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Fred Bussey Lambert

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MS 76
BX 2
NBK 1

THE McKENDREE POOR FARM

BY

F. B. LAMBERT

Sunday April 14, 1929

in

Herald-Advertiser

MS 76
BX 2
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Sunday April 14, 1929

Herald Advertiser.

A BANDONMENT OF OLD 'POOR FARM' ON TYLER'S CREEK RECALLS
CENTURY AND HALF OF SERVICE RENDERED BY THE McKENDREE

Aaron Flood McKendree took over County Farm
Before Civil War; Uncle Bill McKendree Oper-
ated It Until a Month Ago, When New Farm Was
Opened

By
F. B. Lambert

"Over the hill to the poorhouse
Im trudgin' my weary way--
I, a woman of seventy, and only
a trifle gray--
I, who am smart and chipper,
for all the years I've told,
As many another woman that's
only half as old."

"Over the hill to the poorhouse--
I can't make it quite clear!
Over the hill to the poorhouse--
it seems so horrid queer!
Many a step I've taken a-toilin'
to an' fro,
But this is a sort of journey
I never thought to go."

WILL CARLETON.

A few weeks ago, the newspapers carried a statement that the old Cabell County Poor Farm was being abandoned, and the inmates were being moved to new quarters, on the Everett Farm at Ona. It is doubtful whether this short news item attracted more than passing notice, but behind it lies a story of absorbing interest.

Possibly the reason why this old poorhouse never attracted much attention is because it is situated off the main traveled roads, and is rarely seen by the average person passing through the country. It lies far up in the hills of McCombs district, on Tyler's creek, about a mile and a half from the Barboursville-Salt Rock road, and only a short distance from the Lincoln County line. Even to

this day, the house is one of the most palatial of the old-fashioned country homes still in existence.

The Early History

This old house was originally built by "Uncle" Dickie McCallister, long before the Civil War. It was of the two-story, double-log pen type, containing several large rooms and having an enormous rock chimney in the center. It stood in the same position as the present house and one of the original pens is yet a part of the house, forming the north end. This old chimney is still doing duty, notwithstanding the fact that the fireplace has been greatly reduced in size. The hearth on the south end originally extended entirely across the house, and the open fireplace was, at that time, about six feet wide on that side, and four feet on the north side. Both of those fireplaces are now boarded up.

Dickie McCallister sold the place to the county about 1852-3 and moved to Arkansas. Aaron Flood McKendree, father of William McKendree took charge of it as the county poor-house, the same year, and he or his son William (familiarily known as Billy) have kept it most of the years since, except from 1858-1867 and some other short periods. Sanky McClary is said to have been incharge during most of the Civil War. He was followed by Rev. Roland Piss who stayed until 1867, when Aaron Flood McKendree again moved in Joseph Johnson underbid Mr. McKendree for about four years during the administration of former Sheriff Edward Kyle, Sr., but the McKendrees, father and son, have kept it ever since.

The Family

Aaron Flood McKendree was born in Franklin County, Virginia, in 1805, and came to this section about 1835. He married Katherine Crubb, of German descent, and settled at Barboursville, where he formed a partnership with James H. Ferguson who afterwards became a well-known attorney, Judge Ferguson. Together they conducted a shoemaker shop. Ferguson was at first an apprentice or "bound boy" to John and Sig Miller who educated him. Mr. McKendree also worked in the old tannery with the late Mr. Leist or his predecessor.

George William McKendree, the present owner of the place, was one of a large family. He married Mary C. Perry in 1885. She died a few weeks ago, leaving two children at home. Thus, during most of the long period of three quarters of a century, this devoted family has fathered and mothered the poor and unfortunate of this county. It has been a life of sacrifice such as is rarely equalled.

The Inmates

No permanent record has ever been kept of the inmates, hence, it would be difficult to tell how they were or whence they came. They represented all classes of broken humanity--human wreckage--many from good families. Even, before the Civil war, Michael Loller, an old school teacher, was an inmate here. He remained till after the war and died here, and lies buried in an unmarked grave, in the pauper cemetery near the house. In his better days, he was a very good carpenter. He worked for Dickie McCallister and helped to ceil and weatherboard the house, and joked that he was preparing a room for himself. This was before the poor farm was established. Little did he dream that his words would come true. He was crippled afterwards and compelled to walk on crutches. Like Ichabod Crane, his favorite drink was whiskey, and he kept account of his pints by cutting notches on a board which he kept in his room, at the house.

He was a small, slender man about five feet, ten inches tall. He wore his hair long and his beard extended down to his lap. He is believed to have been a native of Rock-bridge county, Virginia.

Several years after the war (about 1882) Dangerfield Bryant, another old school teacher, became an inmate. He came from North Carolina and was not only a school teacher but a teacher of singing and "instrumental" music. It was said that his fiddling was hard to beat. He was a cripple, smooth-shaver, low heavy set, and weighed about 175 pounds. He was a good man and a perfect gentleman. He too lies in the cemetery there in a nameless grave. Many of the older people yet remember him as their teacher of years ago, for he taught in several of the country schools.

Charley Jones

In contrast to Michael Loller and Dangerfield Bryant, Charley Jones was a large, powerful, high-tempered man who came some years ago from North Carolina, wandered around two or three years and settled on Madison Creek. He moved to Somerset, Kentucky, lost his second wife and returned to North Carolina, where he resided with a daughter. She clothed him well and treated him royally, but he preferred the hills of West Virginia and came back. On one occasion, he had a fight with another man about his equal in strength. They pounded each other viciously for 15 or 20 minutes. Neither ever saw a well day afterwards. Charley came to the poor house claimed his relatives abandoned him, lost his mind, and died there a few months ago.

Many of the inmates have been of low mentality, hence it has not been found profitable to work them on the farm. The cost of keeping them has been very low. Aaron Flood McHendree probably never received an average of more than seven or eight dollars per month for each inmate. Sometimes he received as low as five or six dollars per month. During the whole time, the average has probably not been one ten dollars per month for each inmate although it has sometimes amounted to as much as \$15 or \$16. When asked why he kept them, Billy replied that it was just because his father did. At the time the writer visited him, there were 31 paupers at the farm. Mr. McHendree stated that on account of advancing age--he is now going on 71--he felt compelled to give it up. Asked about his ideas as to how the inmates should be cared for, he stated that he believed pauper families should not be kept as a poor house, but rather with private families, to spare the children the future disgrace. He added that for more than 40 years, the courts of both political parties had been kind to him, notwithstanding the family were all democrats, and that two of his brothers were in the Rebel army, one even losing his life for the Southern cause.

The old poor farm is located just beyond Enon church which stands on the divide between Tyler Creek and Trace Creek of Guyan. The people of both creeks attend Enon church or the church at Salt Rock. It is said that every family on Trace or Tyler's creek is represented in the membership of one or the other. It is not necessary to lock smokehouses there. Honesty, fearlessness, and godliness reign supreme. Few communities in this whole country can boast so many men and women of strong outstanding character. The father of Enon church was the Rev. Benjamin Perry who came from Virginia many years before the Civil war and built the original church of logs, within ten or fifteen feet of the present one. This church was used for both school and church and Seton Rousey, father of former County Superintendent John Rousey, taught here before the Civil war. Billy Bramblett and probably others taught in it after the war. Benjamin Perry was the father of Elijah Perry and the grand-father of Attorney John W. Perry of Huntington.

Preachers, lawyers, teachers and other professional men have gone out from this community. Among the preachers were Benjamin Perry, John Perry, Elijah Perry, and other Perrys, Roland Bias, Sr., and his sons Roland and Elisha, and John D. Carter. Rev. Elijah Perry died a few months ago at the age of 90.

Former County Superintendent John Rousey of Cabell and George Kaiser of Lincoln, both resided here for awhile.

Attorney John W. Perry and several others were teachers.

In addition to the Perry families, the Rouseys, Gills, Biases, etc., were prominent. Robert McKendree, a brother of Billy, was the father of Major McKendree, and grandfather of Mary McKendree, now the wife of Ex-Congressman Johnson.

Like Old Plantations

The "Poor Farm" had the right name, for the land is not very productive. Viewing the place from a little distance, one is impressed with its similarity to descriptions of the old Negro plantations. The master lived in the main house, while most of the inmates, or paupers lived in small outbuildings erected for the purpose. Nearby is the cemetery, in which the county lays its proper dead. There is not a single gravestone and when the present generation passes, no man will be able to point out the graves of Douglasfield or Michael Loller from any of the others.

But while we have spoken of Billy as master, neither he nor any of his charges ever thought of him that way. He is a typical Virginia gentleman of the olden days, and always impresses one with his boundless hospitality. Those inmates who had any feeling of self-respect whatever always ate with the family, and some of them had their rooms in the main house. Instead of master, they considered him and Mrs. McKendree as father and mother. The writer went from cottage to cottage and one after another bore testimony to the same facts. Said one little old woman who had spent most of her life there, "Billy and his wife have been father and mother to me." Said another and another. "They have been a sad one after so many years. But Aaron Flood McKendree, Grandmother McKendree, and Mother McKendree have gone, "Over the hill from the poor house," and Billy is passing into the shadows. Let us hope that the long service may be amply rewarded.