

“I Could Hear Those Timbers Cracking Beneath Their Load”

A Talk with Joe Lester Meeks

Written by Jackie Layne Partin

Those Meekses from down in Payne’s Cove, Tennessee, covered the mountaintop above it like snowflakes in a blizzard. I ought to know since my mother was one of them. We must surely all have a common thread somewhere—well, besides the Biblical Eve, but that didn’t stop us from marrying one another. You know, I bet you that Eve, Mrs. Adam, was a Meeks; okay, that may be stretching it a little. What is it they say—after the sixth generation, we aren’t supposed to be considered relatives? When I asked Joe Lester Meeks what his mother’s maiden name was, he answered, “She was a Meeks too, but they weren’t kin!” We both laughed heartily about the situation.

Thanks to the wonderful research and work done by John Campbell, Willene (Nunley) Campbell and Janelle (Layne) Taylor on the Meekses in our area, I can tell Joe that his parents’ kinship was distant. On 16 February 2009, Joe Lester Meeks and I sat down to visit and talk about his life. He was born 12 August 1918, to Pete John Vester Meeks and Nannie “Doll” (Meeks) Meeks. His paternal grandparents were “Crip John” Meeks and Mary “Polly” (Cope) Meeks who lived and reared their family in Payne’s Cove. “Crip John’s” father was Britain Meeks. Joe Lester’s maternal grandparents were William Houston Meeks, Sr. and Narnie Eudora Idella (Northcutt) Meeks. William Houston’s father was John Meeks. This is where Joe’s parents became relatives because it is generally accepted that Britain Meeks and John Meeks were brothers. Well, we didn’t make it back to the sixth generation, but that will be just fine. I love it when my husband tells me that if I keep searching and digging long enough, I will find out that “I’m my own grandpa, or in my case, my own grandma!”

I suppose having two Meekses for grandfathers could cause some confusion when story time came around. When I asked Joe Lester how his two grandfathers died, he told me that one of them was plowing and was killed when the plow hit a rock and came back into his abdomen, and the other died after a file, which was stuck in a crack of the house, came loose and embedded in his head. I know that “Crip John” died from a plow incident, so I must assume that William Houston died from the other freak accident. Joe never knew either grandfather, for they both died before he was born. The only photo of “Crip John” and Mary “Polly” Meeks burned in a house fire. Since “Crip John” was my g-grandfather, I was so saddened to hear that bit of information. Joe Lester recalls, maybe from the photo, that “Crip John” wore his moustache in the handlebar fashion. It is his understanding that most of the older Meekses were buried in the Payne’s Cove Cemetery.

Joe Lester was born in the Lockhart Town area at the old Howley place “back in the woods about three or four miles.” His siblings were Irene, Charles, Bessaline, Allen, Clyde, John and James. Later, Joe Lester’s father built them a little house across the road from the George Carrell “Dick” Sanders’ home. When Jesse and Lucy Woodlee moved their family out of the Dick Sanders home, the Meeks family moved into it. The old log house had two “cabins,” as Joe Lester called them, with a hall between them. A “plank” kitchen had been added in the back. There were two fireplaces, one in the living room, and one in the kitchen, which also had a wood cook stove. The road went right in front of the Sanders graveyard and home; then it went for miles to the bluff and dropped off at Parsons Point into Payne’s Cove.



Nannie “Doll” (Meeks) Meeks



L to R: Joe Lester, John, Clyde and James B. Meeks

Joe Lester never lived in the valley, but he walked down the old road to his Uncle Clouse Meeks’ home many times. Clouse was probably the last house in the cove before the terrain became too rugged to farm. It was near where the power line goes off into the valley now. Joe Lester estimated the distance to be six or seven miles and his walking time to be an hour, or an hour and a half, from where he lived at the Dick Sanders place. The dry creek near the Meeks’ home would flash flood at times. He spoke of the time that the Reed family home was washed downstream by the fast moving waters. It was a hard place to live and farm, but Clouse Meeks had a seemingly active farm with fruit trees and gardens. The river rocks were piled into fences that helped to keep livestock in when needed. They were also used in construction of foundations, chimneys and cellars.

There is a little family burial plot at the old Clouse Meeks place. Joe and I have been there at different times. Clouse buried two of his sons, George Leonard and John, and a daughter, Ida, in the little plot. Little George burned to death at a young age, and Joe Lester thinks that

Ida may have died in that incident trying to save her brother. However, there is a death certificate for a young four-year-old Ida Meeks who died with diphtheria in 1919. John was murdered in Kentucky, and according to Joe Lester, the family had a difficult time getting his first cousin's body back home for burial in the cove.

Joe and Della Reed reared their family close enough to the dry creek bed, so that once when it rained heavily on the plateau, the water carried their house, as mentioned before, downstream where it finally settled into its new site. Joe Reed was a farmer and often carried his produce up the mountain to sell in Tracy City. According to Joe Lester Meeks, there had been trouble brewing for some time between some in his Uncle Clouse's family and Joe Reed. The problem escalated until, on Joe Reed's last trip up the mountainside to sell his goods, he was shot and killed by someone who was waiting for him. When one of the Reed boys heard the shot, he knew that his father had been killed without ever seeing it for himself. There had been threats made on his father's life from time to time.

Joe Lester attended very little school because of sickness. He often woke up in the mornings with bad headaches that later turned into nausea. He would stay this way up into the nights. He remembers that his mother would get up in the middle of the night and cook something for him when he improved enough to be hungry. Mothers are simply "jewels." When he did attend school a couple days a week, he went to the Bonnie Oak School. I told him that I had never heard of the Bonnie Oak School, but I had heard of the Dick Sanders School. He quickly let me know that he attended the one-room, approximately forty foot square, frame building that stood on the property of the Bonnie Oak Cemetery. It stood where the new part of the cemetery is now, and two of his teachers were Roy Mayes from Payne's Cove and Miss Julia Brown whose father operated the Company Store in Tracy City. Mr. Mayes, often wearing a long overcoat, rode his horse up from Payne's Cove where he lived near the cemetery. He hitched his horse on the premises. Joe Lester never had a "whipping" in school, but Mr. Mayes rarely had to discipline anyone with more than just a slight paddling occasionally. He was a strict teacher, but weren't they all in those days? At the end of the day, Mr. Mayes mounted his horse, sometimes giving Joe Lester a ride "a ways" down the road to his home; then off he rode to Parson Point and onto the old wagon road that led to Payne's Cove. I spoke with one of Roy Mayes' sons, and he said his dad did teach at Bonnie Oak School and actually met his future wife, Miss Veola Patrick, while teaching there. *(The Mayes family is still looking for a photo they have of the old school. If anyone else has one, please send it to the Grundy County Historical Society.)*

Joe Lester's mother packed his school lunch in a metal lard bucket. It, more often than not, consisted of potatoes and bread. To this day, he loves fried potatoes and sauerkraut. He made me hungry talking about the foods his mother prepared for her family. Usually on Saturdays and Sundays, the yard was full of people who came visiting. They never had to

mow because the yard was worn free of grass from all the playing and visiting going on in it. While the children played marbles or other games, his mother cooked enough food to fill a long kitchen table with all the bounties that came from her husband's huge gardens. On Sunday mornings, Joe Lester's parents would rise early and go to the garden to gather produce, and when they came back into the house, their arms were full of fresh vegetables and fruits for the Sunday meal. He dearly liked the cornbread "pones" that she prepared. She didn't "choke" her biscuits out by hand, but rather cut them out. We talked about how the bread pans were black with years of smoke, lard and dough baked onto them. There was never a question as to whether the biscuit pans acquired at marriage, would last forever – they would, even though they might get a worn place or two. The older they got, the better the bread tasted. In the winters, his mother used the dried string beans, shuck beans she called them, which had been prepared after harvesting and hung to dry. Like most women in those days, she spent her spring, summer and fall months, being certain that she preserved enough food for the long winter months ahead.

Many people went hungry during the Great Depression of 1929, but Joe Lester said his family had food; however, it was the same thing over and over. His mother was good at making the same thing taste different each time she cooked it. For instance, if cornbread was left over from a former meal, she would make "crumbles." "What are crumbles?" I asked. His mother crumbled the dry cornbread into an iron skillet and added a little water and certain seasonings. This was drier than cornmeal mush and also had a little different flavor and texture, but the family ate it. When there was money to buy food or clothing, the family could get it at the Company Store in Coalmont, or often they would walk to Tracy City to do their shopping. Joe Lester remembered his first new pair of shoes. They hurt his feet so badly, but he would not say anything to his parents for fear they would take them back to the store. When the children back then got shoes or anything new, they took very good care of the items. He commented, "People throw away shoes now that we would have given anything to have had when we were young!"

"Joe, where would you go for a doctor if you needed one?" I asked. Quickly he answered, "Well, my mother had the best remedies for everything. What she came up with was far better than what a doctor could give us." However, if one really needed a doctor, someone would be sent to get Dr. Upton Beall Bowden in Pelham, and he would come up on his horse through Parsons Point. The children back then could stay out all day in the snow and cold and never get sick. They were just used to being outside.

He and his brothers grew up working in the garden, in timber, in sawmills and sometimes in the mines. They once cleared the right of way for the new power line. Joe worked for his Uncle Jim Meeks who was his mother's brother. Jim's wife Lillie (Meeks) Meeks was Joe's father's sister. (*There we go again with those Meekses marrying Meekses.*) Jim ran a sawmill and

was county sheriff for some years. I was curious about all the stories I had heard about "Uncle Jim," as my mother used to call him. Some thought he was a hard man; others thought he was good at his job. Joe Lester figures that the toughest moments in Sheriff Meeks' life came when he was arguing with his wife. They just didn't get along well. After their arguments, Jim would come down to the sawmill and jump on his men who got fed up with it. One man told him, "Now Jim, every time you and Lillie get into it, you come down here and jump on me, now don't you do it anymore." Sheriff Meeks never had to kill anyone or ever got shot, but he wrestled down a fair number of men in his tenure as county sheriff.

Joe Lester bubbled with laughter while telling the following story on Sheriff Meeks. There was a group of men drinking down at the Annex. One man sat down at the bar and crossed his feet; his shoes had buckles on them. He was preparing to drink his first beer when in walked Sheriff Meeks. The sheriff accused him of being drunk, but the man was adamantly trying to explain that he was just drinking his first beer. Sheriff Meeks demanded that he get up, which the man did, but in the process the buckles on his shoes got hung up, and the man fell broadside onto the floor. The sheriff said, "See, I told you that you were drunk!" Overall, most folks respected Sheriff Meeks, but some feared him as well.

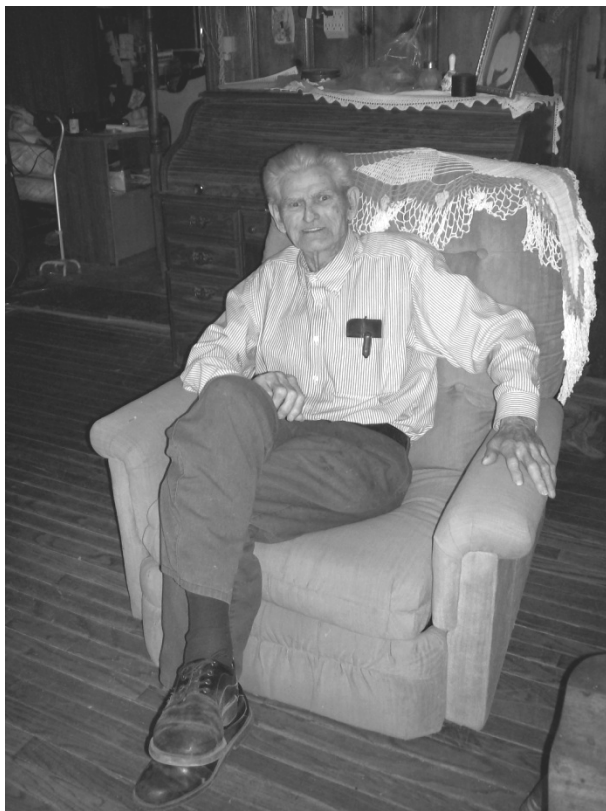
When I asked Joe Lester if he had ever met Mrs. Elijah Meeks, aka Kitt Meeks, he answered with a definite, "Yes!" Kitt and her family lived over in the hollow in Johnson's Gulf that was fittingly named "Kitt Hollow." She rode a white horse everywhere she went. As Joe Lester recalls, she had "one of those old wheels that she used to tell someone's fortune." She was a smart woman who feared no one or anything. The story goes that one of her sons had ordered some guns and had not paid for them. When the men appeared at the door to take him in, Kitt met them at the door. She informed them that the boy was underage and should never have been sold the guns. She pointed out that she did not give her permission as a parent for the boy to make the transaction. Kitt put the men on the road without the son. Joe Lester remembers when Kitt would come by their house at the Dick Sanders place and stop over for a rest before she descended the mountain on her way to the valley below.

In 1939, Joe Lester Meeks married Arizona Campbell, daughter of Myles and Bessie Campbell. They lived with his mother until he finished building a little house for his wife. They moved into it in 1941. Johnny Parsons now lives in that house. World War II ended before Joe Lester was ever called up for duty. He thinks his classification status was decided because of his lack of education. He worked for a time in the Coalmont mines, and then, around the age of twenty-five and after marriage, he started working for Virgil Thomas in the mines in the Pocket. "Virgil was a good man," explained Joe Lester. I was curious about the fears that the men obviously had when they entered a mine and went so far underground to work. I asked him if they were constantly under the burden of fear, or did they just do the

job because they had to without giving much thought to the dangers involved. The fears were part of every day, and at times while deep in the mines loading railcars with coal, sometimes in cramped places, he explained, “I could hear those timbers cracking beneath their load.”

Joe Lester and Arizona managed to buy five acres of land in Lockhart Town at ten dollars an acre. They started building their new house, which is the one that he lives in today. There was a period when Arizona walked from Lockhart Town to Tracy City to work. She was an excellent seamstress. He remembers that they had their house wired and ready to move into by New Year’s Day, 1950. Electricity was just making its way into their community—a perfect time to have it put into their new home. They never had any children of their own, but they opened their home and hearts to other children who needed a place to call home.

Joe Lester’s parents never went to church when he was a child, but after he married, he began to think about his soul and those of others around him. Arizona did a little preaching from time to time, and he was always there to support her. Sadly, she passed away in 2001. Joe Lester is a kind, soft-spoken man, and I enjoyed my visit in his home immensely. Presently, he attends the Mt. Calvary Apostolic Church in Tracy City. In his words, “God’s got me, and I get out and work for Him!”



Joe Lester Meeks (2009)



James Buford and Edna (Roberts) Meeks