

INTRODUCTION

Although I had been a "closet keeper" of family records since my teen-age years, and now have a mountain of papers and two recently published books to prove it, I've never once made claims of being an accomplished genealogist. Invariably, I have to look the word up in order to spell it correctly! By profession I am an artist and presently have the honor of serving as Regent of the David Reese Chapter in Oxford, the second oldest DAR chapter in the state of Mississippi. However, I am also one of those fortunate souls having friends and a few distant relatives who are professional genealogists and have occasionally shared the fruits of their labors with me.

In 1992 I was literally handed a thick file on the McGraw line of my family. To be perfectly truthful, at that particular time my only previous knowledge of the McGraw name was that one CORNELIUS McGRAW was reported to have been my great, great, great, grandfather. His rather homely looking daughter Elizabeth having wed one handsome Samuel Thompson Crockett of DeSoto (presently Tate County) Mississippi, who astride his "hoss" had hailed from Franklin County, Tennessee around 1840. Feeling rather guilty about accepting with ease, the many long years of dedicated research, I phoned Tulsa, Oklahoma to offer my appreciation to this distant cousin whom I've never met.

She related that our grandfather Cornelius McGraw, before moving to Mississippi, had earlier migrated to Dickson and Robertson County Tennessee from South Carolina. He was the son of David McGraw and had been born in 1777 during the American Revolution. The records show that in 1809 Cornelius had served as a Captain in the 25th Regiment, Light Infantry of Tennessee in Dixon County. Regrettably, she also informed me that she had searched in vain for over forty long years for any cemetery records indicating the burial place of poor old Cornelius. Equipped with new-found knowledge of the Lafayette County, Mississippi location of his former property, and a overpowering patriotic spirit of adventure, I immediately assumed that he'd most likely been buried on the premises of his last known homeplace. "The very least I can do is to drive over tomorrow and find our long lost grandpa" I told her. Needless to say, this pleasant sounding lady, chuckling at the other end of the line, had very legitimate doubts about my great expectations of finding our "missing link." Today that McGraw land of long ago, (tucked in where Tate, Panola, and Lafayette Counties all three corner) encompasses over 600 acres of clinging kudzu vines, vicious ravines, and dense woodlands!

THE QUEST FOR CORNELIUS MCGRAW

By

Evelyn Gurley Crockett

David Reese Chapter, Mississippi

As if it were a helping hand, I grasped the snarled root offered by the leaning white oak, and struggled to the top of the eroding embankment. Staring back into the ravine from whence I came, I thought about the Olympics, and wondered as I brushed the woods dirt from my denim shirt, just how well those athletes would fare against these Mississippi hills and hollows of Lafayette County. I was "going for the gold" too, and knew it had to be around here somewhere. I could feel it "in my bones".

The legs of my jeans were tucked inside black boots practically reaching to my knees, and I was glad I'd chosen to wear them on my quest for Cornelius McGraw. Wild grapevines trailed from my hair and cascaded over one shoulder. With my trusted sharpshooter (spade) in one hand, a fireplace poker in the other, and a six-shooter (not to be trusted in the least) brushing against my hip, the idea of my becoming frightened, never entered my mind. It was a sure bet though, that I would definitely scare the living daylight out of any man

or beast chancing to happen upon me in these deep woods!

Although we had lived in Oxford many years, only recently had I been made aware of the fact that I had pioneering ancestors living in Lafayette County in the early 1800s. Earl Truett, Oxford's genealogist of great renown, had shown me an old Chickasaw Cession map dated 1835, which indicated that my great, great, great grandfather Cornelius McGraw's homeplace had literally been kissing the Tate County line. The county of Lafayette had become divided when Sardis Dam was dug from the temperamental Tallahatchie River in the late 1930s, so this property lies "across the river" now. Ironically, his estate had been located less than three miles from Tyro, Mississippi, the tiny village of my birth.

The last will and testament of Cornelius McGraw had been ferreted from the depths of the Lafayette County Courthouse where it had been hiding, Lo, these many years. His final resting place, however, had remained deeply shrouded in

mystery. The irony of this new-found information had been overwhelming for one such as I, who as the gossip rags tout, "has an inquiring mind". For what other logical reason would I have found myself to be an hour's drive from Oxford in the chill of a February morning - dodging briars, stumbling down hills, and scanning this critter infested kingdom for tombstones!

Maurice Durley had hunted all over this property located just one fence over from his Daddy's place in Tate County, and had told me just the previous night about an old family cemetery he had run across years earlier. He failed miserably, I might add, to inform me that the new owners now had this property posted like Fort Knox - complete with pad-locked metal gates and signs warning of the dangers of trespassing!

Probably some "Damn Yankee," I thought as I hurriedly heisted one Levi clad leg over the gate. The cemetery most likely wasn't on this posted property to begin with I reasoned, since the sunken old roadbed ahead appeared to angle toward another fence. Making my way to the beckoning old road, I wondered if the owner would actually shoot or just haul me off to jail. Surely any logical landowner or sporting sheriff would understand that the three shells inside my six-shooter were merely meant for snakes and not for hunting. Before relinquishing the scant security of the ancient roadbed and leaping into the wilds, I silently prayed that I neither met the landowner, nor aroused any more than three snakes.

My instructions had been "to go down the field road until I came to a clearing on my right". This had sounded easy enough for a country girl, but the "clearing" now hosted pines, oaks, and an assortment of biting brambles. The fences Maurice had spoken of were now cross-fenced, and the old road stubbornly stopped abruptly there in her tracks before deciding to dive straight down into a 30-foot ravine. With the exception of the lush green of the pines, dottings of cedars and an occasional cluster of century plants, the woodlands seemed void of color.

One side of my face had become scratched after several hours spent walking and "looking to my right" for those six or eight monuments reported to have once been there. As I ambled deeper into the

woods criss-crossing back and forth, an arrogant old cedar proudly poised near a corner fence came into view. Like most Mississippians born "after the turn of the century", I'd been told that a grove of cedars on a hill was apt to yield a grave. However, one solitary cedar guarding one of a hundred like hills, did not necessarily a cemetery make. Still...I was strangely drawn toward this bewitching old snag.

On reaching the tree, I found the area by appearance, no different from all the others. For no apparent reason, other than sheer frustration, I randomly began spading this vine covered area of downed trees and bushes to no avail. My sojourn in these woods seemed destined to scare up little other than a few fox squirrels and the three delirious deer whose wooded sanctuary I'd so irreverently come to invade.

"Why had I wasted time digging holes in some Yankee's sanctified soil, risking being shot, or Lord forbid, - doing trespassing time in the Lafayette County Jail?" I mumbled aloud as I pulled the car into my aunt's driveway at Tyro. The entire episode had hinged precariously on the insane and I knew it. Sadly enough, I also knew that I would stop again on my way back home and continue my compulsive quest for the grave of Cornelius McGraw.

After having related my fruitless wilderness adventure to relatives there at Tyro, I quickly found a recruit in 19-year-old Forrest Russell. He, too, became intrigued with the prospect of finding this "fourth great" grandfather of his secretly slumbering down there on a hill somewhere. Maybe the sharp of eyes of this college student and avid hunter could spot those old monuments obviously blending in the gray terrain I thought, as we drove back down and across the county line.

Forrest would also search in vain before agreeing that no markers were left standing within the radius of this particular country mile. Leading him then to the hill of many holes, I handed him my spade. Although refraining from actually voicing such, I sensed that he had come to question my need to shovel up the earth in what was once old Cornelius' countryside.

It was past 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon when we definitely decided to "give up the ghost". He had much better things to do than dig in the dirt with his demented older cousin out in the wilds, and I

felt the need to return to Oxford where my husband's patience, I'd feared, had become tested to the limits.

While I gathered those strange tools of grave robbers, Forrest nonchalantly gave the spade one final thrust into the soil. The familiar thud of ravaged roots wasn't to be heard this time. Instead, a sharp ear-splitting sound comparable to the crack of a rifle shot rang out loud enough to wake the dead! Instantly we jumped as if we ourselves had actually been struck, and to our shame, I must admit, shouted a few choice exclamations!! These words, I'm confident, are somewhere across the river still, bouncing and echoing over those hilltops which continue to guard the grave of Cornelius McGraw. And I wondered if we had scared poor old grandpa Cornelius as much as he had scared us!

The space had, by some unexplained miracle, struck "DEAD CENTER" his marble monument. Eight or nine inches of soil were quickly shoveled and scooped away before the following inscription could be pieced together:

In Memory of
CORNELIUS MCGRAW

Born in So. Carolina, March 7, 1777

Departed this life August 18, 1859

Aged 82 years, 5 mos. and 11 days.

In seconds it seemed, we had also unearthed his wife's monument safely hidden next to his:

ELIZABETH

Consort of Cornelius McGraw

Daughter of Josiah and Margaret HUNDLEY

Born in Virginia, and died in Lafayette Co. Miss.

Sept. 29, 1854, in the 68th year of her age.

"She lived the life and died the death of a Christian"...

We both looked as if we had suddenly greeted a sarcastic ghost when we brushed away the clinging soil of a century and slowly revealed the remainder of bone-chilling epitaph:

"An angel's arm could not snatch her from the grave,
Lessons of angels could not confine her here."

Obviously neither her grandson's skill with a spade, nor her grand-daughter's uncanny sixth

sense had been taken into consideration. My sons on occasion, had accused me of being a "bonafide witch". This, I thought, as I knelt there shaking my head, will definitely remove all doubt!

After an unsuccessful search for additional monuments, we stood looking down on those old broken pieces of marble. Their engravings testifying triumphantly to us, and to time itself, that these two people once lived. Knowing that beneath this small section of sacred soil rested the remains of over 200 years, conjured up feelings of awe defying deft description.

"Cornelius must have been calling out to us from the grave." I said as we carefully made our way back through the brambles. "Lord, I wish you'd stop saying things like that!" Forrest turned and practically shouted.

Barely moments before we were to reach the edge of the woods, an eerie wind-like sound could be heard whistling faintly over the hills and through the trees. Generalized to the area where we stood, the leaves all around and about us began quivering simultaneously from the strength of this ghoulis, illusive gust. Yet, oddly enough, stopped almost as quickly as they had begun.

At a slightly faster pace, we continued our trek with neither of us immediately commenting on Nature's little prank. That phenomenal trick of the wind once referred to by some of the older black folk as "tree haints". Sheepishly, I finally asked Forrest if he had not thought this occurrence "a bit unnatural too?" Only briefly slowing his gait, he answered "Yes, and I was thinking the same thing you were. Let's get the H___ outta' here!"

The entire scenario had certainly surpassed being considered bizarre by the time we nervously loaded our belongings and slightly chilled bodies into the car. Both agreeing as we drove away, that no one would ever believe us if we dared repeat this story. Somehow though, it seemed only fitting that Cornelius and Elizabeth had been disturbed by their own inquisitive grandchildren rather than rank strangers. A mischievous smile flickered around my lips as I glanced knowingly across the seat at Forrest, my partner in crime. "Maybe they were just bidding us a fond farewell", I softly said. About

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The Outstanding Veteran-Patient, John T. Jackson, sponsored by Chancellor Wythe Chapter; Outstanding DAR VAVS member, Sybil Morgan, Hampton Chapter; Outstanding Teacher of American History, Michael Connolly, sponsored by Chesapeake Chapter; and the Virginia and Eastern Division Outstanding Junior Member, Martha Buler Brosch, Princess Anne County Chapter, were recognized on Opening Night. Seven C.A.R. debutantes, with C.A.R. escorts, were presented by Virginia Brown Holsinger, State President, Virginia Society C.A.R., and received by the State Regent and Mrs. Francis D. Shoemaker, III, Senior State President, Virginia Society C.A.R.

Missy C. DiGiacomo, President, Virginia Juniors Club, presided at the Junior Breakfast. The Marion Moncure Duncan Traveling Tray for Outstanding Junior Participation, sponsored by John Alexander Chapter, was awarded to Freedom Hill Chapter. A contribution for the State Project was presented to the State Regent. She also received a Friends of Junior Membership pin in recognition of her support of Junior membership and her service as a Junior member.



Nebraska

The Ninety-Eighth State Conference of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution in Nebraska was held March 30 through April 1, 2000 at the Quality Inn and Suites in North Platte, Nebraska. Mrs. Carlton (Cheryl) Clark, State Regent, presided. Conference Co-Chairmen were Mrs. John Bode and Mrs. Shirley Lowry. Hostess Chapters were: Pineville, Evergreen, Fort Kearney, General George A. Custer, Loup Trail, Shelton, Sioux Lookout and Thirty-Seventh Star. The theme for the conference was "Patriotism This Century."

Honored guests were: Mrs. Robert W. (Linda) Watkins, First Vice President General; Mrs. William H. (Anne) Keller, Missouri State Regent; Mrs. Wayne G. (Rexene) Plucker, South Dakota State Regent; Mrs. Charles P. (Florence) Michaloski, Ohio State Regent; and Mrs. Lawrence F. (Merry Ann) Smith, Director of Development.

Today's business sessions included reports from state officers and chapter regents. Chapter regents and vice regents were also treated with a luncheon given by the State Regent.

A very memorable Hour of Remembrance was held Friday afternoon to honor all Daughters who have departed this earth in the last year. State Chaplain, Mrs. Alex (Carolyn) Stolarsky made arrangements and the State DAR-lings Choir added their musical talents.

The opening night speaker was from the Veteran Memorial Association of North Platte. The speaker informed us about a memorial proposed to honor all veterans and the local canteen that operated in North Platte.

Saturday morning the Cameo Club met for a breakfast meeting. The program conducted by President Cherry Felkins told about different ways to "show off" family heirlooms such as jewelry and tea sets. Business sessions throughout the day focused on State Chairmen's reports, the need for resolutions from the state society and some fun singing together.

The Awards Luncheon was presided over by State Vice Regent, Ellen White. It was announced at the Awards Luncheon that Martha Riggs had won third place in the national contest for her essay, "I Am A Daughter, Let Me Tell You Why." Nancy Selting was also honored as second place winner at the state level. Both ladies gave us the distinct pleasure of reading their essays to us.

The Saturday evening banquet featured special music by the DAR-lings State Choir and the guest speaker Mrs. Robert W. (Linda) Watkins, First Vice President General. The State Outstanding Teacher of American History Award was presented to Mr. Don Bader of Lexington, Nebraska by Mrs. Kevin (LeAnn) Reichenberg. The DAR Good Citizen Award was presented by Mrs. Janet Gifford and the American History Scholarship was presented by Mrs. Dorothy Holloway. Mrs. Evelyn Vohland, Honorary State Regent, installed the State Officers for the 2000-2002 term.

The Conference ended with benediction and an invitation to the 2001 State Conference in Kearney, Nebraska. All sang "Blest Be the Tie That Binds" to end the evening. A reception was held for the incoming state officers on the Terrace.—LeAnn Reichenberg

McGraw

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that time a mournful song about "Diggin' up Bones", and "doing anyTHANG' that turns you on" wailed from the car radio. "Jesus!" he replied....

Immediately on my return to Oxford, I notified my stunned distant cousin in Oklahoma and Mr. Truett drove over with me the next day to photograph this miraculous find. Later that evening, still filled with excitement, I phoned his home again for some now forgotten reason and he sounded extremely tired. "Is something wrong?" I earnestly asked. "I'm getting old" he answered dryly. "I've been a long time since I've been out in the woods with a witch!" UPDATE: One week would pass following our discovery of the McGraw gravestones before we would be directed to the burial place of the PROPST family. Located several hundred yards farther down the road, it was, indeed, "a small family cemetery with six or eight stones...in a clearing on the right!"