

TO MOUNTAINTOP CEMETERY
SHANKS CEMETERY, PUTNAM CO., TN

86-year-old Shanks Leads steep climb
The Dispatch Newspaper, Cookeville, TN
5 July 1976, Page B

“In God’s own morn, her orb will rise, once more a star in paradise.”

The inscription was hard to read in the dim light filtering down upon the grave through the sheltering leaves and branches of trees towering above.

Mrs. Carolyn Huddleston and her brother George Morris Shanks had to kneel, rub the old tombstone vigorously and trace the aged inscription with their fingers before they could piece together the epitaph. Mrs. Huddleston read the inscription aloud.

Standing beside the grave, Luke Alexander Shanks nodded in agreement as they made out with a little less difficulty the name on the weathered stone.

Mrs. Huddleston read, “Nancy R. Shanks, born March 9, 1834, died July 6, 1877.”

Nancy Shanks has been lying “at rest” for 99 years now in this wild but tranquil setting so remote that even her grandson, 86-year-old Luke Shanks seldom makes it “up” to the old family cemetery any more.

For the old cemetery is up – to reach it takes a vigorous climb up the steep slope of a Buffalo Valley mountain.

The reporter had been concerned about the steep climb when the party had started up the incline, not for himself or his wife or four pre-teen children which he had brought along “for the ride” and the experience but for the elderly Shanks. He was afraid what the ascent might do to the old gentleman if he had to keep up with the younger members of the group.

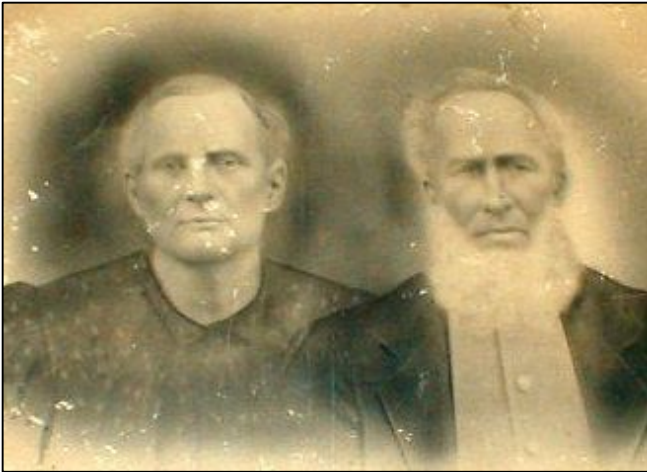
That was the reporter’s first mistake. Seconds later when the 86-year-old opened a gate for the others, then stepped off briskly with his walking stick as though to lead the way up the incline, the reporter called without meaning to be flippant, “Go ahead, I’ll try to keep up.”

That was his second mistake, for there was no keeping up with the spry old-timer as he moved steadily up the hill with ease while the others scrambled, and worked and rested and scrambled far behind. Only the children managed to stay anywhere near Shanks, following the heels of the old man until they were sidetracked by wild blackberries.

When Shanks finally stopped near the crest of the mountain, it appeared to be more to let the others catch up than to rest himself. He was not even breathing heavily.

He led the way to a wire fence and climbed over then waited patiently while the young men with the camera less than half his age laboriously straddled the wire. George Shanks and Mrs. Huddleston followed while the children and their mother remained outside the cemetery fence to keep out of the way and explore the mountainside, something entirely new for this family recently arrived from the Texas coastal flatlands.

Winding their way through the trees, the rest of the party followed Luke Shanks to the grave of his grandmother, where they made out the inscription then turned to the tombstone beside it.



Inspecting the tombstone in the dim light, Mrs. Huddleston slowly read. "Cravin M. Shanks born January 2, 1834 ---" here she hesitated, trying to make out the words. Luke Shanks finished them for her from memory, "died September 23, 1899." This was the grave of his grandfather. (Pictured left: Cravin Shanks and his 2nd wife Elizabeth (Burgess) Lindsey, d/o George Washington Burgess & Charlotta McBride. Elizabeth (Burgess)

Lindsey Shanks is buried in Smellage Cemetery, Boma, Putnam Co., TN).

This time George remembers that usually the caskets were carried by several men, by hand, up the steep slopes to the cemetery. He said that there had been occasional instances when the caskets had been carried up the slope by a mule-pulled wagon, but that a roundabout, less steep, route had to be used.

This time George Shanks had to take a piece of paper and pencil, lay the paper over the inscription and rub it with the pencil to transfer the message in cut stone onto the paper where it could be made out. The message was addressed to Nancy Shanks in the grave beside Cravin's: "Since thou can no longer stay to cheer me with thy love, I hope to meet with thee again in yon bright world above." The elder Shanks commented. "If my grandfather had been living today he would've been 142 years old."

He said that 22 persons have been buried in the old Shanks mountaintop cemetery. Only a few of these graves scattered among the tangle of trees and underbrush, have headstones, he remarked.

"There's a lot of them marked just like this one, Shanks said, pointing to a small, unmarked rock. He said he does not know where many of the graves are located.

“My grandfather’s brother, Bill Shanks, is buried here somewhere. His family came all the way here from Kansas two straight summers and looked for his grave, but couldn’t find it.”

On his way back down the mountain, Shanks related that it had been difficult to transport the deceased up the mountain for burial. He said it has been many years since anyone has been buried on the mountaintop, but can eighty-six-year old century farmer Luke Alexander Shanks come down the side of the hill from the old barn he built many, many years ago on the old family farm.

As the group neared the bottom of the hill, the 86-year-old waved his hand along the side of the mountain and said, he had up until a few years ago plowed the hillside despite its incline and rock out-croppings, and grew good corn crops on it.

“I don’t want to be buried way up there,” he said. “My father and mother are buried in Smellage Cemetery, and that’s where I want to be.”

“I had a brother who died in 1910. Near the end he couldn’t talk and my father wanted to bury him on top of the mountain with the rest of the family. He kept shaking his head ‘no’ and motioning up the side of the mountain, then shaking his head ‘yes’ and motioning towards Smellage.

At first no one could understand him, then someone said, ‘I think he’s trying to tell us he doesn’t want to be buried up there,’” Shanks continued, “Then he nodded in agreement. He was buried in Smellage Cemetery.”



(This would have been William Byrd Shanks, b. 23 May 1886, TN – d. 23 May 1910, s/o Robert Fain Shanks & Annie Anderson. William Byrd Shanks never married, pictured left, courtesy of Miriam (Shanks) Gwaltney)

Robert Fain Shanks & Anna “Annie”
Anderson
Picture courtesy of
Miriam (Shanks) Gwaltney



So it seems there will be no more Shanks to join Cravin and Nancy and the others on the mountaintop at least not for a long time.

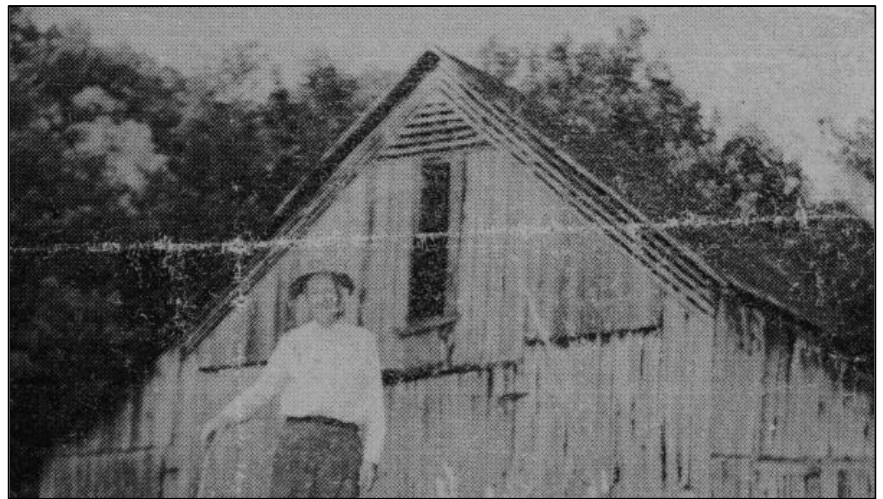
Leading the way back down the mountain from the family burial plot just as he lead the group up the mountain to see the graves was Luke A. Shanks, 86, who can climb the steep slopes like a man a third his age.



Home of Luke Alexander Shanks and his barn. standing on the front porch is his daughter Miriam and her husband William "Bill" Ivy Gwaltney.



Luke Alexander Shanks stands by the tombstones marking the graves of his grandfather and grandmother in the heavily timbered mountain top family cemetery.



Luke Alexander Shanks standing in front of his barn located in Putnam Co., TN.