

Hercy Franklin Coffey

The Inspiration of White Rock

By Buck Harris

I found this article about Hercy Coffey in some papers that Lynden “Buck” Harris sent me years ago that I never published. I am proud to run it for the Nelson County Historical Society’s Backroads Blog, along with many photos the family gave me as well as some I took in recent years. Hercy and his wife Burgess were the pillars of the White Rock community on the North Fork of the Tye River. Hercy owned and operated a grist mill, a sawmill and a small country store that everyone in that area frequented.



Hercy preparing to saw a large log

Montebello, Love, and Campbell’s Mountain would converge at the ball diamond at Love, built and maintained by Tom Coffey, for a weekend of baseball.

Oral history reveals that Hercy was an outstanding baseball player and given the opportunity could have played professionally. But by 1917, Hercy was a grown man of 20 years of age and a

One must be at least age sixty to have known, loved and revered our uncle, Hercy Coffey. To have known this kind, compassionate, and meek man one would never have forgotten the occasion.

Hercy Franklin Coffey, the son of Eli Davis and Frances Catherine (Coffey) Coffey, was born on July 9, 1895 in a log cabin on the banks of the North Fork of the Tye River in Nelson County. He was a lifetime resident of the little mountain community of White Rock.

His early youth was uneventful; attending school at White Rock when a teacher was available and doing chores around the homeplace as dictated by his mother and father.

His teenage years became more exciting as Hercy was considered by his peers to be the “Babe Ruth” or “Ty Cobb” of Nelson County. On spring and summer weekends, teenagers and even grown men from the Tye River area including Nash,

Fork Mountain, Tyro, Bald Mountain,

prime candidate when World War I came along. He was drafted into the army in October 1917 and after a brief period of training was dispatched overseas to France and into the thick of things. In 1919, when the war was over and Hercy was able to return to his loved ones, he came back without visible wounds or scars, but instead, he came back after being saturated with poisonous gas; a malady he never conquered and an illness he suffered for the rest of his short life.

Hercy courted, fell in love and married Lora Burgess Ramsey from the Bald Mountain area and they were married on April 3, 1921. They lived first with his parents at White Rock for the first couple of years. In January 1922, Burgess was with child and her time was near. She sent for her mother, Serena Ramsey, who lived on Bald Mountain, to come and be with her during her delivery. Her mother, taking a horse to ride to her daughter, had a fatal heart attack and died in route. Daughter Margie arrived without incident on January 11, 1922 as well as daughter Lura on December 24 of the same year. When her third daughter, Lorine came along on June 9, 1927, she came without incident.

Uncle Hercy and Aunt Burgess raised their family to adulthood in the little community of White Rock. Shortly after the children started arriving, Hercy built a new home on the west bank of the Tye River, dammed the river and built a race way, a grist mill, opened a small store and acquired a sawmill.



Hercy as a World War I soldier



The new Coffey home at White Rock



The mill dam on the Tye River



He is now self-supporting for not only his own family but for the other families of the Tye River community. He insured that his family nor none of his neighbors had a need that could not be satisfied.

Hercy was the most versatile individual I have ever known. Having very little formal education, he made up for this shortcoming with his ingenuity, curiosity and God-given talents. He could fix anything; millwright a sawmill or set a gristmill

Grist mill that served people on the North Fork and Love with the best of them.

As time passed, the girls grew to maturity and left their nest as nature had planned. Margie married Alonzo L. “Junior” Hatter, Lura married Johnny Steele, and Lorine married Glenn Allen. The Coffey’s knew they did not lose their daughters,’ they merely gained many more new friends and loved ones.

The entire Coffey family was the most compassionate family that one could find. In my young years, I had the opportunity to spend many a week of summer vacation with this gracious aunt and uncle. Their household was the most pleasant place to live. You would never hear a cross word spoken nor any unpleasant comment made. Everything was done with pure love and care. I have spent many an hour with Uncle Hercy fishing or merely in conversation. But never did I hear gossip, an off colored comment or joke, or a harsh word about anyone. What a constitution to have!

As far back as 1945, and yearly from then on, the Bill Ramsey clan (Burgess’s family) and some of the Andy Allen clan, met at the Coffey home at White Rock on the 15th of April for the opening day of fishing season.

In those early days, the Virginia State Fish and Game Department stocked the Tye River heavy with beautiful mountain trout. Regulations dictated that trout season was to open at daylight. But when exactly is daylight? When one can see to get to the river (perhaps with the aid of a flashlight)? By true daylight, the river was lined on both sides with up to fifty fishermen, women and kids. It was common knowledge that the



Hercy & son-in-law, Johnny Steele with a nice trout

local game warden, Austin Hill, would be arriving at the Coffey homeplace around noon when lunch was being served. So, no one was worried about the law. But Hercy never fished on opening day. He felt it was necessary for him to be the host, guide, and babysitter. He was either helping the children rig their poles, instructing the women of where and how to fish, or in general being the commander of a river full of fishermen. Hercy was one of those born fishermen that could and did, as the urge hit him or Aunt Burgess, to catch a mess of trout. He would take his fly rod and head for the river. He would carry along a couple of flies but he mostly would dig into the river bed and catch the natural baits; hellgrammites or periwinkles and in a few minutes, he would come home with a mess of fish to satisfy whatever size the crowd was to be fed.

Sometime later the gathering started to occur on the fourth Sunday of July and was then called the Coffey-Ramsey-Allen reunion. This gathering, normally about 120 people in attendance, continues to this date. Our families come together not only to partake from a huge feast set before us, but to fellowship, reminisce, admire the new babies, meet new friends and loved ones, and most of all to thank our Lord for all the blessings He had provided to us.



George Allen & daughters Holly and Brenda at the family reunion at White Rock, 1996

All of our families have fond memories of our beloved Coffey family. We were very saddened when the Lord took them away. Uncle Hercy at the tender age of 61 in 1956 and Aunt Burgess at a golden age of 91 in 1993. The original handmade kitchen table and backbench remain in the Coffey homeplace. Occasionally, I have an opportunity to again sit there and reminisce over vittles set before me. Such occasions bring back these wonderful fond memories.

Lynn's Note: A little added genealogy for Hercy is as follows:

Hercy was born on July 9, 1895 and died on May 28, 1956 at 61 years of age. He married Lora Burgess Ramsey on April 3, 1921. Burgess was born on April 28, 1902 and died on January 18, 1993 at 91 years of age. Both are buried in the Hatter graveyard on Rt. 56 where the Tye River crosses at Campbell's Creek (at the base of Campbell's Mt. Road). The graveyard is on the property of A. L. "Junior" Hatter and his wife Margie, who was Hercy's eldest daughter. Hercy's obituary states that he died unexpectedly in a local doctor's office on the night of May 28, 1956. He was a member of the White Rock Christian Church and a veteran of WWI; a Private in Co. K, 23rd Infantry, 2nd Division. Survivors include his wife, Mrs. Burgess Ramsey Coffey; three daughters, Mrs. A. L. Hatter of Tyro; Mrs. John R. Steele, Spottswood; and Mrs. Glenn Allen, Stuarts Draft; one brother, L. T. Coffey, Lynchburg; and one sister, Mrs. J. D. Taylor of Massies Mill. Funeral services will be held Wednesday at 2 p.m. At the Evergreen Christian Church, Tyro. Interment will be in the Hatter cemetery.

Hercy's father was Eli Davis Coffey, born Feb. 2, 1868 in Nelson Co. Virginia and died at the age of 74 on October 29, 1942 in Nelson County. His mother was Frances Catherine (Coffey) Coffey, born on Nov. 16, 1874 and died June 6, 1948. They were married on March 25, 1890 in Nelson Co. Both buried in the White Rock Cemetery on the North Fork of the Tye River.



Fannie & Eli Coffey at their home

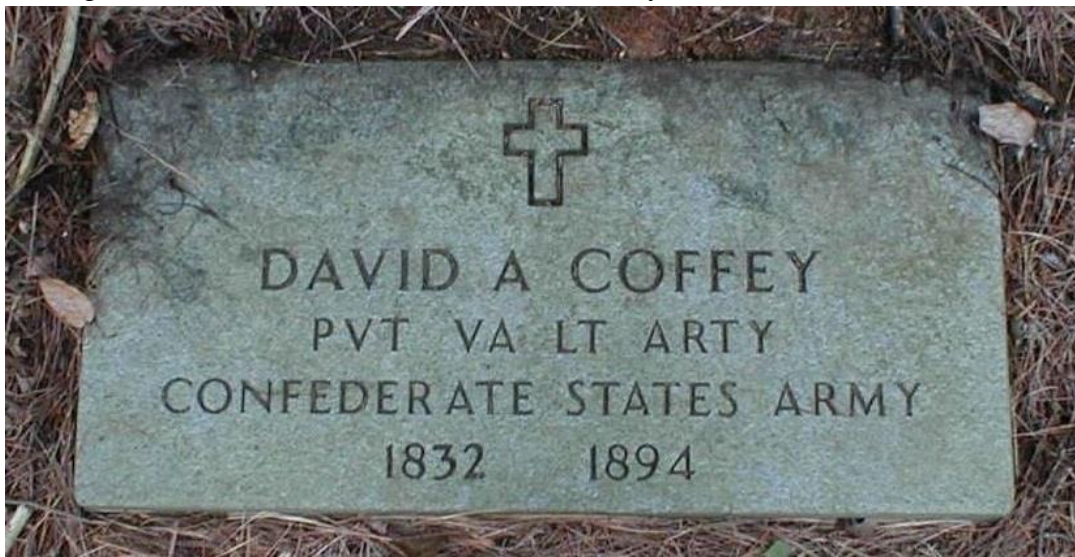


The Eli Coffey cabin at White Rock

Eli's obituary published in the Waynesboro News Virginian on November 3, 1942 states: Eli Coffey died suddenly at his home on Thursday, October 29, 1942, at noon, following an attack of coronary thrombosis according to a report by Dr. H. E. Clarke. He was the son of David Alfred and Mary Jane (Fitzgerald) Coffey. He is survived by his wife, Mrs. Frances C. Coffey; one daughter, Mrs. J. D. Taylor, Massies Mill; three sisters, Mrs. Annister Weaver, Craigsville; Mrs. Linda Bryant, Craigsville; Mrs. Belle Thompson, Roseland; and adopted son, Tom Ramsey, Montebello. The funeral was held at the home on Saturday afternoon at 1:30 o'clock with Rev.

R. T. Harris and Rev. E. W. Crist of the Christian Church in charge of the services. Flower bearers were Mrs. O. W. Taylor, Misses Vera Coffey, Hazel Taylor, Dora Mae Coffey and Mrs. A. L. Hatter and Miss Lorine Coffey. Active pallbearers were: Orion Taylor, Willard Taylor, Elwood Taylor, Ralph Coffey, Claude Coffey and Bernard Taylor.

Eli's parents were David Alfred and Mary Jane (Fitzgerald) Coffey. David was born in 1832 in Nelson Co., Virginia. He died on June 17, 1894 at 62 years of age. He was the son of Holloway Stewart and Catherine C. Fitzgerald. He served in the Confederate States Army and is listed as a Private in the Virginia Light Artillery. He married Mary Jane Fitzgerald on Nov. 10, 1858 in Nelson County. Mary Jane, was born on February 18, 1844 and died on May 25, 1925 at 88 years of age. Both buried in the White Rock Cemetery.



Hercy Coffey's grandfather's gravestone marker in the White Rock Cemetery

More Coffey Family Photographs



Early photo of the Coffey family: young Hercy on horse in center



Hercy and his sister, Zimena



Hercy and Burgess at their home



L/R -- Burgess, Hercy, Teressie and Charlie Coffey in White Rock



With grandchildren: Bobby, Bonnie, Ann & Gary



The old family homeplace in White Rock



Hercy's gravestone in the Coffey cemetery