to school. At that time Nelson County was just a huge apple growing concern in this area and there were orchards everywhere. Shortly after my dad died, we were on welfare. We had to supplement that by earning what we could. For my mother and all the kids, we got thirteen dollars and some change each month. From the late 1940’s to 1952 that’s what we got. In 1952 they raised it to forty-two dollars and some change and I can remember my mother crying like she’d been whipped because we were going to live so much better. I still have that little piece of paper that shows us getting that increase.”

As children, Carl and his siblings attended the Fleetwood School which at that time had elementary grades one through seven and high school grades nine through twelve. Carl said some of the bus drivers during his school years were Wilson Lawhorne, Lila Campbell, Parrish

Strickland and Carl himself, who drove a bus in his junior/senior year. Carl's teachers were Mrs. Powell who taught the first grade, Mrs. Dodd, the second grade, Mrs. Turpin taught the third grade, Mrs. Crockett the fourth grade, and Mrs. Beard, the fifth. In 1956 they built the consolidated high school and that's where Carl attended the upper grades, graduating in 1960. He added, "One time my mom got sick and I quit when I was a sophomore to help her. I had to because there was no one else to help her. It was at Christmas time and I didn't go back for the rest of that year. It's a thousand wonders that I went back and finished but my mother was the driving force for me returning and I guess I had enough foresight to know I needed to go back. Because I didn't start school until I was seven years old and then quit for a year when Mom was sick, I had just turned 20 when I graduated.

Bo Zirkle and I were among the few that graduated around there; most of my peers quit when, or before they were 16. That was the age when you could drop out and the truant officer wouldn't come looking for you."

After graduation Carl worked for about a year around home but in 1961, a man by the name of Arnie Coffey came to their house and wanted to know if Carl and Ralph would like to come and work with him on a project in northern Virginia. The project was clearing land for a water impoundment dam they were building along Goose Creek in Loudoun County.



Carl's high school graduation photo



Carl at the boarding house

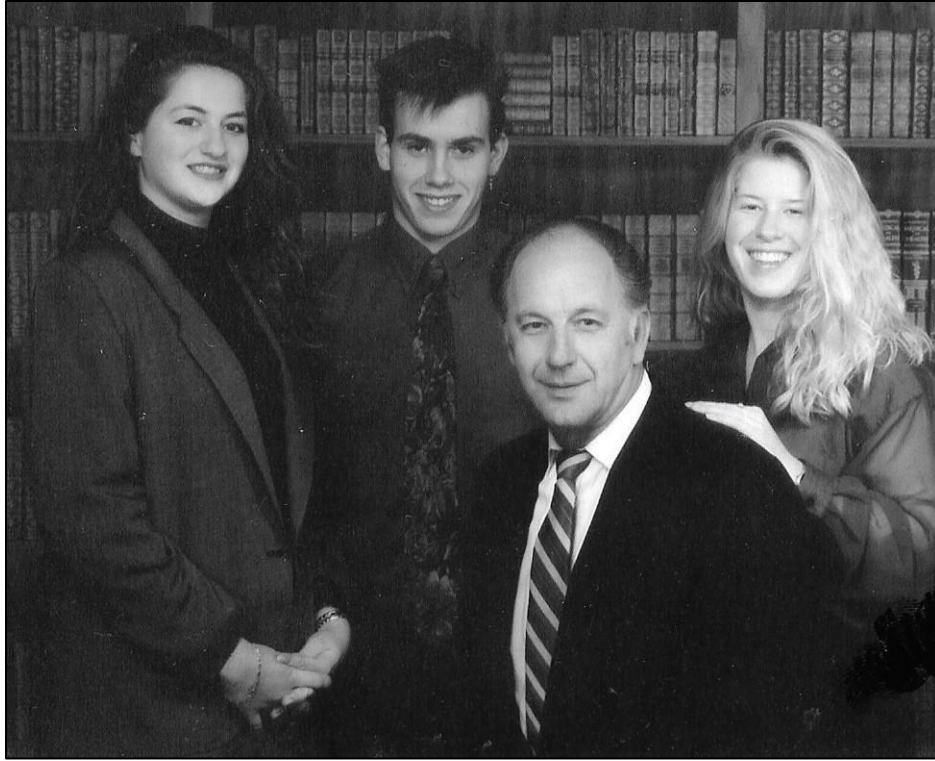
So, the two brothers and Richard Carr all left to work in northern Virginia and found lodging in a boarding house for twelve dollars a week, which Carl said included, "Breakfast, dinner and a cheese sandwich for lunch... *very thin* sliced cheese." Ralph and Richard stayed for about a

month before becoming homesick and heading back to the mountains they called home. Carl said, "I toughed it out and stayed on. I was making a dollar and twenty-five cents an hour, which was good money back then, running a chain saw cutting bushes and trees. By then I was good with a chain saw; *real* good. It wasn't long before one of the equipment operators quit and I began running a loader and a new bull dozer and got pretty familiar with them. My pay went up and before I knew it, I was the only one out there clearing the property. I cleared both sides down to where the water was going to be, about five miles long.

You didn't have to push the stumps out because when the dam was finished, they would be about 30 feet under the water. By that time Ralph and I had a GMC truck and I'd load it up with the large logs I'd cut during the week and drive home on Friday night and drive back to work on Sunday. That solved our firewood and money problems. By that time we had bought a horse and could drag wood to the house. We put a new tin roof on the house, replacing the wooden shingles, and put a tin heater in the dining room."

Carl worked on the dam project for about two years before one of the partners who owned Redd and Warren Contractors, Bill Warren, died. After his death, Bill's wife asked Carl to stay on and finish the work, which he did. By that time Mr. Redd had also died and the Warren's son, Don, had graduated from college and a new company was formed called Centerville Construction and Carl stayed on with them until October of 1963. That's when he was drafted into the Army and spent the next two years serving our country. After basic training, Carl was hoping to go to Fort Belvoir which was the engineering area of the Army where all the heavy equipment was kept. But Uncle Sam had other ideas and Carl ended up becoming a medic. When he finished his medic training he was sent to Maryland, where he spent the rest of his military career participating in "Operation White Coat," where germ warfare was studied. Carl said it was a great tour of duty; he went to work at 8:30 a.m., got off at 11:00 for lunch, went back at 1; 00 p.m. and got off at 4:30. After all the hard physical work up to that point of his life, the Army position seemed like a vacation. Carl and his buddy had new cars and since Hood College was close by, there were girls everywhere. Carl smiled as he told me, "I enjoyed my tour, let me tell you!" His pay was sixty-four dollars a month. Haircuts were a dollar, laundry was a dollar and two dollars were appropriated for other essentials, leaving him sixty dollars a month to live on. Deduct fifty dollars for the new car payment and Carl was having the time of his life on ten dollars a month. Carl said, "You could spend your last dime and still get three meals a day and clean sheets twice a week... livin' large!"

At the time Carl was in the Army in Maryland, Linda Campbell was attending college there. In earlier years Carl had worked for Linda's dad, Harold, and the young people had gone to school together. They began dating and married on June 5, 1966. They had two biological children; Laurie Alice, who was born on August 13, 1972 and Carla Elizabeth born November 20, 1974. The couple also adopted their son, Kevin, who was born on Aug. 19, 1975, when he was a year old.



Carl with his children; Carla, Kevin and Laurie

When Carl got out of the Army, he went back to northern Virginia and continued working for Centerville Construction for about a year before the company went under. But before he left, he was hired to run a track loader for the S. O. Jennings Company that installed large pipe, such as culverts and sanitation pipes. He made foreman on the pipe crew, getting a raise in salary and a truck to drive. At that time Centerville Construction was back in business under a new name, Dulles Construction, and offered Carl twice what he was making at Jennings which he couldn't turn down and he went back to work for them. Four years later that company went broke for the second time and Carl said he learned a valuable lesson in what NOT to do in the construction business. In July of 1974, Carl and his good friend and co-worker, Kevin Aiken, and five other people from Dulles met together and started their own company called Phoenix Development Corporation. Kevin and Carl became partners and have worked together for about forty-five years now. They took over the jobs that Dulles Construction had started and began getting new clients of their own, building a reputation of being honest, hard-working people. That type of business always gets noticed and Carl said before long the company started to grow and prosper. By 1985 the Phoenix Corporation had between 250 and 300 employees.



Carl's Northern Virginia Company, the Phoenix Corporation

Things were going along smoothly until early 1990 when an economic downturn began in that area. It was also at this time Carl and his wife were going through a divorce and the marriage ended in December of that year. At one point Carl said he thought they'd lose the business but he went to the First Virginia Bank and pleaded with them not to foreclose on them. Carl said, "And they didn't. They stuck with us and we pulled through. By the end of 1991 and the early part of 1992 things started turning around and the economy rebounded. With a small business loan coupled with a bank loan we were able to buy 20 acres with a large construction facility that was empty because of an earlier foreclosure." Carl said it was a perfect setup with plenty of office space as well as a huge shop with nine 60 foot bays. With this purchase, the Phoenix Corporation was pushed to a whole new level of being able to compete with the other contractors. Carl adds, "We had good workers, a good pay scale and a benefit package to keep them."



Phoenix's large fleet of dump trucks

Debbie Kibler was one of the employees hired in 1994 to take care of the paperwork for employee health benefits but left after six months because she didn't feel there was enough work to justify getting a paycheck. In the meantime, the lady doing payroll had to leave because of health reasons and Debbie was talked into coming back to take her job.

In the fall of 1994, Carl made a trip back to the mountains to attend his mother's funeral. Quincey, who died on October 6, was laid to rest next to her husband Patrick in the family cemetery along the North Fork of the Tye River. Two years later, on June 10, 1996, Carl's brother, Ralph, was buried there also. Carl and Ralph's son, Jeff, now own the homeplace together. Going back, Carl explained that originally, his grandparents lived in a house up Panel Branch but that house burned and they built the home where he was raised. After marriage, his parents lived in Charlie Coffey's cabin that is still standing and now owned by Carleton and Libby Coffey. When his grandparents died, his parents moved into the homeplace where Carl grew up.



Carl's homeplace along the North Fork

The Phoenix Company was sold in December of 2001 to a competitor and Carl said at the time of the sale, "We had 500 employees as well as four of the original seven men who started with the company. The company had numerous pieces of clearing, earth moving, pipe installation and other miscellaneous equipment, including a lot of trucks. The Lord just blessed us unbelievably."

The company did it all; building highways, laying out sub-divisions and housing developments, sewer, water and storm drainage work, laying asphalt, and curbing gutters. Debbie continued to work as the payroll secretary until September of 2003 and Carl stayed on at the company as a consultant until December 2003 when he "retired." The word retirement, I've found, does not mean quitting work, but changes to, doing the work you like.

Carl and Kevin continued their partnership in a successful mulch/compost business that Phoenix owned in northern Virginia. In years past, they had bought forty acres that backed up to the boundary fence at Dulles Airport. Part of the land was sold off but almost 26 acres was kept as a place to bring old stumps and wood to be ground up. When Phoenix Development

Corporation was sold, the sale did not include this part of the company called Loudoun Composting which took in grass clippings, yard waste and leaves from surrounding counties to be ground up. Before it, too, was sold, it employed twelve people including Carl's daughter, Laurie, the company accountant and Kevin's son-in-law, Tim Hutchison, the general manager.

When Carl officially retired in December of 2003, he decided, like so many people who were raised up in Nelson County, to move back "home" to the mountains. He looked at several places before settling on a beautiful piece of land close to Massies Mill called The Flat Farm which was established in 1820. The 200 acre farm needed some TLC and a lot of work was done before moving in, in August of 2004. Ironically, Carl also bought a hundred acres across the road that originally belonged to Walter Hoffman, the man who hired Carl to pick apples as a young man.



Carl and Debbie on their wedding day

"Oz," "Wino," "Shue Creek," "Mexico," "String Bean," "Trigger," "Bean Head," "Ugly," "Bull Rider," "Leggs," and many more. Good folks. Good Company. Good Hunters.

Carl volunteered that he's had a pretty colorful life. "I've done a lot of things and been a lot of places. I've met two Presidents; both Bushes." When asked how he got to meet the President, Carl said he was dating a Secret Service lady and he escorted her to the Inaugural Ball. "I met

On June 18, 2013, my husband Billy had the honor of marrying Carl and Debbie Kibler at their farm and the couple who had been going together for a long time, tied the knot with the beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains as a backdrop. It is obvious they are a happy couple who share their home and hospitality with those around them. When they married, the Coffey's had a combined family that includes Carl's three children as well as Debbie's two children from a previous marriage, Brad and Katie. Between them, they also have 12 grandchildren.

These days Carl and Debbie keep busy around the farm. They keep 125 brood cows and make vast amounts of hay to feed them and sell to others. They have several employees to help with the farm work and there are horses and dogs in abundance. Carl continues to enjoy the sport of bear hunting and when asked who he hunts with, I smile at familiar folks and their bear hunting nicknames; "Jethro,"

"Ellie Mae," "Polkberry," "Apple Picker,"

Robert Duvall several times and went to one of his parties. I got to meet Elizabeth Taylor and some governors and been to most of the states and to Europe a few times.” With everything he’s done, I asked Carl why he decided to move back home. His answer didn’t surprise me. “Why, there’s no place like Nelson County. It’s one of the well-kept secrets of all time. It’s such a blissful, beautiful place. Everybody waves to you with that two-finger wave. I had the best childhood ever and didn’t know we were poor. I wouldn’t change my upbringing for anything. It made good, sound, solid people. It was a good life. We found things to do. We’d go down to the river and hop rocks to see who could get the furthest without getting their feet wet or we’d go ginseng hunting. Kids now don’t know anything about nature. Nature is God’s second book. You go out in nature and there are so many things to learn.” Debbie told how Carl, as a child, would pack some food in a knapsack and take off for a week, exploring. When asked where he went, Carl smiled and said,.... “Wherever my feet would take me.”