

Clouse Hill, Tennessee – My Happy Playground

Written by Jackie Layne Partin

From the time I was big enough to beg, I wanted to spend summer days with my relatives at Clouse Hill, that little spot in the road between Sanders Crossing near Tracy City and the big Spring at the foot of the mountain at Payne's Cove Road. When my mother, Clara (Meeks) Layne took us children out to visit her father, mother, siblings and extended family in Clouse Hill on Sunday afternoons, I would beg to stay with my Mama Meeks. Sometimes it worked, making me one happy little girl.

Mama and Papa Meeks, as they were always called, were my maternal grandparents. Maggie Myrtle (Smartt) Meeks was born in 1897, in Flat Branch near Coalmont. She was the daughter of John and Mary Estella (Sanders) Smartt. She was the first of a large group of children, and at a young age she met and married George Mack Meeks, a widower and father of three living children. He and his first wife, Mary Elizabeth Bean, had lost one young child whom they called Little Willie. Their other children were Pearl, Beulah and Marvin Vester Meeks.

Maggie Myrtle had a hard life, as did many women in those days. I never did ask her if she married Papa Meeks, a man thirty years her senior, to get away from home or because she fell madly in love with him. I reasoned in my older years, that it was a whole lot of wanting to get away from home with a little bit of love sprinkled in there somewhere. Nevertheless, she stayed faithful to her "old man" for thirty-four years until his death in 1949.

Papa Meeks was born in 1867 and was reared in Payne's Cove with all the other Meekses up in the head of that cove. That's where he met Lizzie Bean and married her. He moved to Flat Branch and was a logger, a coalminer and a farmer, whatever it took to put bread on the table. Throughout the years, I have also asked myself, "Did Papa Meeks marry Maggie because he needed a mother for his children, some of whom were still at home, or did he fall head-over-heels in love with her?"

When Maggie had given birth to several children including my mother, they moved to Clouse Hill. More children were born there. By the time they moved out to the area, the little village that had sprung up years before was long gone. The coalmines had shut down. The Clouse Hill Post Office was no more; the railroad tracks had been taken up and moved to Coalmont, which was the next big venture in coal mining. Most citizens of Clouse Hill followed the coal. Even some of the Company housing was moved to Coalmont.

Not to worry about the dwindling population—Mama and Papa Meeks were the parents of eleven children, and they also reared my sister Gabe Meeks. Their little daughter, Dora, passed away while they still lived at Flat Branch, but all the others were reared at Clouse Hill. Some of Papa Meeks' brothers and cousins moved up from Payne's Cove and helped fill the area with more Meekses. An area at Flat Branch was once called Meeks, Tennessee, and it looked like Clouse Hill might be in danger of becoming another Meeks town. The source for the name "Clouse Hill" still evades me; Papa Meeks had a brother named Clouse who lived in the cove below, but eventually moved to the plateau. It is possible that it was named after him, but more research needs to be done on that.

When Papa Meeks moved his family from Flat Branch around 1933, they moved into a "pretty nice house." A couple years later, the family had gone to a funeral in Monteagle, and on the way home they saw that their house was on fire. It was completely destroyed. The family lived outside under a big tree during the daytime, and the children were bedded down in the hay shed during the nights. Several families brought items to the family to help them through their tragedy. As one of my aunts told me, "All we had were the clothes on our backs." Manuel Williams helped Papa Meeks rebuild the house with lumber from Matt Sanders' sawmill. The house never had more than three rooms, but there were front and back porches; below the house was a cellar. The rooms consisted of a living room with a fireplace, which also doubled as a bedroom; a cold-in-the-winter bedroom just crammed full of beds; and a kitchen with a big, wood, cook stove in one corner and a very large, very worn oilcloth-covered table with benches down the sides and chairs at the end, and a pie safe. That was just about all that could be seen in the kitchen except the occasional live chicken that managed to wander in when the back door wooden latch didn't fall into its little slot, and a pile of split kindling with a coal skuttle near the stove for carrying out ashes.

It was approximately five miles from our house in Monteagle to my grandparents' house in Clouse Hill. I remember walking that distance sometimes with my aunts—well, minus the minutes I spend on their shoulders as they helped me along the way. On our little lot in Monteagle, there was not much to get into, but in Clouse Hill, I had a whole different world waiting for me. There were no boundaries for anyone, especially me. Just about every house was full of my kinfolks. Mama assigned me certain chores to do every day, but at Clouse Hill, my aunts and uncles did all the work. Some of them weren't very much older than I was. When my feet hit the old slate road, I took off running, like a horse out of a barn. In one household, I had fifteen cousins that I couldn't wait to play with. Cousins, cousins everywhere!

There were no toys, none whatsoever. Clouse Hill children knew how to have fun back then. We climbed trees and swung from grapevines like a bunch of little monkeys; we played house with broken planks and pieces of broken glass. We had crabapple fights;

played tag; but there was one other thing that I classed as my favorite fun thing to do with my cousins. I called it “running from the shadows of the clouds.” The old red slate-covered road near the house was straight with a few hills. The clouds’ shadows, for the most part, moved from the cemetery right on down the road toward where Mama Meeks lived. We could see them coming. It was our job to outrun the shadows, which eventually caught up and passed over us. When one passed, another came. I thought that was so much fun. This was one of the games we played as we walked to Clara Myers’ store out at Sanders Crossing.

At times, Mama Meeks needed something from the Myers’ store. Now mind you, we are not talking about cokes and candy, but kerosene, flour, sugar and the most necessary item of a trip – snuff for Mama Meeks. She placed her few coins and her snuff in a little tobacco bag and pinned it inside her petticoat. On these long, long walks, I had a ball, playing, running, hiding, just soaking up love from all my cousins, aunts, uncles, grandmother and sister. On one of those trips, we were all making our way back home, when my Uncle Jeff stopped in one of those old cars that had the doors that met in the middle. We loaded up, but my hand got shut in the door. I screamed in tremendous pain. My uncle loved me very much and was obviously saddened by what had happened, but as soon as we got to his house, he ran inside and cut off slices of salt fat and placed it on my hand. The pain seemed to lessen; I eventually lost two fingernails, but thankfully they grew back.

Sometimes the Culpepper Rolling Store came through while I was visiting. Even though I had no money and neither did the others, Mama Meeks managed to stop the store sometimes. I remember once she entered the bus and came out with a box of cocoa powder. I knew immediately what that meant, and she couldn’t have bought anything that would have excited me more. That meant that the next morning we would be served chocolate gravy, or cocoa syrup as some call it, with our biscuits. Cocoa powder was expensive, so this was an act of tender loving care she showed for her children and me.

I always begged Mama to let me visit Clouse Hill during berry season. There were dewberries, blackberries, huckleberries and gooseberries, all for free, furnished by the Good Man upstairs. We picked one handful for canning and one handful for eating. Mama Meeks could choke out the best biscuits in the world and place them in a large blackened-from-years-of-use biscuit pan. First she smeared a good layer of lard around the inside of the pan; that was to make those biscuits crunchy brown on the outside and keep them from sticking to the pan. She placed them against each other then took a spoon and spread melted lard all over the tops for good browning. Those biscuits were so good that “they’d make you want to smack your Granny!” Now, don’t ask me what that means, but I’ve always heard it said when food was so delectable. A huge pot of coffee was brewed, and then a big skillet of gravy made to cover those biscuits, and on rare occasions that wonderful cocoa syrup was made. Sometimes something was made from the berries picked in the summer, maybe jam,

jelly or just plain sweetened berry juice cooked to a certain stage for pouring over those biscuits. I remember the morning when Mama Meeks went out early and killed some young fryers. She plucked them, cut them up, rolled them in flour, and browned them on all sides, then covered the pieces with a lid to smother them. When done, she made breakfast gravy in the same skillet with the smothered chicken pieces. Now folks, how many chickens would she have had to kill to feed the family she had and me? I never remember eating chicken that tasted as good as my grandmother's breakfast smothered chicken.

If there were a few biscuits left, my aunts, uncles, sister and I would pick some berries and place them in the center of the cold biscuits for a mid-morning snack. We'd also take a big cold biscuit and cover it with a thick slice of tomato cut from the center of one that had warmed itself in the blazing summer sun. One day last year, 2009, my sister stopped making biscuits like her Mama Meeks; when her husband passed away, she lost her reason for getting up early to do what her grandmother had done every day all those years for her. She had never missed a morning in her nearly fifty years of marriage choking out those big biscuits made from scratch. She varied the recipe just a little by using Crisco instead of lard, but she had the knack; she was taught by the best.

And those coffee grounds, what could a bunch of children do with those? My Uncle Alf found a good use for them; he taught me how to put them behind my bottom lip so that I could pretend to be dipping snuff. There wasn't much to spit, but I really felt like a big person. Mama Meeks always kept her snuff on the mantle above the fireplace when she wasn't on the move. She couldn't trust that it would stay there unless she kept her eyes on it. The old hearth was stained badly with the spit of snuff. Right in the corner of the room by that fireplace, a battery powered radio was kept and a coal oil lamp; neither was used unless it was a necessity. When Saturday nights came around, the lamp was lit and the radio was tuned in to the Grand Ole Opry – that was a necessity. That was payment for a tough, hard week. Some of the clan went out on the porch to hold hands with those they were courting, but for the most part, the radio had everyone's attention.

When family and passers-by stopped to sit in straight back chairs leaned against the wall on the front porch, Mama Meeks always built a "gnat smoke." I still do that sometimes, but I never do it without thinking of my visits at Clouse Hill. An old rag thrown on a small fire will smolder and smolder and fend off just about any insect around. The right spot had to be found to place the "gnat smoke," or else, people would be constantly moving to keep the smoke out of their eyes.

Once my Aunt Lillie, or Lil, as she was better known, was plowing the field when I stepped out in front of the mule. Wow! I never did that again. I was a tiny little squirt, but Aunt Lil found enough flesh to spank with her large hand, over and over and over, while all

the time, yelling, "Little girl, don't you ever do that again. You could have been killed!" Sure, the old mule never touched me anywhere, anyhow, but I thought certain that Aunt Lil was going to end my life right there in the potato patch. Years later, I sang hymns to her in her hospital bed the day she died; a good beating didn't change the love I had for her. And speaking of potatoes and bugs – potato bugs, do you know what to do with them when you don't have "Sevin" powder? Well, it was easy then and fun. I was given a can with a little coal oil in it. Those wretched little herbivorous pests got just what was coming to them. Plink – right into the coal oil they went never to damage a potato plant again.

There was a cellar off the back porch where food was stored for the winter. Down across the field for a good distance was the spring. All the water had to be carried from there to the house. It took several trips to get enough water to wash clothes. The spring was so clear and cold; it kept milk, butter and such things cool for usage by the family. With such a large family, the spring held nothing for very long. The outhouse was across the slate road in front of the house. The mailbox was on the same side of the road and had to be passed to go down the path to the toilet. It was a double-seater with corncocks and catalogs made available; I thought it was a nicely built toilet. But I could never go to it alone, because my Uncle Alf told me that a headless man stood near the mailbox and guarded the path. I believed him, so I was constantly on the lookout for the body of the man walking back and forth along the side of the road. My uncles loved me, and I dearly loved them, but they really scared me sometimes. Eventually, a hand dug well was placed near the house; my Uncle John and Uncle Alf held me by my arms and legs across that well and threatened to drop me in. After tantalizing me for some time, they took me and threw me into a large tub of water that was sitting in the yard. They were young and had no idea what danger was. They would have never forgiven themselves had something happened to me. How in the world did children survive "the old days?"

Over by the Clouse Hill Cemetery stood a one-room schoolhouse, which is where some of my aunts, uncles and sister attended. My mother managed to finish third grade at Flat Branch before the move, but she like some of the others, had to quit school and help with the chores. There just wasn't enough money to fix lunches, sew clothes, and buy books for all the children. The children were needed at home to work the fields, cut the wood, carry the water, prepare foods for the long winters and help tend the younger ones. The little tin lunch buckets might have a biscuit in them, or sometimes there was nothing for lunch. Their clothes were worn for several days and washed at nights for the next school days. Some of the younger ones graduated from the eighth grade in that little school. What I remember the most about the school building was Mr. Harvey Kilby's Sunday afternoon Bible stories. He made it possible for the local children to have their Sunday School like the children in town. I was privileged on several occasions to be a part of the gang of children who showed up for religious enlightenment. Sometimes he handed out fruit, and the children were so happy.

On the left, facing the school, lie the remains of many forgotten souls; their burial spots being unmarked. Oh, how I wish I knew the names of the old ones and the little babies buried there! I wish Stephen and Comfort (Bolin) Cope, one set of my gg-grandparents, would just give me a tiny hint that they were interred on that hill. It is hard for me to stop and look down upon the graves of my Papa and Mama Meeks. When I was seven, Papa Meeks became quite ill. He had had a stroke earlier and was bedridden. All the grandchildren who came through the house were asked to take turns fanning his rigid body as the heat of July was stifling in that little room. I proudly remember taking my turn. He passed on July 3, 1949. I'd miss him. He was a tiny little man at death, but bigger than life when he formerly sat at the end of the big dining table in the kitchen. He had a moustache and ruled with an iron fist, or he thought he did. He poured his morning coffee into a little bowl that Mama Meeks always placed under his cup. I think that was to make it cool quicker, or maybe it just made it taste better.

Some years after Papa Meeks passed away, it was necessary for Mama Meeks to go to Tracy City and work for Mrs. Betty Byrd. Some of the teenage children, including my sister, were still at home. Times were tough on them, really tough. My Uncle Jeff really was the strength for the younger ones. They eventually married; some moved; some stayed. Mama Meeks passed away in 1983 while living with one of her daughters in Tracy City. I still visit the ones who stayed, but the saying that you can never go home is really true. Clouse Hill has changed. Times have changed. Occasionally, I see a "gnat smoke" in a relative's yard. Where have all the berries gone? Is the headless man still roaming the area?

I stop from time to time at the cemetery, but it is quiet; no one speaks, but I remember.



George Mack Meeks (1867-1949)

Maggie Myrtle (Smartt) Meeks (1897-1983)