

LONG CREEK

By John F. Hall

On a steep hill in the Land between the Rivers, you can visit a cemetery called Long Creek. Prior to the 1960s, a small church called Long Creek Primitive Baptist was located near the top of the hill. During the 1930s and 1940s, the Pastor of this small church, Joseph Nuck Darnell, preached once a month to the small congregation. Few people had money in those years. The Pastor was not paid a salary and no offerings were collected during the church service. Pastor Darnell earned a living as a farmer and later



he became a toll collector on the bridges going to and from the Land between the Rivers. People with kin that were members of the small church were buried up and down the steep hill.

For a few years my three grandchildren, Andrea, Heather, and John-John Hall fished with their dad across the road from Long Creek Cemetery. They called their favorite fishing place the “snake pond.” Andrea is almost 15 and Heather is almost 14.

They did not fully appreciate the fact that many of their ancestors on the Oakley side of their family are buried on that steep hill. During my last visit to the cemetery in 2010, I noticed soil erosion around the tombstones of their great, great, grandparents, Chester and Iva Oakley. I decided to make some repairs to stop the soil erosion at the April 2011 cemetery cleaning.

Age has a way of wearing down the body and my four decades of being a soldier were starting to take its toll on my feet. I needed surgery to correct the damage to my feet. Therefore, I asked Andrea to help me make the repairs at the Saturday morning cemetery cleaning. I felt that by helping me she would gain some appreciation of the fact that she has ancestral roots on that steep hill. My wife, Paula (Oakley), prepared some food to be shared with the other volunteers who would be coming to help with the cemetery cleaning. We drove the six miles to pick up Andrea at her home. To my surprise, Heather came to help with the repairs and cemetery cleaning. My son John Andrew, realized that my feet would play out if I worked more than two hours. Therefore, he sent some reinforcements.

Billy Oakley, who once operated a grocery store at the Sun Set Inn in Golden Pong, was



on his zero turn riding mower. He was wearing a straw hat and bib overalls. Jimmie Lane was giving him some instructions. I told them to pose for a picture before going down to the Chester and Iva Oakley tombstone. Heather was raking the leaves away from the tombstone, Andrea spread the grass seeds. I spread fertilizer around the tomb area and Andrea put down the straw.

Bill Miller was raking leaves near his uncle’s grave. His two uncles, like my grandfather, John Hall died in the 1918 Flu Pandemic that killed more than 26 million people

worldwide. Penicillin and other antibiotics did not exist at that time and most people died from complications of pneumonia. Bill said that people were so afraid they would get the flu that they did not have funerals and they buried the died the day they died. Bill continued, he said that when he was a teenager he worked for Chester Oakley. He would “Cho out” corn. Corn drill planters at that time in history were not designed to plant the corn seed 12 inches apart. The planter would only plant the seed six inches apart. Bill was hired to use a hoe to cut out every other corn plant.

Paula’s brother, Grover, snapped a picture of Andrea, Heather and me standing behind Chester & Iva’s tombstone. Bill Miller back in 1970 spoke these words, “To you and me, the graves of our loved ones who sleep beneath the silent earth are reminders to us that



sorrow as well as laughter prevailed here.” After making repairs and raking leaves in that area, I took Andrea and Heather to the tombstone of their great, great, great grandfather, Kansas Territory Oakley. The leaf blower left a lot of small debris on the long flat tombstone. I got on my knees and blew the debris away so the girls could read the entire inscription on the tombstone. We walked further up the hill in search of the tombstone for their great, great, great, great grandparents. I called out to Vickie Lane to come over and help us find their graves. I

asked Vickie to tell them the history of Francis Marion Oakley and his wife Nancy. She said that Francis served in the Civil War and that Nancy was a full-blooded Cherokee Indian. Ancestry.com is not able to come up with any history about Nancy. Indians, it seems, did not preserve the history of their ancestors.

I asked Andrea to read the badly faded inscription on Nancy Oakley’s tombstone. She was able to make out some of the words, “She was not one of us. She done me no wrong.” I guess it was Francis Oakley’s way of telling the world that his wife was an Indian and she was a good woman. Francis died one year prior to the death of his wife. Again, I remembered the words of Bill Miller back in 1970, “As God instructed Moses to teach the law to his children, and his children’s children, so should we continue to instruct the relate the story of the Land between the Rivers to our children and our children’s children.” Vickie Lane said that few people have as many of their ancestors buried in one place as the Oakley’s.

Andrea and Heather were not born when Bill Miller spoke about Golden Pond in 1970. Their dad was only three years old at that time. Yet Bill was able to communicate in a way that kept the girl’s interest. He knew about riddles and he tested the girls. They had an advantage on Bill because they had taken Logic at their former Christian school.

Heather told me that she like Bill Miller because he was not a grumpy old man and he was the life of the party. I guess Heather was referring to the lunch served on the steep hill that day. It was chicken, Bar-B-Que, baked beans, salad, chips, cherry pie and other pies, cookies and sodas. J. B. Oakley gave the blessing and thanked God for the food. I marveled, as I sat in my van with my shoes off, due to the pain, at how the stormy

weather had cleared away. The sun was shining and a cool breeze swayed the evergreen trees. Andrea filled a plate and gave it to me. I had both sliding van doors open to enjoy the fresh air.

I have no real way of knowing if cleaning a cemetery would be a good way to bring history to life for my teenage granddaughters. Bill Miller is part of the story of the Land between the Rivers as much as my wife, Paula, is part of that story. It is, after all, the people who volunteered that day to move debris and leaves off tombstones that keeps alive the memoires and shows respect for their ancestors.

Andrea and Heather had to leave to practice volleyball. Bill came over and gave Andrea and Heather a hug goodbye. They are the great, great, grandchildren of the man that Bill Miller worked for as a teenager. They are a living link to Chester Oakley, whose tombstone held no memories for them prior to this day. Some day they might bring their children to this steep hill and relate to them the story of the Land between the Waters.

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