

# Treasures From a Trunk

by Valerie Renee Ledford Leach

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As the late winter sunlight streamed through the window of the humble mountain home, the old man rubbed his eyes and lay his pencil on the bed. There was still so much he had to write, and time was short. He picked up the pencil again and noticed his young granddaughter, Hattie, playing happily beside his bed. She loved to sit near him and watch him write. She could ask a lot of questions, but he always found time to talk with her, teach her a Bible verse, or sing a song with her. She was the future. At 89 he would not be here much longer. He had a lot to tell her.

"Grandpa, will you tell me a story about Ellen?"

"Of course, Hattie. Just let me finish this one last entry."

Hattie loved to hear stories about his eldest daughter, who died at the age of five. She had been a right little girl and he had saved all her drawings. He loved to show them to Hattie.

He hastily made an entry on the genealogy chart. The piece of brown wrapping paper saved from a brown paper poke that Hattie had foraged yesterday served well for his purpose. He wrote on anything, because it was too hard to get out and about these days.

Not quite finished, he was interrupted by his daughter-in-law, Maggie. As she peered through the doorway she realized he had been writing all day with Hattie by

his side. "He looks tired," she thought. "He spends too much time on those journals of his." She had come to see whether he needed anything and couldn't help asking: "Pa, you work so hard and so long on those papers and ledgers! Why?"

"Well, Maggie," he replied. "Little Hattie might wonder someday about some of these things that I'm writing. She'll have the journals to find the answers."

Maggie, seeing they were both content, quietly left the room and returned to her work. Hattie sat on the edge of her grandfather's bed and listened intently to his story.

Many years have passed since then. The man was my great grandfather, David J. White. Hattie is my aunt and Maggie is my grandmother. My Aunt Hattie shared the above incident with me recently as I told her of my reading and transferring her grandfather's writings to the computer for the Appalachian-Scottish Studies Program. She had loved her grandfather dearly and had always wondered what was in his journals. She always felt they should be shared with others. However, after her grandfather's death her mother had put them in a trunk for safe-keeping. That is where they stayed for over 50 years. They were forgotten, but would be retrieved in time.

That time arrived one summer day about 25 years ago. My grandmother, my Aunt Hattie, and I were sitting around my grandmother's kitchen table talking of the past. I was asking questions about our family and Hattie brought up the writings of her grandfather. We pleaded with my grandmother to allow us to open my great grandfather's trunk. She was reluctant. It would be on the back porch under a stack of trunks, plastic bags of saved quilt pieces, boxes of canning jars, and old newspapers. (My grandmother had survived the Great Depression. She saved everything.) She could see our excitement and finally relented. All of the above items were carefully removed from the tops of the trunks. Their dusty lids were opened one by one, and articles hidden from view for years were once again brought to light. Each find--an old pair of satin slippers, an aunt's old wedding dress, World War II

ration cards, and discarded photos and letters--threatened to distract us from our mission. We could have spent weeks on these trunks alone. However, we pressed on, setting the items aside for another time. It seemed an eternity before we reached the last trunk. Lifting its lid, we discovered my great grandfather's picture staring up at us as if to ask, "What took you so long?"

We carefully removed the journals and ledgers, some dating as far back as the 1850s. There were all sorts of documents, survey maps, old deeds, and letters. My Aunt Hattie eagerly looked for the ledger containing little Ellen's drawings. They were found among the pages of a huge ledger, dog-eared and torn. She was so excited she could not contain her emotions. It was a truly exciting day for our family. One would have thought we had found a great treasure. We had, but of a different kind than gold.

I stayed a whole week with my grandmother and aunt. My mother joined us, and we read many of the journals and letters together around my grandmother's kitchen table. My Aunt Hattie's memory of her beloved grandfather had come alive, and she shared her own stories of their short time together. Other relatives arrived to look at and read the writings. This was a special time for all of us, but especially me. I was at that turbulent time of adolescence. Finding these journals, a message and record from the past, gave me a focus and a bond with those who had been before me and who had made my own life possible. I felt very important as my grandmother entrusted me with the care of those writings.

I must say that I didn't quite know what to do with them, for this was before home computers and trying to copy them word for word was an impossible task. So, just as my grandmother before me, I stored them in a safe place. I hoped that in years to come there would be time to go back to them. I was only 13 at the time, and much of my life had to be lived. The journals were once more set aside.

As time passed my pursuit of an education, marriage, family, and career and other interests kept me from returning to the journals. However, the knowledge

that they were waiting for me nagged my mind. Finally, several factors led to my giving the journals the attention they deserved:

1. In the summer of 1993 I traveled to Scotland with the Appalachian-Scottish Studies class of East Tennessee State University. As I visited that small, history-laden country I remembered the information I had learned about my Scotch-Irish ancestors from my great grandfather's writings. My ancestor, Christian White, immigrated from Ulster, Ireland, to Germany and then to the United States after the Revolutionary War. He first settled in Pennsylvania, made his way through Virginia, and then settled in Washington County, Tennessee. I would not have known this information if I had not had access to my great grandfather's journals.

2. Time urged me to begin recording the writings, as they were beginning to fade and the pages were becoming brittle. Soon it would be too risky to even touch them.

3. My Aunt Hattie became terminally ill. It had always been her wish to have the writings printed for the family, and I want to have this done in her lifetime.

4. My Appalachian-Scottish Studies professor approved my review and transfer of the writings to computer for printing as a class project.

It was no easy task to read the journals of an 89 year old man. He wrote urgently with only slashes to divide sentences. It had been a long time since I have taken these journals out of safekeeping. The excitement I felt at their discovery had dissipated. I only felt an urgency to get the task completed. I, like my grandmother, Maggie, wondered why he wrote about his life and the times he lived. Why were these writings so important to him?

From my Appalachian-Scottish Studies course work, I learned about the characteristics of the Scotch-Irish people. The Reverend Richard Ray, a Presbyterian minister from Kingsport, identified several of these characteristics as: belief in a Sovereign God, a strong belief in the purpose for man's life, importance of the pursuit of knowledge, and the establish-

ment of education (lecture of August 4, 1994, at East Tennessee State University).

I recognized these same characteristics in my great grandfather through the writings of his journal, and I believe they provide the impetus for his writings. The lessons he had learned and recorded for others to read was a testament of his persevering faith through the trying circumstances of being orphaned, of losing his dream to pursue a higher education, of surviving the Civil War and the difficult years that followed. This faith in a Sovereign God and purpose for his life enabled him to become a leader in the establishment of churches in the rugged mountains and rural areas of East Tennessee and western North Carolina.

This persevering faith and purpose in life also became an encouragement to others. N. E. Harris, a governor of Georgia and son of a family with whom my grandfather lived after his mother's death, said of him: "His coming was certainly an epoch in my life. Up to that time, I had never appreciated the advantage that I enjoyed, both in school and in home life. David [White] began to read everything in sight and tried to impress on me the importance of learning in this way something about the world and the things that had happened in it. I can look back now and recall the fact that my early association with David White awoke within me the ambition to succeed which followed me the remainder of my days." (*Autobiography*, Macon, GA: J.W. Burke Company, 1925, p. 20.)

The desire for knowledge and the establishment of schools as a characteristic of the Scotch-Irish was easy for me to recognize in the journals. He wrote: "Books became an idol to me. I carried them in my pocket to mill to read while the corn was grinding. I esteemed time as precious. So far as schools were concerned, I went into a morose state of mind as though all was lost. My hopes of getting an education died (the Civil War had just started). For this had been the uppermost thought of my life from a boy. I pity any who had a greater ambition to be a scholar and had to fail because the fates were striking at all the schools." The impor-

tance of education to him was evident as he taught school during the early years of the Civil War and immediately afterwards. He considered teaching school as laying the foundation for the future.

My great grandfather was a descendant of those Scotch-Irish immigrants who settled East Tennessee. Ingrained within his personality was the same "love of liberty, love of country, and love of home" (in the words of Oliver Temple, *East Tennessee and the Civil War*, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971, p. 558) that his ancestors had given him. Just as those characteristics were passed down to him, he reaches from the past through the vehicle of a journal to touch the lives of those he would never know in the future. As a great granddaughter he never knew, I am encouraged and comforted through reading his thoughts, sermons, and recollections. I have come to know him through the journals. Hattie, his beloved granddaughter who now faces terminal illness, finds comfort in his discussions on death and the hope of eternal life.

This strong Scotch-Irish purpose in life gave his writings an importance which was recognized by his family. The journals were preserved for another generation. The remarkable thing about preserving these writings is that not only is his story told, but stories are also told of many like him who struggled to find a place in a growing nation. It was important for him to record names of people, their lives, events, and the part they shared in his time. His journal is a record of relationships among people busily building a nation. Thus my great grandfather exhibited another characteristic of his Scotch-Irish ancestry and another reason for writing. In the book *From Ulster to Carolina* (Blethen and Joy, Western Carolina University, 1983, p. 42), the author shares the importance of relationships to the Scotch-Irish. He says, "This cultural interaction is one of the fundamental features of the Scotch-Irish."

David J. White was like many Scotch-Irish descendants who anonymously helped forge democracy and liberty for their descendants to enjoy. Their contri-

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butions to our lives help us to realize the importance of our own existence, and our responsibility to preserve what is important for future generations. If we do not hold on to what is important and safeguard it for the future, as my grandmother did the journals, we lose sight of our heritage, of who we are, of where we've been, and of where we are going. This is the treasure my great grandfather left his family. No great stocks and bonds or bank accounts, but the gift of his life. In reading my great grandfather's journals, I have come to realize why they were so important to him. The lessons, hopes, fears, and dreams have been recorded so that we are encouraged in our life's journey. This is why he wrote so long and so hard on that winter day so many years ago. He had a purpose.

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**SOURCE: "U.S.SCOTS" SUMMER  
1995      pages 8-9 and 11.**