

Growing Up in Flat Branch

"The Lawson Family"

Written by Charles Alfred Lawson, Jr.

Flat Branch is a quaint little community nestled in the hills of Grundy County situated four miles north of Tracy City and two miles south of Coalmont. The lay out of Flat Branch is more or less a circle. The road goes all the way around. I really don't know when Flat Branch became a community, but there is evidence of a road through the area that was so worn down by wagons, horses and erosion that they had to move a section of the road to one side. That too became so worn that it was almost impassable when the present road was built through the area where the Childers, Lawsons and Lankfords lived. My guess is that Flat Branch became a community before the eighteen hundreds. This old road may have been part of the Stage Coach system.

Almost everyone around the Flat Branch community got some education in the classroom. To my knowledge there have been three elementary schools in Flat Branch. The first one was a one-room small log building that was less than fifty feet from the Lawson home place. The chimney was made of sticks and mud. The second Flat Branch schoolhouse was built near the railroad that hauled coal from "S" and "M" mines and near the home of Charlie and Fannie Nunley. I do not know when the school was built. I do remember hearing Luther Johnson talk about attending school there. My mother attended school there until they built a two-room school on top of the hill. Everybody knows where that one was. At the beginning of the school term we had two teachers, but some years by Christmas time, the attendance dropped, and there were not enough students to justify having two teachers. That meant we all had to go into the big room. That made it hard for the students as well as doubling up the work for the remaining teacher. The school did not have a well, so two upper grade boys had to go to a local spring to get drinking water. Our heat in the winter was a pot-bellied stove. I had the job of building a fire in each of the two stoves. The teacher paid me a nickel for each fire I built. The air conditioner in August and September was an opened door and windows.

This two-room school was where my mother, Mildred Lankford, finished the 8th grade. My father, Alfred Lawson, also attended this school in his last years of school, but had to drop out to work in the coalmine to support the family. The school also doubled as a community church. We had Sunday School every Sunday; the Methodist had the 1st and 3rd Sunday for the regular preaching, and the Baptist had the 2nd and 4th Sundays. Usually in the summer there were revivals, and people walked for miles around to come fill the

church to standing room only. Of course, some of the neighborhood young men stayed outside and flirted with the girls through the windows.

Sometime in the late 1950's the county reorganized the schools and that was the end of Flat Branch School, but the building still remained a church. The church purchased the building from the county. The building remained a church until I contracted with the church people to build a brick church building that is still in use.

When I was growing up in our little community, everybody knew everybody. The roads were red slate that came from the coalmines in the area. When I returned to Flat Branch in 1967, the roads were limestone gravel and dusty; then in the early 1970's the road was oiled and graveled. I believe I was told the railroad was removed from Flat Branch in 1928, and the railroad bed became a road for all other traffic. In 1936 when my grandpa Albert Lee Lankford died, the road was so bad that the hearse could not get to the home from the railroad bed, so they hauled him in a wagon to the hearse. During my senior year in high school, we had a band concert at Coalmont School. Our principal, Mr. John Anderson offered me a ride by coming through Flat Branch to pick me up. One section of the road was in such poor condition that he thought he would get stuck. He told me after the concert that I would have to walk home.

Some of the names of people who lived in the community during the 1900 to 1930 Census Reports still remain, but some have died, and others have moved to other places. Starting at the stone bridge and going up the hill and around the circle back to the stone bridge included names as Ed Johnson,, Calvin Caldwell, John Pickett, Elihu Fults, Wyatt Childers, Wilburn Fults, Lidge Dykes, Albert Lee Lankford, Ed Nunley, Jesse Fredrick, Oma Meeks, William Price, Will Nunley, Charley Nunley, France Meeks, Clark Irvin, Bob Powell, James Meeks, Ed (Molly) Cribbs, Herbert Nunley, Cal Hall, and Mack Meeks. Others on the outer skirts of the circle, but still considered Flat Branch, were Alex Sanders, Marvin Meeks, Gillam Nunley, Mart Meeks, Frank Short, Oscar Smith, and James (Tom) Smith.

Most of the men worked in the coalmines of the area to support their family. My Grandpa Lankford also did some carpentry work. It was important that all families have their own gardens for survival. They raised corn and hay for the horse that plowed the fields and the cow that gave the milk. Corn was also fed to the chickens that laid the eggs and the hogs that furnished the meat and lard for cooking. Everybody had to work. Everybody had chores to do every day. One of my chores was to gather kindling to build a fire in the cook stove ever morning. Dad would build the fire about 3:15 in the morning and go back to bed while Mom cooked breakfast. Well, one night it was raining, I put off getting kindling for the fire - then really did forget to get it. The next morning at 3:15, Dad called me to build the fire. My thoughts were, "Everything is wet. Where will I find

dry kindling?" I did manage to find some, and I built the fire. Guess what? I never forgot again.

There were several other chores, but the one that took the most time was cutting wood for the cook stove. My brother Herbert shared that job with me. He pulled the crosscut saw to his side and I would pull it back to my side. Then he would pull it back to his side. Finally, we would say, "I'm tired." We would need a drink, so we would go over to the creek, lie down on the bank of the creek and drink the cold refreshing water.

My family was a large family. Mom had 15 children and raised 13 to be adults. There were four boys and nine girls. Mom and Dad did not have a formal education passed the 8th grade, but Mom was adamant about her kids going beyond that. So we all did. We would sit around the kitchen table with two coal oil lamps straining our eyes doing our homework. Later Mom was able to buy an Aladdin lamp that lit up the kitchen so much that we all wanted to rush in to do our homework. In high school we all had homework, and hard studying was necessary because of our lack of good teaching in our elementary school. I will not mention names here, but our teacher only completed the 8th grade. We were not prepared for high school. We found out later that most kids were not prepared for college.



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Most of my siblings were educators, either in elementary schools or high school. I have one sister who is still teaching Office in a high school. Before most of them retired and before our parents passed on, we would gather at the home place on Sundays to visit and discuss this and that. Most of them were Baptist or Methodist and teachers, so those three things were the topics for the day. I told them I was the black sheep of the family because I was not a teacher and I went to a Pentecostal Church. I told them I did my teaching in the U. S. Air Force. There was an article in the "Grundy County Herald" when my last sister finished high school entitled "Bakers Dozen Finishes High School." From the time my oldest sister started to high school until my youngest sister finished, it was 28 continuous years. We all either finished college or finished a trade school. Mom and Dad were proud of their family. As far as I know, none of us smoke or drink alcohol, but we do have a habit of going to church. That is not to say we are saints or angels. "No! Not at all." We have failed many times—probably more times than we have done good.

Now back to the realities of life for the Lawson family of Flat Branch. Life was not all work and no play. On Saturday afternoon if all work was caught up, we played horseshoes, hide and go seek, or kick the can, and we had enough players for a game of ball. Hopscotch was another game we liked to play under the shade of the big oak trees in our yard.

There are many other things I could tell about my life growing up, but for another time.