

## AN ERA REMEMBERED

Family Recounts Civil War Living on a  
White County Tennessee Mountaintop

By Cindie Miller

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*When I was a child, all of this mountain was covered with fruit trees, every kind of peach tree, apple trees, pear trees, cherry trees. Daddy and mama would put us in the wagon and the mules would pull us up the trail to pick the fruit. Mama's sisters, Aunt Esther Simpson, Aunt Sallie Burgess, and their mother, Grandma Cora Beam Geer, peeled and canned peaches and other fruit for their families. There were also huge chestnut trees on the mountain.*

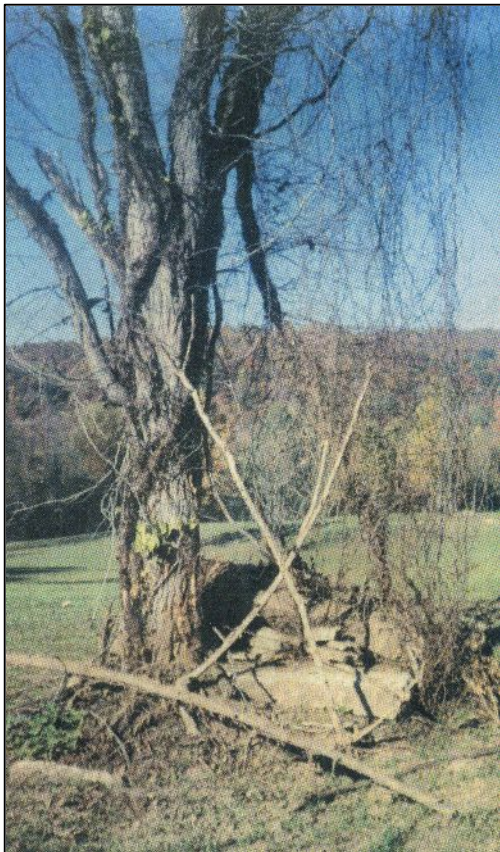
The words are hand-written on the pages of a small photo album. The words, and the photographs that accompany them, chronicle the life of Doris (Gillen) Shanks and her family as they grew up on a 300-acre tract of land near Cherry Creek in White County. Shanks and her family feel a great connection to this property, for their parents bought it in 1930; she and her siblings were born and raised there.

Last Saturday, the land was auctioned. It was a day that Shanks dreaded. The albums that she created will be the record of her life there.

Much like the words of another woman, Amanda McDowell. McDowell, too, grew up on the land near Cherry Creek. Amanda's father, Curtis McDowell, ran a school on the mountaintop which Shanks mentions in her album. That school – Cumberland Institute – came to life on the mountain in the early 1800s and active during the Civil War.

The school boasted numerous buildings: dorms for both boys and girls, a seminary, the families' homes, and the larger main school building. At one time, Curtis wrote that there were 150 students enrolled there. (Exactly when and how the school was established is still something of a mystery. It is mentioned in another book, "James Tate Williams: His Family and Recollections," as well.).

Amanda's diary is the poignant story of a young woman who watched her country and her family torn apart. Moving to the mountain at the age of 15, she was instrumental in keeping the school together through daily dedication and downright drudgery. Her words reflect the hardships of that life, but more importantly, they are a valuable historical account.



Amanda was a young woman during the Civil War, a young woman with hopes and dreams just like any other. She watched the war begin from a distance through news as families dropped their children off at the boarding school and through late-coming newspapers. She watched her brothers, Jack and Lafayette, march off to that war, one to the North, the other to the South.

Amanda's diary, and much of the correspondence she saved, was later discovered by her niece, Lela McDowell Blankenship, who took the precious pages and recreated Amanda's life in a book, "Fiddles On the Cumberland." Amanda and her family come to life on the pages – their loves and hopes, dreams and ambitions, disappointments and deaths.

Most importantly, Amanda writes about her experience as a young woman living through the Civil War and living in

a place that saw the division between the North and South more closely than many. Just over the hill from Cumberland Institute was Yankeetown, and just a few miles south was Sparta and Cookeville. Loyalty to the South ran high, and those who sympathized with the North were, according to Jack, well advised to keep quite about it. The brothers wrote of their decisions and the thought that went into those decisions. Amanda speaks of her heartbreak on the pages of her journal:

(Pictured: The remains of the stone steps of one of the dormitories – a pile of stones).

*May 4, 1861:*

*Little thought have I had that I should ever live to see Civil War in this, our goodly land, but so it is! The Southerners are so hot they can stand it no longer, and have already made the break. There will be many a divided family in this once happy Union.*

*There will be father against son and brother against brother. O, God! That such things should be in a Christian land. That men should in their blindness rush so rashly to ruin, and not only rush to ruin themselves but drag with them so many thousands of innocent and ignorant victims!*

*There are thousands who will rush into the fury with blind enthusiasm, never stopping to question whether it be right or wrong, who, if they only understood it properly, would stay at home with their families and let those who started it fight it out...*

*They are taking on considerably at Sparta. Have raised a secession flag and are organizing companies at a great rate. Why Christian men who live here in peace and plenty with nothing to interrupt their happiness should prefer to leave their peaceful home and all the ties which bind them to their families and rush into a fight in which they can not possible gain anything and in which they may lose their lives is more than I can see. But, of course, my judgment is not much anyway. But in my feeble opinion they will have cause to repent their rashness.*

*I do not think the killing of one another is going to better it any, but on the contrary, I fear it will make it worse.*

The war years took their toll on the McDowell family. Patriarch Curtis McDowell was in ill health much of the time, and his daughters Mary and Amanda were responsible for much of the school's obligations. The school suffered through the war years because of the lack of finances needed to send students there. Mail stopped coming to the school, and news was hard to come by. Amanda had strong feelings about the war and wrote about it during the years of 1861-1866. Her words on Independence Day, 1861, are harsh:

*July 4, 1861*

*Thursday Morning*

*The Great National Holiday*

*I reckon, the nation is so busy preparing to swallow itself that it will not have time to celebrate it with the usual pomp. It seems to me that the thought of this day ought to be enough to stop the mad career of all men who have a particle of patriotism. But nothing short of utter destruction will stop them now.*

On July 5, Amanda wrote:

*But there is one source of enjoyment that nothing can rob me of, and that is consciousness of having at all times and under all circumstances done my duty to the best of my ability and knowledge.*

Amanda took pride in her dedication to duty and comfort in her faith that God would direct her life. On August 20, 1861, she writes poignantly of the changes that have taken place in her family since her arrival at the school on the mountaintop.

*August 20, 1861*

*Tuesday Morning*

*“This day seven years ago, I got home from Uncle William’s. What changes have taken place in those seven years? Our dear Albina, who was then only a little girl, has been for three years sleeping in the earth. Cousin Frances who came home with us was just budding into womanhood. Alas! What a change in her. Married, - Parted, - Divorced,-Fallen-Oh! Frances my troubles have been great, but thine have been tenfold. I wonder if I shall experience as many changes in the next seven years as I have in this.*

She was 22 years old.

Life was busy for young Amanda. In addition to her duties as school teacher, she was responsible for much of her family’s welfare. To read of her daily life is to admire here fortitude and her uncomplaining perseverance. When the war ended, she accepted the news with resignation and skepticism.

*April 17, 1865*

*Monday*

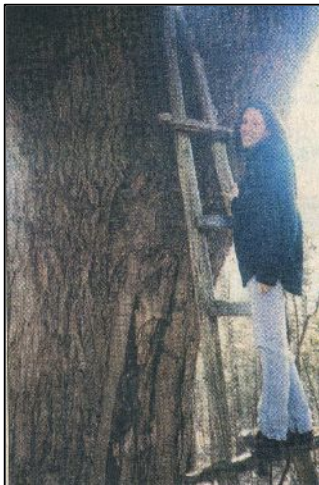
*There is some great news. I have been looking for a grand smash up for sometime, things have been so still. And guess from all accounts the great Southern Confederacy is about “gone up for ninety days” as the boys say. The news is (and is corroborated and told over by every new arrival from Nashville) that Lee, his whole army, Petersburg, Richmond, and some say Davis himself is taken. The latter item is hardly true, but the rest is true, I expect. Some are already rejoicing over the downfall of their oppressors. For truly secession has been the greatest tyrant that ever reigned over this country. For my own part, I try not to rejoice in the prospect of peace...I fear we are going to be disappointed but will live in hope.*

The diary continues for another year and ends on July 11, 1866.

While the war ended, life at Cumberland Institute continued for a few more years. (Perhaps until 1888, according to Tate’s book). Amanda fell in love with a man named Larkin Craig, who became involved in the guerrilla warfare of the latter years of the war; she would have nothing to do with him despite her feelings. She accepted the proposal instead of Hazel Burns and lived a long and happy life with him, producing three children from the union. Amanda never stopped serving her community, and after Cumberland Institute closed, she opened and operated a post office.

She decided to keep the letters the family received throughout the war years as a remembrance, and she kept her diary as well. These accounts were later discovered by her niece, Lela McDowell Blankenship, and compiled into the book *Fiddles On the Cumberland* in 1943. And while Lela “took some creative license” in creating the book, Amanda’s letters and diary entries were scrupulously reproduced in the second edition, republished by Lela’s nephew William and his wife Betty McDowell. About 1,000 copies were printed and distributed to members of the family. Some are still available for sale.

And where does Doris Shanks come into the picture? Growing up on the land on which Cumberland



Institute stood, Shanks and her brothers and sister were fascinated by its history. Through the years, Doris heard many of the stories of the school, and its remains were always a reminder of what once was. More than that, Shanks’ great-grandfather, Robert Henry Geer, taught history at Cumberland Institute.

(Pictured: Jamie Chadwell, granddaughter of Doris Shanks, stands at the giant tree where lovers of several generations may have met or hidden their letters).

“He probably rode a horse up the mountain every day,” Doris writes in her album, “because he lived a short distance away.”

A large tree on the property – one of the few still standing on the mountaintop – may have been the site of many a secret tryst: it was a perfect place for students to hide their love letters, since boys and girls were guided by strict rules of discipline and were not allowed to “fraternize” per Rule VIII of the Rules and

Regulations of the Cumberland Institute” “All intercourse and communication between the sexes expressly prohibited – except such as shall be inevitable at the times of recitation of classes.”

The auction of the property which held so many memories and so much history makes another era gone by. It is though the words of the historians – Amanda McDowell and Doris Shanks – that these memories live on. It is with some measure of relief and joy that Robert Gillen, Shank’s brother was able to purchase the site on which he school stood.

\*Read more about the histories of Putnam Co., TN and surrounding areas and about the McDowell family at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>



Miriam Shanks Gwaltney, Robert Shanks & his wife, Doris Lee (Gillen) Shanks, 1992 at the spring of Cumberland Institute in White Co., TN.

“Fiddles in the Cumberland” by Amanda McDowell 1861-1865 was compiled by Lela McDowell Blankenship and edited by W.J. McDowell in 1987 - publisher: Richard R. Smith - NY - 1943.



Miriam Shanks Gwaltney, 1992 on the hill of where the Cumberland Institute of White Co., TN used to be located. Curtis McDowell built, owned and operated the school, in the foothills of the Cumberlands of White Co., TN. His two sons helped him with the teaching and the building of the school.