

The Fitzgerald Family / North Fork of the Tye River

Excerpts from the Backroads writings of Preacher Billy Morris

Lynn's Note: The entire September 1984 issue of Backroads was dedicated to White Rock and surrounding areas along the North Fork of the Tye River. In that particular issue I interviewed several people who had ties to the land there; Burgess Ramsey Coffey, Lena Maddox Zirkle, and Junior and Margie Coffey Hatter. I also interviewed a newcomer to the area named Billy Morris who related how he came to be living along the North Fork. It was at this time he began to write a regular column in the Backroads, relating stories of the people and places along the North Fork. Through his writings much history was preserved, especially about the Fitzgerald family who lived there for many generations. Billy was a preacher from the Norfolk area who ended up purchasing the old Mitchell Fitzgerald home and property that had been in the Fitzgerald family for at least six generations when he bought it. He began holding services in his home and many of the native mountain people who attended these in-home services became Christians through Billy Morris's preaching of the gospel. Soon "Preacher Billy" became a well-known individual in that area and is the man responsible for starting Sand Springs Baptist Church in Sherando and Cornerstone Baptist Church, located at the intersection of Route 56 and Harper's Creek, both of which continue to hold services each week. Preacher Billy endeared himself to the local population and when he passed away on May 1, 1987, it left a large void in the hearts of those who loved him. He left his mark not only as a humble Christian servant but also as a local historian for the North Fork. We miss him still...



Cornerstone Baptist Church



Sand Springs Baptist Church



“It Got A Hold on Us”

By Preacher Billy Morris

“We had never taken such a vacation before. The time was the summer of 1972 and the ad was in our large Norfolk newspaper under, “Vacation for Rent.” The description was simply, “Cottage on a mountain stream in the Blue Ridge.”

Naturally some doubts plagued us as to whether we had been foolish to rent this “pig in a poke” for a whole week. But honestly, before sunset of the first day, all our fears were laid to rest. We fell in love with the little spot on the North Fork of the Tye River.

The river itself was the clincher. What a song it sang at night as we slept under a blanket in mid-summer. In the daytime it was our chief recreation area. That week, and at least once a year thereafter, we built a dam between the white cottage where we lived and Mr. and

Mrs. Junior Hatter’s cabin just a holler down the way. Oh, what happy, carefree hours my children, my grandson Ethan and I have passed in that clean cold water. Yes, we got our bath and had our fun all at the same time. Then we saw the people at the other cabin when they had an outside fire and much smoke going under an old washtub. For a while we steered clear of the mountain folk. But at last, our curiosity bested us and we ventured over to their yard. They were canning beans outside as many people here still do. We got an even better surprise though; they had a table full of food on the covered porch. That day we got our first taste of homemade coconut cake. When I returned to the swimming hole to tell my “sweet-toothed daughter,” she wanted me to go back with her so she could get a slice of that cake! After that day we always made our way down to their cabin when we saw the bean canners building their fire.

Ten years later we were able to buy Mitchell Fitzgerald’s old homestead. Here Rueben, Marshall and Mitchell have in turn lived, reared their families, and served their God. We ask your prayers that we may always be worthy of their heritage and of Heaven’s blessing. The winding dirt road that goes from Highway 56 at Nash, up to White Rock is number 687. We like to say, “Route 687, closest thing to heaven!” For sure, the Lord has included a lot of His best handiwork on our road; the Tye River leaping and shouting past rocks and boulders as it flows. First it is on the left, then on the right and then back again to the left once more as the road winds and climbs ever higher toward Montebello and the sky. Yes, this place got a hold on us some twelve years ago and that grip has only tightened with time.”



The Fitzgerald homeplace & Wildcat Creek on the North Fork

“The Creek”

Taken from the July 1985 Backroads

Maybe some of you are as fortunate as I am and live right beside a clear, little stream flowing down out of the mountains. Our creek is exactly nineteen steps from the back-porch door. You see, I just went out and stepped it off. They were long steps because I want it to sound like a short distance. It is.

We do not know for sure that our creek is “Wildcat Creek” but someone told that was its name and that name sounds just right. So, if it wasn’t the name in the old days, it’s the new name!

Not one person lives by Wildcat Creek now except the Morris’s. Once the Pulaski Campbell family lived high upon Fork Mountain, near its springs. But the elder Campbells have long since been dead and the old trail that comes down from their homeplace has almost disappeared. According to Mrs. Burgess Coffey, that trail entered the main road right here by our yard.

It seems like yesterday that I took my first drink of this good cold water from the creek. It was back in the early 1970s when my son Brad was only a toddler and he is now seventeen years old. We were vacationing about a half-mile up the road and walked over here to visit and have a prayer with Mitchell and Ella Fitzgerald. Mr. Mitchell walked to the creek past Ella’s flower bed and gave Brad and me a drink of water from a jar.

Little did I know how many drinks I would someday take from that wonderful creek. Ella died several years ago but her flowers are just now putting out their blossoms. There are sweet peas,

daylilies, and phlox and each year they offer their sweet tribute to Ella or maybe even Mitchell's mother, Cora, who also lived here.

Lura Coffey Steele told me recently how as a youngster she used to come here and help Mrs. Cora wash clothes. She said they rinsed them by a flat rock. The rock is there yet and I stand on it dozens of times each day. You see, we still dip buckets of water from the creek for drinking, working, and washing, just nineteen steps from the door.

Being a preacher, I MUST not end without telling of another stream. It is a million times more wonderful than any earthly stream. We read of it in the final chapter of Revelation 22:1-2. It is called the River of Life and it flows from the throne of God. I hope we can all see that beautiful stream one day. Through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord, we shall."

"There'll Be No Dark River There"

Taken from the December 1985 Backroads

"Today has been so beautiful for mid-November. Right now, I am sitting on the front porch of my home which was also the home of Mitchell Fitzgerald. I am thinking of many things and looking out over the Tye River and Wildcat Creek. I wish all of you could have this porch for just one afternoon and feel as close to God as I do in this moment.

Last week I saw Mrs. Teressie Coffey. She is now 98 years old and has such a clear memory. She always has so many things to tell me. I am her preacher so it is a real turnabout for a member to teach the preacher and we ought never to forget that!

What I learned was that her grandfather, Spotswood Fitzgerald, was Reuben Fitzgerald's brother. Reuben and Spotswood's father was Robert Woodson and their grandfather, Bartlett Hawkins Fitzgerald. That takes one back well past the Revolutionary War since Bartlett was born in 1759. I didn't know about Bartlett before talking to Mrs. Teressie so now I can trace this farm back six generations; Bartlett Hawkins, Robert Woodson, Reuben Pendleton, Marshall Hill, Mitchell Wayne and Mitchell's daughter, Lois Alma Fitzgerald. I feel like I live in a hallowed place.



I took a walk down to Hatter's store and stopped to look up the hill where the North and South Forks of the Tye River meet. Mrs. Burgess Coffey says there is a graveyard there and that is where Preacher Riley Fitzgerald is buried. Johnny Coffey of Love once told me about Riley Fitzgerald singing, "There'll Be No Dark River There" and how he was touched and blessed by his singing. I could not sing that particular song but I sang for Johnny, Riley and the Lord, "Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly, while the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is high." Yes, Mr. Johnny, we know that in the land where Preacher Riley has gone, there is no dark river there called death.

“Remembering a Good Man”

Taken from the November 1985 Backroads

Tomorrow will be Friday, October 4, 1985 and a lot of my family members will be coming for a visit to celebrate my birthday on Sunday. Also, on that day we will be celebrating Sand Springs Baptist Church's homecoming and we are expecting a large crowd for the service, dinner-on-the-grounds and singing afterwards.

Yet here I sit alone in this old farmhouse tonight. My mind is thinking on things as I get this little breather before all the activities start.

Fifty years ago tonight Mr. Marshall Fitzgerald might have been sitting with his thoughts in this very room. He would have been sixty years old. Mr. Marshall's grave is up on the mountain here on the farm. After his death, his son Mitchell owned the farm. Mitchell is now elderly and lives in the rest home in Roseland. After he went to live there, his daughter, Lois, sold the homeplace to us. Even before Marshall lived here, his father Reuben and his grandfather Woodson lived on the land.

Seems like tonight my thoughts were on Marshall. I never met him for he died in 1957; long before I visited the community of White Rock. I have heard much of Mr. Marshall though. He was, in fact, an important person around the neighborhood. He taught school up at the one-room schoolhouse for a few terms but he was mostly remembered as the local song leader. People have told me he led the singing at funeral services when people died and were buried in the White Rock graveyard. Margie Hatter and Pete Taylor said they are still moved when they hear the song "Shall We Gather at the River."

Another memorial to Mr. Marshall is the many piles of rocks spread over the woods on the farm when the land was cleared. When Marshall moved rocks, he did not merely throw them here and there. He stacked them in neat walls. Some of these walls are as much as eight or ten feet long and four to five feet tall. To me they are pretty standing in the quiet woods. He must have been a hard worker and I think he liked things to look orderly and neat.

Marshall went into eternity from this very room where I am writing, or so I'm told. But I am not in a sad frame of mind tonight, rather I am happy. Like Mr. Marshall and everyone else, "My times are in God's hands." Psalm 31:15. I'm sure Marshall Fitzgerald lived such a life. The Psalmist said, "The memory of the righteous is blessed," and I say "Amen." He was a good man.

“We Keep on Hoping”

Taken from the February 1985 Backroads

The sky is very grey and heavy looking this early January morning. They say we are going to get snow today so before daylight I was up, bringing in many armloads of wood to the back porch. I will sit down and wait to see if it really is going to snow. My son left for school, full of hope that it will. I hope it will not!

We all hope. Hope for health, wealth, and happiness. Hope, like faith and love is a gift from God. I had a touching experience just the other day. I had walked up the mountain here on our farm to the old Fitzgerald graveyard. It is now shrouded in deep woods. Even the path has to be searched for. Most of the graves are marked with field rocks or not at all. Just a few have engraved stones but one caught my eye. It is the grave of Reuben Fitzgerald's seventeen-year-old daughter, Melissa who was buried in 1870. Upon inquiring from older people in the area, I have pieced out a simple story. This young girl was in love and hoped to be married back in 1870. But alas, her hopes did not come true, for eternity claimed her. She left her young sweetheart behind and later on he took up his life again and married another.

Though her hopes on earth never came to be, surely, she is happy in that Blessed Land for her gravestone reads, “She died as she lived; a Christian.” In this new year we all have hopes. Let us pray that the good hopes of mankind may move nearer to fulfillment in 1985 by the grace of God.

“It Cost Me a Walk”

Taken from the March 1985 Backroads

Last month I wrote an article in Backroads about hope. In it I was telling the story of a young girl who lived and died on this very farm well over a hundred years ago.

The story has been handed down from generation to generation. Thus, it has come to my ears and they perked up when I heard the story. I love to hear old tales about our area of the mountains, especially those about the old farm where we now call home.

In writing last month's story, it suddenly dawned on me I didn't remember the girl's name. So, before I could finish, it was necessary to lay down my pen and walk up to the old graveyard this cold day in January. I hit the trail up the mountain and, in the graveyard, I found the simple stone that read, “Melissa D. Fitzgerald, daughter of Reuben P. and Amelia H. Fitzgerald, Born March 8, 1853 - Died August 18, 1870. She died as she lived; a Christian.”

When I was back in my own warm kitchen it felt mighty good. This little piece of information from the gravestone of a young girl was worth the trek in the cold. With her name and dates, I could finish writing the story of Melissa, who sat on the porch of this old homestead and sewed her wedding dress. It was a dress she never got to wear, for at the age of seventeen years, five months, and ten days, Melissa died of typhoid fever and was called into eternity.

Yes, it cost me a walk up the mountain but it was worth it.

**Lynn's Note: On the morning of October 15, 2020, Billy and I drove over to the North Fork to see if we could find the Fitzgerald graveyard and take photos for the Bartlett Hawkins Fitzgerald articles. The autumn leaves were swirling down and the forest floor was damp from a recent rain. We parked our truck at the wide spot in the road where we were told the trail to the cemetery started. Walking up the steep ridge through the woods, I noticed a lot of creeping cedar growing underfoot but was looking for telltale signs of wild periwinkle which usually grows close to old graveyards. Billy found it first and as I came up to the flat area on the side of the ridge, there was the periwinkle covering the ground. Three large rockpiles directly behind the graves and a thick rock wall snaking up the side of the mountain told of a family who lived on the land and cleared the surrounding area. Billy remarked that at one time, cornfields probably dotted the gently sloping land surrounding the cemetery. Six readable tombstones as well as some plain fieldstones dotted the leaf-covered landscape. I wondered if perhaps these fieldstones marked the graves of Bartlett and his son Robert Woodson, since there is no record of their final resting place, other than Teressie Coffey's oral recollection that they were buried in a Fitzgerald graveyard along the North Fork. Since the homeplace of Mitchell, Marshall and Rueben Fitzgerald was located down the mountain to the right of the cemetery, it may very well be the earlier Fitzgerald family members resting place also. I thought it a perfect place; with the mountains rising high all around and the rushing waters of the Tye River just below, the Fitzgerald's picked a serene and most beautiful spot to sleep away the generations.*