

Mill Creek School



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This story about the Mill Creek School first appeared in the September 1987 issue of Backroads that was devoted solely to several of the one-room mountain schoolhouses in Nelson County. Although most of the former students are gone now, they provided a detailed history of their childhood school before they passed away. Many thanks to those who graciously shared their memories and photographs of this early school.

The schoolhouse at Mill Creek lies deep in a hollow between Montebello and Dowell's Ridge and is in remarkably good condition despite its age. It now belongs to the Cash family who, in recent years, built on an addition that comfortably holds everyone attending family and school reunions held there.

In writing the history of this school, I talked with Ethna Faber Seaman and her sister, Mary Fauber Seaman, who both live in Montebello and they provided insight into what the early years at Mill Creek were like.



Ethna & Mary Seaman.

In 1904, Hampton Fauber, Ethna and Mary's father, decided the area needed a good school to educate their children. The county said it would provide one hundred dollars to help fund the new structure, and Mr. Fauber took it upon himself to furnish the rest of the materials and labor to build it. This was the second of two schools named Mill Creek. Like Ivy Hill, the first school was constructed of logs and served the generations of children before Ethna and Mary. The first Mill Creek was located down the hill from the present building, closer to the spring the children used for drinking water.

First-grade students started off with a primer and went on to the McGuffey readers. These early schoolbooks were of a high quality, and there was a good moral to all the stories. The adventures of Will and Nell delighted many a child learning to read. A small brass bell was rung in the mornings to signify the beginning of class. When the pupils were settled in their seats, they said the Pledge of Allegiance, read a passage from the Bible, and recited the Lord's Prayer. Then they sang some type of hymn or a patriotic tune, such as "My Country 'Tis of Thee." Mary laughed and said that they wore this particular song very thin during the year. The subjects of math, spelling, geography, English, and history were taught, but Ethna said they also studied physiology, which is now called anatomy. "I got my best grades in that subject," recalled Ethna.

Schoolteachers of the day were paid about forty dollars a month, and part of that paycheck went for room and board if they didn't live in the near vicinity. There were a number of different teachers over the years. Doris Fitzgerald, Della Fauber, Phineas Abbot, "Aunt" Sally Hite, and Ethel Fauber, to name a few. The ladies remembered that Ethel Fauber always kept a switch handy for any needed discipline. But by far, a blind man by the name of Arnie Meeks was the children's favorite. Even Ethna herself taught for one term at Mill Creek. She did this after all her area neighbors signed a petition stating that they wanted her to teach their children. Along with the studying and more serious aspects of the classroom came the funny anecdotes, which are a part of every childhood memory. Mill Creek had its share, such as the tale of two little girls who had been caught talking and sent to the corner for punishment. Each of them had to stand in the tiny corners next to the flue pipe near the woodstove. As one of them stood doing her time, she noticed some writing scratched into the wall. She inched closer to the other girl's ear and whispered, "Lookie here, the devil's been figuratin' on the wall!" Birch twigs were cut on a regular basis and used by the children as toothpicks. In one instance, Burgess Coffey was called up to the front of the class to figure a problem. While her back was turned, Ethna grabbed her birch twig and chewed it down to a stub before laying it back on her desk. When Burgess returned to her seat and saw the frayed

stick, it struck her so funny that she got to laughing and couldn't quit. The teacher was young and had a good sense of humor, so infractions of this type were rarely disciplined.

Mill Creek closed in the 1940s when newer, more modern county classrooms were instituted. But the treasured memories of former students will be talked about, kept alive, and passed down to the next generation for years to come.

In the November 1984 issue of *Backroads*, I featured a reunion of the former students of Mill Creek. Twenty years later, another reunion was held and was featured in the November 2004 edition. The men and women from the first reunion were mostly deceased, including Ethna and Mary Seaman. But students who had attended at a later date came out in abundance and provided still more remembrances. The following story has been taken from these two reunions.

Margie Coffey Hatter called me one brisk October morning in 1984 and told me to get dressed and come over to her house in Tyro. The reason for this trip: to attend a reunion of the former students of Mill Creek School. We drove in Margie's jeep up the narrow dirt road of the North Fork toward Dowell's Ridge, where the Mill Creek schoolhouse was located. The aromas of fresh-baked biscuits, country ham, and potato salad filled the vehicle. As we bounced along the rutted road, I asked Margie questions about the early school and the people we were going to meet. I was not prepared for the nostalgic sight as we rounded the last bend, and the schoolhouse came into view. There sat a pristine white building atop a little knoll, a plume of smoke was curling from the chimney. Walking up to the front porch, I noticed the door had a large wooden spool for a doorknob and a worn piece of wood that served as a door latch. I had to stop for a moment just to imagine all the tiny fingers that had opened that very door over the years of its existence. As we walked inside, laughter and happy banter filled the room. People were busy laying out a huge amount of food on the long tables set up in one corner of the schoolhouse. One by one, Margie introduced me to each of the men and women who had come to that first reunion. Besides Margie's sister, Lura Steele, their mother Burgess Coffey, and Burgess' sister Lena Steele, there was Hattie Grant, Wilson and Ethna Seaman, Maxie and Mary Seaman, and Inez White. Also in attendance were Rockwell Harris and Preacher Billy Morris. Together we enjoyed the covered-dish dinner and later sang hymns around the warmth of the woodstove. It was during the course of this special day that I talked to Ethna and Mary about the history of Mill Creek. The day was perfect and one I have never forgotten. When Doris Cash (Ethna's daughter) called to say there would be a second reunion at the school, I greeted the news with great joy and much anticipation. A lot of changes had occurred at Mill Creek since 1984. Most of the people who had come that year were gone. Ethna had left the old school to her only child, Doris, and her husband Ralph. They had added a large, two-story addition off the main room, complete with indoor plumbing.



**1987 Mill Creek Reunion:
Left to Right-Mary Seaman, Lena Steele, Hattie Grant, Burgess Coffey,
and Ethna Seaman.**

The second Mill Creek School reunion was held on August 22, 2004. Again, I talked with many of the former students, who shared their memories of the early school. Vivian Bradley said that Lewis Bradley had cut wood for the stove to heat the new school but she could remember that the first log schoolhouse, built in the 1800s, was still standing in 1928 when she was a student.

That first schoolhouse was a small, square, wooden structure that was formerly used as a chicken coop. Vivian's grandmother and her father had attended the earlier school, along with Oather Bradley and Clayborn Fauber. She was kind enough to share a list of teachers who taught at the new school from 1921 until 1940, and school reports from 1921-22 and 1934-35 with the students listed.

“Roll Call”

The report for 1921-22 at the new school states there were twenty-six pupils and only nine desks. The teacher was Mrs. Nellie A. Stevens, forty-eight years old. She did not attend high school or “normal” school. The students listed in alphabetical order are

BOYS

Edward Allen
Willie Bartley
Kermit Bartley

GIRLS

Ruby Allen
Glenna Allen
Hazel Allen

Aubrey Bartley	Thelma Bartley
Emory Bradley	Della Bartley
Mandred Fitzgerald	Nellie Bartley
Leonard Fitzgerald	Kelsie Bartley
Donald Maddox	Lois Bradley
Allen Maddox	Katie Fauber
Herman Maddox	Sallie Fauber
Troy Fauber	Elta Fauber
Kenneth Ramsey	Teresa Fitzgerald
	Irene Maddox
	Lena Maddox

School Report 1934-1935

Mr. Kidd was Superintendent of Nelson county schools at this time and frequently came to Mill Creek to listen to the children read and recite. The school was open 160 days a year with five and one-half hours of instruction per day. There were six boys and fifteen girls registered for the term.

Dennis Allen	Manley Fitzgerald	Irene Allen	Agnes Fauber	Elizabeth Fitzgerald
Glenn Allen	Saylor Fitzgerald	Helen Bradley	Marian Fauber	Marie Fitzgerald
Gorman Allen	Agnes Allen	Iva Bradley	Mildred Fauber	Doris Hatter
Maury Falls	Louise Allen	Vivian Bradley	Lorean Falls	Missouri Ramsey

Early Teachers at Mill Creek School

1921-1922: Mildred Mahone
 1923-1924: Alma Morris
 1924-1925: Ethna Fauber (married Wilson Seaman)
 1925-1926: Mary K. Duncan
 1926-1927: W. E. Cunningham (minister at Brethren Church in Montebello)
 1927-1928: W. E. Cunningham
 1928-1929: Mrs. Beale/Miss Marie Parrish
 1929-1930: Mary Elizabeth Scarborough
 1931-1932: Persis Saunders
 1932-1933: Pauline Conner
 1933-1934: Annie Harvey
 1934-1935: Anora Martin
 1935-1936: Sallie Lincoln
 1936-1937: Genevieve Monroe
 1937-1938: Nina Beach (married Averil Doyle)
 1939-1940: Hilda L. Mann (married John Wm. Martin)

Marie Hite Whitmore attended Mill Creek for the early grades and remembered the spring that the children drank water from. She said it was a privilege for a child to be picked to take a bucket to the spring to get drinking water for the day. "We all drank from the same dipper and nobody

ever got sick,” remarked Marie. She recalled the two “Johnny houses” used by the children, one for the boys, and the other for the girls. The school curriculum included reading, writing, arithmetic, history, and hygiene. In 1922, Marie went to Radford College to earn her teaching degree and later taught school in Augusta and Rockbridge Counties. She taught at Narrow Passage School from 1936 until 1939.



Marie Hite Whitmore.

D. E. Hite walked to Mill Creek and remembered Anora Martin and Ethna Fauber as two of his teachers. He said there was a heating stove in the middle of the room, which kept the children warm during the cold winter months. He also said the teachers would board with Hampton and Rose Fauber; whose house was next to the school.

Lorean Falls Painter remembered that the teacher’s desk stood at the front of the classroom and there were two blackboards behind her desk. On one side of the room, there were homemade wooden desks that would seat two; on the other side, newer individual desks. A large map of the world took up the back wall. When lessons were to be recited, the children had to stand in front of the class to give them.

LaRue Fauber Wilson gave me two early photos of Mill Creek students. The earliest photograph was taken around the turn of the twentieth century. LaRue’s father, Hercy Fauber, and his twin sister Ethel are pictured in the back center and look to be in their late teens. Hercy has on a black bow tie and Ethel is to the right of him. LaRue still has the slate he used when he attended the first Mill Creek School. The older girl in the front row at right in the light-colored dress with ruffled bottom is “Sis” Doyle, Averill Doyle’s mother.



Mill Creek School students, c.1900.

The later picture was taken at the new Mill Creek School between 1937 and 1938. Lucille Allen is holding the guitar on the left, with LaRue standing next to her in the white dress. Nina Beach, the teacher that year, is standing at the top center.



1937-38 school year.

Gene Bryant, seventy-two, was the youngest student who came to the reunion. He remembered that the last teacher at Mill Creek was Faye Woodson and that the school closed in 1942. Gene

said one time he and George Allen got into a fight, and the teacher made them apologize to each other. George did apologize but Gene wouldn't, so the teacher kept him after school that day and made him wash the blackboards and get wood in for the next day. She kept him until it started to get dark and then she walked him home.

Glenn Allen attended Mill Creek in the 1930s. He remembered that three of his teachers were Annie Harvey, Sallie Lincoln, and Nina Beach. He said Harry and Francis Phillips were two other boys who went to school there at that time.

The second reunion of the Mill Creek School was a total success, with everyone having a memorable day. After the covered dish dinner, music was provided by Glenn and George Allen, LaRue Wilson and Darrel Ramsey and folks enjoyed hearing all their old favorites. Special thanks and appreciation go out to Ralph and Doris Cash for generously opening the doors to Mill Creek School. Everyone had such a good time catching up on personal and family news and the little white schoolhouse was once again alive with the laughter and happy chatter of the class mates who attended there so long ago.



Old Time Music by LaRue Wilson, Glenn Allen, George Allen, and Darrel Ramsey.



Former Students l/r: D. E. Hite, Vivian Bradley, Alva Jordan, Lorean Painter, LaRue Wilson, Agnes Coffey, Louise Fitzgerald, Marie Hite, Marian Weaver, (Back) George Allen, Irene Tatro, Gene Bryant, and Glenn Allen.



Ralph & Doris Cash

The Experiences of Two Mill Creek Teachers

After the Mill Creek School article appeared in the 1987 Backroads, I received letters from two former teachers, telling of their experiences at the school. I'd like to include them in this article because of the historical content. The first is from Persis Saunders Dolan who taught in 1932. The last is from Byrd Wootton Garnett.

MY EXPERIENCE by Persis Saunders Dolan

"It was a happy Friday afternoon on March 4, 1932, when I found out Mr. John B. Whitehead, our County Agent, would be in Montebello for a 4-H Club meeting. He had asked us if we wanted to go down the mountain with him to our homes for the weekend. Two teachers from Montebello School and I, from Mill Creek, a one-room school four miles beyond Montebello, met Mr. Whitehead for our trip down the mountain. There was much pleasant conversation since Mr. John was always quite entertaining and everyone loved him.

"He dropped me off at Tye Brook, the dear old brick home where we children were raised.

"Saturday a cold wave moved in but we thought it was typical March weather. We really didn't expect much cold since the winter had been comparatively mild. Saturday night some sleet and snow fell; about an inch or less covered the ground but the wind was cold.

"Brother Jack and Lee Blanks, who lived in a house on the place, prepared to take me back to my school on Sunday, March 6th. They decided they might take a shovel and ax along since the Blue Ridge Mountains looked white from home, and we weren't sure what might be in store.

"After saying goodbye to Mother, Daddy, Jane, Ned and Tommy, Jack, Lee Blanks and I set out for our trip back in Lee's Chevrolet sedan. The going was all right at first but after leaving Tyro the conditions got worse. Several trees had to be cut out of the road and by the time we got to Crabtree Falls, there was no going by car. Jack and Lee were exhausted and insisted we three turn around and go back home.

"Since I had never seen much snow at this time of year, I thought perhaps that we were in an area hit hard but going might be better if I could get some help from a family living near the foot of the falls. I walked up to a cabin and asked if I could borrow a horse to take me up to Mr. Willie Seaman's place at the fish hatchery. The rugged mountain man said he would let me have a horse and his small son if I wouldn't agree to stay with them. This was kind of him but I could see he

had a house full of small children and I remember seeing that pigs lived under the house which seemed unusual.

“When Jack saw I was determined to go on and he and Lee could not go any further, he became peeved and said I was doing a foolish thing, which I soon found out!

“The old man led out a horse and his small son got up behind me. After a few steps the horse stopped in his tracks, since the snow was up to his stomach. I let the boy go back with the horse and decided I could trudge along where the snow wasn’t drifted more than knee deep. Every step I made found snow up to my knees and in some places, a bit deeper.

“It was about dark when I left the boy and horse. I knew it was about a mile up to Sandy Ridge and perhaps I could make it to Mr. Richard Seaman’s house, who lived on the road. I realized I’d never make it to the fish hatchery where Mr. Willie Seaman’s family lived.

“About the time I left the boy and the horse, thinking I could walk and the going might get better, a man and his son came along going the same way. The older man made long strides which helped me to walk in his tracks. The younger man trudged along, trying to help me. Often when I stumbled in the snow and fell, he would try and help me up and fell, too. It was getting frightening and I began to think the worst. I wasn’t sleepy and still had strength to keep moving. Thoughts of freezing crossed my mind since I was dressed in spring clothes; a lightweight coat and no boots. Every step got to be an ordeal.

“Finally, a few yards from Sandy Ridge (at the top of the mountain near the fish hatchery), a small light from a lantern gleamed in the starlight darkness which gave me a sigh of relief. The old man had gone ahead and got to Massie Grant’s small crude cabin on the side of the road. He mentioned to Massie that his son was coming on and was with the school teacher from Mill Creek. It was then that Mr. Grant grabbed his lantern and was holding that welcome light. Mr. Grant, his wife and daughter saved my life that night.

“When I got to the Grant’s cabin, they lead me in the house. I could not speak and they realized my condition. Blankets were wrapped around me and gradually I was moved closer to the large stove. Perhaps two hours later, about ten o’clock that night, I had “thawed out” enough to talk some but every muscle in my body shook uncontrollably. Mrs. Grant prepared some hot canned sausage and a hot drink which helped. She had two cats by the stove. The room was very small but they offered me their best. I loved them for their kindness and saving me from freezing. I shook all night and slept very little but it was so good to be alive.

“The next morning the snow was up under the windows and no one traveled the road. In fact, there was no *trace* of a road. Snow drifted over cars and in places it was eight to ten feet high.

“Julian and Lovern Seaman came down from the fish hatchery, which was on their farm, to see Massie and his family. I think they were relatives. They could not believe Massie when he told the Seaman boys I was there. They always joked and told “tall tales,” and they thought it was one of Massie’s great ones!

“The Seaman boys went backup to their house and hitched the horses to a big, handmade sled and took me to their house. They were so good to me. I remember there was no traffic on the road for more than a week. Some people tried to find their cars by taking a broom handle to feel for them. There was no mail service for two weeks and no phones.

“The Willie Seaman family took care of me in their hospitable way for one week until the roads were opened. Then Julian and Lovern took me the four miles to my boarding place with Mr. and Mrs. Donald Fauber, who lived only a few yards from the Mill Creek School where I taught grades one through the sixth. Donald Fauber was Mr. Hampton’s brother, who built the school in 1904. The Faubers were all very good to me and gave me the best they had. Times were hard then

and conveniences almost nil. They offered me simple, nourishing food, and a comfortable hospitable home. The Faubers had two little girls named Mildred and Marion, whom I taught in the primary grades.

“Back to my snow ordeal. My parents were frantic and hard alarming news of weather in the mountains; no mail, travel, or telephone. Finally, I got a letter written and Grayson Massie, who taught at the Montebello School, rode horseback from Woodson to Montebello. He asked if I wanted the rider who came with him to take my letter and mail it from Woodson. When my parents got the letter, they were more confused than ever! I explained some of my ordeal in the letter and let them know I was well and being well cared for at the Seaman’s. A week was spent with the Seamans and roads were finally passable. They had chains on the car that took me to Mill Creek School. I’ll never forget the kindness shown to me by all these caring mountain people I learned so much from. It is ironic I never caught a cold from my experience in the unusual March snow storm, 1932.

A YEAR OF FOND MEMORIES

By Byrd Wootton Garnett

“Thanks to LaRue Fauber Wilson, a former pupil of mine and to Susie J. McCormick, a cousin, both of Raphine, Virginia, for sending me a copy of the November 1987 Backroads. This edition covered the reunion of Mill Creek School. My name was left off the list of teachers for the year 1939-40 in which I taught.

“I boarded at the Hampton Fauber house with a family of Sorrells. There were Mr. and Mrs. Sorrells, their daughter Lina and son, Bill.

“On the first day of school when I returned to the house, there Mrs. Bryant (Lucille Allen’s mother), Mr. and Mrs. Falls (Lorean Painter’s parents) had come over to welcome the new teacher. I will always remember my time there. All the mountain people opened their doors and their hearts to me. I visited in every home, had meals there and sometimes invited to spend the night.

“On the first Sunday night I was there, Nina Beach Doyle and her husband Averil, along with Harry Fauber came over to welcome me. Other young people who were good to me were Myrtle Fauber, Agnes Allen, Gorman Allen, Wilson and Willard Falls and Lorean Falls (Painter).

“I think LaRue Fauber (Wilson) was in the fifth grade that year. Other students I remember were Lucille Allen, Mallie and Gene Bryant, Irene, George, and James Allen. Also, Glenn, Louise and Maxie Allen, Houston Martin (foster son of Mr. Hercy Fauber), Howard Phillips and his sister Frances, and a little Coffey boy whose name I can’t recall. I am now eighty-five years old and have trouble remembering back that far but I do remember how polite the children were.

“That fall was the first I had seen apple butter cooked outside in a big copper pot. All the neighbors came the night before to peel and slice the apples. Some came early the next morning to start the cooking. Since it was all new to me, I took all the children and went to see the apple butter making. It was delicious!

“Willard Falls came over frequently to play Dominoes with Lina, Bill and me. It sure was a lot of fun.

“That year the Blue Ridge Parkway was being built from Waynesboro to Buena Vista. One evening Lorean Falls called to ask me to go with her, Willard and a Park foreman by the name of Bob to ride over the Parkway. Of course, I went. All at once Willard said, “Byrd, have you ever ben in love?” Before I could answer the car stopped at a country store and Willard said, “You are in Love now... welcome to Love, Virginia.” I’ll admit, I had never heard of Love, Virginia. I am glad to know that the old post office is still there.

“Just before school closed in May, the young people decided to have a picnic for me on the Parkway. As we arrived, we saw a big bear walking on his hind feet, coming toward us. Harry Fauber had permission to kill the bear because it had destroyed many of his baby lambs. So, he and Spud Sorrells went for guns and trailed the bear down the mountainside and killed him. Some said the bear weighed hundreds of pounds. Harry kept the hide and had it tanned and made into a rug that covered a large area in his room. Anyway, I love to tell friends about the bear “we” killed.

“Mrs. Fauber corresponded with me as long as she was able. It was great hearing from my mountain friends at Mill Creek.

“Lina Sorrells is still living. I hear from her from time to time. She is now in the nursing home in Buena Vista.

“I enjoyed the Backroads article on the first Mill Creek School reunion. I was sorry no one let me know. I would have loved to have seen all of the nice people there and hear about their families and what they were doing. I saw Harry Fauber several years ago at a funeral in Fairfield.

“Wish we could get together again to reminisce. I lost my husband in June of 2003, after sixty-one years of happy marriage. We had two sons. One owns and operates a farm and the other is an Orthopedic surgeon in Richmond. I have five grandchildren and feel so blessed. I wouldn’t take anything for the year I taught at Mill Creek. It was a wonderful experience and I have such fond memories of such fine people. May God bless one and all. I hope will let me hear from you.

Lynn’s Note: *In August of 2005 there was another reunion at Mill Creek School and Byrd came to that one and had a grand time visiting and catching up with all of her former students.*



Lorean Falls Painter with teacher, Byrd W. Garnett.