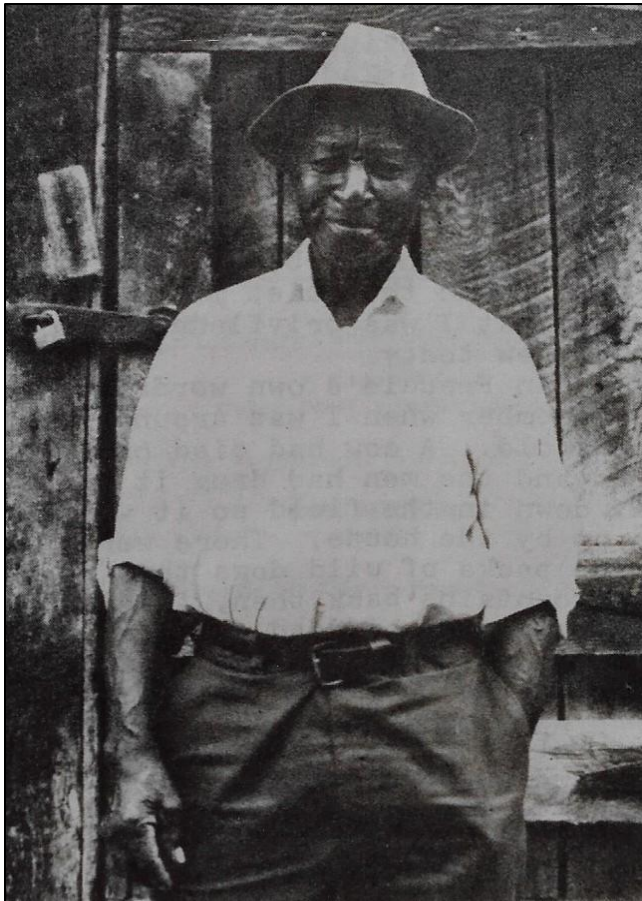


Oscar Randolph Fitch

Old Wintergreen

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Oscar Randolph Fitch at his Wintergreen home

Back in 1985, I was in Nellysford delivering the Backroads newspapers to Freddie Phillips, owner of the Valleysmont Market, when he said I ought to interview a man who worked for him by the name of Oscar Fitch. He said Oscar, who was then 91 years of age, was still working for him and other people in the area and would make a good story for the paper. Since Oscar didn't have a telephone, I drove over to his house on Glenthorne Loop to ask if he would let me talk to him about his life. I found him to be a gentle and gracious man who was more than willing to share what he knew with others.

The first thing that struck me about him was his appearance. When he told me he was 91 years of age, I honestly could not believe this correct. I felt sure that the man Freddie told me about must have been this man's father, the "elder" Fitch. Oscar himself assured me that he was the oldest Fitch still living in the Wintergreen area.

We began taking sitting quietly on the wooden steps of the old meat house located in Oscar's back yard. He said he was born on December 22, 1894 to parents, Woodson Wilson and Mariah Weeks Fitch who worked at the Phillips farm in Wintergreen. His father remarried at 78 years of age and in addition to his own natural brother and sister, Oscar also had four half-brothers and three half-sisters from his father's first marriage. Oscar himself has worked for three generations the Phillips family; Freddie (Frederick Pershing) Phillips, Sr.; his father, John Bailey Phillips; and Freddie's grandfather, Zachariah Davis Phillips. Not many can boast of an accomplishment such as that and still be working today.

Oscar, at 21 years of age, was working full-time at the large Phillips' farm known as Glenthorne when he married Leonia Turner of Louisa, Virginia. The couple set up housekeeping in a tiny house located on the farm property and lived there a long time before moving to a house a few miles away. In 1931, the Phillips family had built the farmhouse that Oscar and Leonia eventually

moved to and many years later, the Fitch's bought the white farmhouse for their own and that's where they raised their five children and then opened its doors to any of their family that needed a place to stay. Hazel Phillips, Freddie's wife, said there was no telling how many children Oscar and his wife took in to raise. The Fitch family also survived the devastating flood that occurred in August of 1969 when Hurricane Camille hit Nelson County, Virginia. Many of their neighbors weren't as lucky.

Oscar recalled his early life in the Rockfish Valley, telling how at 20 years of age he became a Christian at Elk Hill Baptist Church. "In those days, we had what was called a mourning bench and you would kneel there until you felt changed inside" explained Oscar. "We all walked to church and I remember being baptized in the Rockfish River. The church usually did their baptizing during the first Sunday after a big revival that was held each August."



Elk Hill Baptist Church where Oscar was a member

He told of how people worked from sunup to sunset back in the old days. He also told of families getting together for music and dancing when the work was done. "There was always someone who could play the banjo or French harp and we would make good music together." Hunting was just as big a sport back then as it is today. Men hunted racoons by night and squirrels by day. Oscar kept some coon dogs but did most of his hunting with Emmett Bryant who had a lot of fine dogs to his credit.

The Fitch's raised their own hogs and come December they would do their own butchering. They cured and hung the meat in the very wooden building we were sitting at and talking today. This year Oscar said he didn't raise any hogs because, "the feed got too high."

The Fitches live off the main road but Oscar said he enjoys living, “right where I’m at.” He has never had the urge to wander too far from where he was born and raised, saying instead that he has always been content with what he has. One doesn’t have to talk to him long to know he is happy with his life and that his roots go deep into the soil of the Rockfish Valley.

Oscar never learned how to drive a car so he still walks nearly everywhere he goes. “I usually walk to Valleysmont Market every day, summer and winter.” Valleysmont was the store Freddie Phillips and his family owned and operated. I asked Oscar how far away the store was from his home and he replied, “It’s two miles up and two miles back.” Talking with this elderly man I began to see why he looked sixty-five years of age instead of ninety-one.

As for his overall health, Oscar stated he is very healthy. “I’ve never had to wear a pair of glasses in my life because I just don’t need them yet. Once when I was around 71 years old, I had to go to the hospital for some bladder surgery but that didn’t keep me down for too long. I was back to work before you knew it. I guess it’s the goodness of the Lord that’s keeping me here and I am thankful to Him for it.”

Oscar still tends a big vegetable garden of his own and helps several area residents with cultivating theirs also. At the time of the interview, Oscar was still working for Freddie, spraying crops, working in the peach orchard and getting in hay when it’s needed. Long time Wintergreen resident Bernice Spencer told me she delayed building her new home until Oscar could find the time to lay the foundation, knowing if he built it, the work would be done right.

The Fitch family still cuts all their winter firewood, which is used in a woodstove to heat the house during the cold winter months. They also heat their hot water in a big iron kettle outside the back door and it was in this same kettle that Oscar recently cooked a large meal of mutton for his church picnic.



My own impression of Oscar was that he is a kindhearted, humble man who has tried to do his best in everything he’s ever done. But for a truer image of just what kind of man Oscar Fitch really is, I asked Freddie Phillips. You can always tell more about a person by what their close friends say about them rather than what they say about themselves. Freddie shed a beautiful ray of light around the quiet man I was privileged to talk to on this particular day.

Freddie said, “I remember when I was around ten years old. A cow had died on the farm and the men had drug it way off down in the field so it would not be up by the house. There were large packs of wild dogs that roamed the mountains back then, feeding on the carcasses of dead animals. Our parents told us time and time again never to go near them because they were very dangerous. But one day curiosity got the best of my brother and I and we hiked down to where

we knew the men had drug the cow. Sure enough, all those dogs were there feeding on the carcass. Before we knew what happened, the dogs saw us and headed straight for us. My brother was older and easily out-distanced me running and as I tried to keep up with him, I slipped and fell. Before I could bat an eye, the whole pack was on top of me, biting and scratching at me. I looked up and saw Oscar running toward me from where he was plowing and, in his hand, he carried the wooden paddle he used to clean the mud off the plow blade. He yelled at the dogs and literally beat all of them off me and scooped me up and carried me home. My parents were so grateful they asked Oscar to be my Godfather. That was only one incident of many in my life where Oscar deserved his title of a well-respected man. But there are a lot of other reasons why I still continue to look up to Oscar. I can honestly say that in my 65 years of living, Oscar Fitch is the only man who has kept every promise he ever made to me. His word is his bond and he is always good for it. He is the kindest, most humble Christian man I've ever met and as far as I know, he's never said or done anything bad to anyone in his whole life. I am proud to say all these things about Oscar because I know them to be true."

I believe Freddie's words are a perfect way to end the interview about the man named Oscar Randolph Fitch, whose own family affectionately called him the nickname, "Joe." In a world that seems focused on glitter and wealth, we know it's not what a man has materially that makes him successful but what he's made of on the inside that really counts. In talking with Oscar's great-nephew, Bobby Fitch, he stated that his "Uncle Joe" was an exceptionally fine man who taught family members the value of living a good life. Oscar's example shows that it is not earthly possessions that are most important to leave as a legacy, but the possessions of a Godly heart.

Note: Oscar passed away unexpectedly at his home on April 5, 1998, at 103 years of age. He was the oldest member of Elk Hill Baptist Church and was past treasurer and the oldest deacon to serve the church. He was the last member of his immediate family. He was preceded in death by his wife, Leonia, on February 28, 1987, and his five children. A service was conducted at Elk Hill Baptist Church on Friday, April 8, 1998, by Rev. Alphonso Davis and Oscar was buried in the Elk Hill Cemetery next to his beloved wife.

