

Living History Letters

These letters, sent in to the Backroads newspaper in the 1980s, were written by family members of the families they were writing about. There is so much genealogical information and oral history stories passed down through the generations that I thought I would share them on the Backroads blog for those who might have missed them the first time around.

Dear Lynn,

When we returned to our second home in Florida after spending the holidays at our home in Lynchburg, Virginia, I had two copies of *Backroads* waiting for me, thanks to my sister Louise Anderson who gave me a subscription in addition to my own.

I enjoyed Mr. W. P. Hite's letter very much. I know Mr. Hite and his brother Ralph and his sister Ethel, who married my wife's uncle. However, there are a few things I would like to add.

My father ran a general merchandise store from 1914 until he passed away in 1953. There were several other merchants during that time and since then. To name a few, there was P. L. Robertson, who was also the post master. "Dock" Powell, J. J. Campbell who was my wife's father, and Homer Anderson.

Mr. Bob Booth ran the blacksmith shop and my grandfather, Wade Fitzgerald, ran a gristmill next to his shop. Across the road was another gristmill that was operated by my grandmother's brother, J. B. Harvey. My grandmother was Nellie Harvey Fitzgerald.

I can remember my great-great-grandparents, McDowell and Jennie Fitzgerald. My great-grandmother would bake cornbread pones and I enjoyed eating them right from the hearth. She also smoked a clay pipe.

The Model "T" Ford car Mr. Hite mentioned in his story belonged to my grandfather, Wade Fitzgerald. He nicknamed it "Brass Head" because of its brass trim. I would help him polish the brass which consisted of two rods running from the front fender up to the top of the windshield, two brass kerosene lamps on each side of the windshield, and brass trim around the radiator.

We had a doctor whose last name was Drake and Dr. Drake had a room in the home of Mr. and Mrs. J. Y. Anderson.

There is so much more I could tell, however, and I may write more later. We really enjoy the *Backroads* newspaper since a lot of the people mentioned in the newspaper are related to us and others that we know.

Sincerely,

N. L. Farris
Fort Pierce, FL

Dear Lynn,

I appreciate so much the article you did on Oscar Fitch that was reprinted in a recent issue of *Backroads*. I missed the article when it was originally published in 1985.

Oscar was a neighbor of ours and I have known him all my life. I was born and grew up on the farm just down the road and around the bend, south of Oscar's house. My father owned property that joined Oscar's property on the south. A couple of years ago, just before his 93rd birthday, Oscar, my brother-in-law, John Thomas and I walked up on that hill south of his house to locate the property line between our land. Oscar seemed to be in better physical condition than either of the two of us! He is, indeed, a remarkable man.

Lynn, if you have crossed over Route 151 from Route 664 (Reid's Gap/Beech Grove Road), it turns into a gravel road on the east side that becomes Route 627. The house where I was born and grew up is about a quarter-mile south of Oscar Fitch's property. The house is about to fall down now; a casualty of Hurricane Camille that hit in August of 1969. The property is on the west side of the road. I was visiting with my mother the night of the storm and was in the house when it hit. It was some kind of experience!

Perhaps you are aware that the Rockfish Valley School at Greenfield is having a 50th Anniversary celebration in May of this year (1989). My high school graduating class was the first class to be graduated in the new facility so our class is being featured in the celebration. Eight of the nine who graduated are still alive. One boy, "Cubby" Hughes, gave his life in World War II. I have been contacted by a member of the planning committee, Mrs. Robert Rittenhouse, and you might be interested in contacting her for some material to use in *Backroads* concerning this event.

Sincerely,
Thomas Foster
Weatherford, OK

***Lynn's Note:** I have to agree with Tom on what a remarkable man Oscar Fitch was. When I first interviewed him in 1985, he was a few months short of 92 years of age and still walking two miles to work and two miles back home each day. He looked like a very physically fit man in his early seventies and I found it hard to believe he was in his nineties. I found Oscar to be a very humble, quiet Christian man who endeared himself to those living in and around the (old) Wintergreen and Nellysford communities. I plan to feature him in an upcoming article in the Backroads blog.*

Dear Lynn,

Reading the *Backroads*, I feel as if you are almost my next-door neighbor.

I just want you to know there is one left that went to the old log Snead School. At age five I started school there. My grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. James Brown, owned the land that came up to the Dunkard Church in Love. That was the church we attended. I had two sisters and one brother but they are all deceased now. I was the youngest and I am now 83 years of age.

My father died when I was fifteen months old and my mother took us children back to Love. My two oldest sisters were born about a half-mile from the church. There was a lane you turned in right by the church which led back to our home. I expect you can still see the print of our driveway, even now. After my daddy's death, our grandparents built us a house a little ways down Back Creek. Our house burned down after we left from up there. We have been away many years. The old Snead home was still standing but Johnny and Nin Coffey, who used to live there, had built a new house over nearer the creek. I can still picture all those places whenever I read the *Backroads*.

My brother and I were born one mile up the mountain from Vesuvius, just around the curve below Narrow Passage School. We were the children of Johnny and Kate Humphries. Our grandparents lived up on a hill just after you went around the bend.

Leonard Hewitt married my oldest sister and Guy Hewitt built his house where our house once stood. I have never heard my grandparent's name (Brown) mentioned in the *Backroads*. My grandmother Brown was a midwife and she delivered most of the babies in those days. I can still remember sitting on the front porch with my grandfather the day Gladys Snead was born. We could see the Snead house just as plain as day, just down the mountain.

I would love to just sit down and talk with you. I knew everybody from Love to Vesuvius and have drank water from Ida Sorrell's spring many times when our mother would take us on a walk to Vesuvius. We would start from our home in Love, and would walk across the mountain by Tom Coffey's place down to White Rock. Then we'd walk up the Tye River before going down the mountain towards Vesuvius. They sure were hard days but neighbors were good to my mother and we'd stop by for a rest along the way.

I am enclosing a check for \$10.00 to renew my *Backroads* subscription. I sure do like reading it and know so many people you write about, by name.

Sincerely,
Bettie Curtis
Chesapeake, Virginia

This letter is addressed to Bettie Curtis of Chesapeake, Virginia, who wrote in last month with a letter telling how she and her family used to walk to Vesuvius from Love. It is from Eva Coffey of Love, who wanted her to know how much she enjoyed Bettie's memories.

Dear Bettie,

I saw in the *Backroads* how you were saying something about your homeplace. Yes, I can remember where it was and also the church you spoke about, which was located down the road from where I live now. I went to church there some, too. I remember your mother, Pearl, for she was my teacher at Snead School. My father joined the church there and I can remember one Sunday my family went home with your mother and father for dinner and she had custard pies for dessert and they were so good! I can still see the road that went back to your grandparent's house from the main road. My husband is Forest Coffey and you said you all came by Tom Coffey's place on your way to Vesuvius. That was my husband's homeplace and he said he remembers that, too. We really enjoyed reading about you all in the *Backroads*.

Eva Coffey
Love, VA

Dear Lynn,

I thoroughly enjoyed Mrs. Seaman's article on the Hampton Fauber family. I wanted to write a story about her father.

When I was a boy, I was at the railroad station in Vesuvius where my father (G. A. Graves) was the agent. Mrs. Seaman's father had a young bull calf (about 500 pounds) shipped to Vesuvius in a crate. Mr. Fauber put a rope on him and opened the crate to walk him up the mountain, home. The bull had become mad at the proceedings and for quite a time I didn't know who was going to take who up the mountain! Mr. Fauber, being a large, strong man, finally won the battle!

I have known a lot of Mrs. Seaman's family, especially her brothers, and a lot of her cousins. Having helped my father at the station I knew many people from around Montebello and the surrounding territory and I enjoy reading about them in *Backroads*.

Everett Graves
Raphine, VA

Dear Lynn,

I received my *Backroads* for this month and enjoyed it so much. My sister couldn't have given me a better Christmas gift than the *Backroads*.

I was born and raised in Montebello and Wade and Nellie Fitzgerald were my grandparents. He used to have a corn mill in Montebello and he would grind every day but Friday, for that was the day he'd grind buckwheat. There were two other stores in Montebello back then, and my father, Albert Farris, ran one of them. He and my mother married in 1914. My father came here from Syria, Virginia, as a peddler and used to stay with my grandparents. My mother is still living and will be 90 years old in September. Her name is Ollie Fitzgerald Farris.

The stores in Montebello were Farris' Store and Robertson's Store. Mr. Robertson kept the post office in his store and the cannery was owned by Bob Allen. The last time I heard from him he was preaching up at Mountain Top Church in Love.

We were a big family and we had a lot of love. My parents got married in Washington D.C. They drove there in a horse and buggy!

I used to go to Mount Paran Baptist Church in Montebello and all my family is buried in the cemetery there. Our father and grandfather made sure we went to church every Sunday. My granddaddy, Wade Fitzgerald, used to teach Sunday School on Fork Mountain back during the Depression days. I was pretty young but I can remember that our home burnt down. All of our good and kind neighbors helped my daddy to rebuild our home which is still standing today. I think Wilson Grant owns it now.

Thanks, Lynn, for your newspaper. It brings back so many good memories.

Novella Farris Willey
Georgetown, DE

Dear Lynn,

I was born in Love, Virginia, in December of 1927 and I am still very interested in the people who are still living there. My parents, Lum and Jane Allen Hatter told me over and over during my childhood that I had been born in "Love." There seemed to be very fond memories for them of Meadow Mountain. Looking back, and remembering the look on their faces, I now know that since that was one of the very good parts of their lives. They handed down those memories to their little girl who was born in the place they loved so well. They wanted me to never forget it.

I am reminded of an incident during the 1940s when I was seventeen years old. I was visiting with my Uncle Frank Hatter and Aunt Lottie, and of course, their children. One of them told me about a prisoner of war camp where the Germans were being held. I was asked if I wanted to "see" the Germans. Of course, I was very curious, but afraid, also, since I didn't know what Germans looked like. My amazement knew no bounds when I saw the "enemy." Why, they looked just like we did! I stood back as far as I could, but after a few minutes I realized that they were behind a fence and couldn't hurt me. I gradually moved closer, because I wanted to see their faces. I saw the faces of young men who were more scared of us than we were of them. One in particular looked at me so intently, with piercing blue eyes, that I've never been able to forget the experience. Reading your account of how Hans Schages was a prisoner at that camp, brought the whole thing back. I am reasonably certain that Hans was in that camp that very day. When will all nations learn to stop killing their young men?

Our family moved to West Virginia in 1936 so Papa could work in the coal mines. I never learned to like that state very much. As a child, when I think about the "good times," it will be things like walking through the woods, playing in Irish Creek where Mama "baptized" me one day as we played. She was young and full of fun.

I wish I could organize my thoughts and "snapshots" of my mind into some kind of sequence that makes more sense to me. It's frustrating to not know exactly where I was when I was small. Love, Meadow Mountain, Irish Creek, Duck Pond. All these places flash by, as well as Montebello and Vesuvius.

Vesuvius is where I believe we caught the train to West Virginia in 1936. It was mid-winter and the snow was so deep in the mountains Pap took feed sacks and wrapped them around our feet so we could walk down to the truck that would take us to the depot. Although none of us kids had ever actually seen a train, we had talked about nothing else for weeks. I can't remember how long we waited before we heard the train coming. It's one thing to *hear* a train, but, for a seven-year-old child born and bred in the mountains where you saw nobody but each other and a few neighbors, *seeing* one is entirely different matter! I took off...running away from that train as fast as my legs would take me, with Mama right behind me yelling, "Come on, we're going to miss it!" One of the other kids caught me and got me calmed down. We got on the train and hadn't been on it for just a short while until we all got sick on our stomachs.

We finally arrived in Bramwell, West Virginia and I met cousins I didn't know I had. It seemed like half the people on Bramwell Hill, where Grandma and Grandpa Allen lived, were kinfolks on

Mama's side. They were so nice to us. We spent a few days with Mother's parents and then rented a house from a man by the name of John D. Harmon. We found out later that John D. had been in the "pen" for killing his wife and her lover. They were in the Harmon house when he killed them! They said you could still see the blood on the floor where the murders took place. We used to sneak down to the house and look through the windows to see if we could see it. The house was never lived in after the murders and it was said John D. got off with a light sentence because of the circumstances.

My life has not been the same since we left Virginia and I wonder what would have happened if Papa hadn't sold the house at Love. At least, I think they owned that place, but I'm not sure.

Both Papa and Mama are gone now, and I have one brother who still lives in West Virginia. When I want to go "home" now, it is always to the Shenandoah Valley. I love her with a deep and abiding love, and I still feel like a big part of that country.

Sincerely,
Margie Hatter Laing

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