

GROWING UP IN VIRGINIA

Memories of life on the farm in the nineteen forties-- Northeast portion of Montgomery County--we called it the Roanoke Valley but it is now called the Catawba Valley.

Uncle Harry's store: Uncle Harry Bennett had a country store and a gas pump in front next to the single lane and barely surfaced hard road. (This is now a two-lane Virginia Byway). The store was one room with a potbelly stove for heat. The store had a glass candy case filled with several types of candy: peppermint sticks, horehound sticks and licorice. I can't remember any kind of chocolate, nor were there any cookies or cakes. There were several shelves filled with large tins for sugar, flour, beans cornmeal and some shelves with rows of canned goods. Also there was a wooden crock of salted fish and a container of dill pickles. The dill pickles were popular. Also, canned peaches were popular. Often farmers would come in, buy a can of peaches, open and eat them on the spot. No utensils were used, just a pocketknife. Outside and adjacent to the store was a pile of neatly stacked wood to feed the stove. There would frequently be a black snake near the woodpile (said to keep away the mice) and occasionally a copperhead was seen there.

Area's first Bomb Shelter: Uncle Harry had a reputation as a philosopher and a dreamer, but not much of a doer. He had hump back from an accident working on the railroad, and my Grandmother had given him the property on which to build the store. His wife, Aunt Bertha, was known to do much of the work. As an aside, Aunt Bertha taught me to swim in the North Fork of the Roanoke River. The river was about a hundred yards behind the store. One of Uncle Harry's beliefs and fears was that we were going to be bombed and that they needed a bomb shelter. So he spent a great deal of time and no small amount (for him) of work constructing a basement under the store. To our knowledge, this was to serve as the first bomb shelter in the valley. And of course he stocked it with canned peaches and other nonperishable goods.

A lesson learned: the single gas pump in front of the store was made of metal with a glass container built in toward the top. It operated by a hand pump that would force gasoline up and into the glass container part of the pump. Then by force of gravity, a hose let the gas run out of the glass container into a vehicle or container. I believe five (5) gallons was the maximum you could pump, but it might have been more or less. I do know that the way you measured the amount of gas was by how much you let run out of the glass.

Uncle Walter, who managed the farm, bought a new (1948) Pontiac from Epperly's in Cambria (now Christiansburg). On rare occasions, Uncle Walter would let me drive his new Pontiac. On one occasion, he instructed me to get some gasoline from Uncle Harry. To go from the home, where the car was kept in a garage, to Uncle Harry's store, was about a mile. And it necessitated driving from the home a quarter of mile to get to the paved road and then to the store. I drove to the hard road and stepped on the gas—all the way up to maybe 35 miles per hour. As I moved off the paved surface and braked to stop beside the gas pump, the wheels of the car hit gravel and started skidding. It must have skidded 60 to 90 feet—it seemed like an eternity, and missed the gas pump by inches. It was only by the Grace of GOD that, what might have been a terrible accident was avoided. The lesson learned is that braking on gravel is as bad as braking on ice. DON'T TRY IT!

The store is still standing. It can be seen today approximately 40 feet from the road and just east of the Bennett Cemetery on the other side of the road (Sam and Marie Hancock's farm). I suppose the basement/bomb shelter is still there.

The watermelon patch: Behind Uncle Harry's store, between the store and the North Fork of the Roanoke River was fertile land. Uncle Harry always had a garden there worked by Aunt Bertha. In with the corn and beans were watermelons. On a particularly hot summer day, several of us stopped by the store after working the hay field. Uncle Harry determined that we were entitled to all the watermelons we could eat. And eat we did—**the best watermelon I ever tasted.**

Which reminds me of another true story: Later in my life, I was a prison guard (in a cell block) in Grovetown, Ga. Grovetown is about 12 miles from Augusta and close to Fort Gordon (was Camp Gordon then). Watermelons were grown in abundance by tenant farmers, and lay ripening in the fields beside the road. This was an important source of income for the farmers, perhaps the only source for some. Service personnel were prone to take one (or more) watermelons as they went back and forth to the army base. One particular watermelon field had a huge-- bill board size sign in the field that could be seen easily from the road. Written or painted by hand on the huge sign, with hardly a word spelled correctly, was a warning that everyone could read:

“THSE ERE MI MELENS. ONE O DEM IS PISONED AN U DARNT KNO WICH”

This must have stopped the pilfering because I never say any serviceman in that field of watermelons after the sign was erected.

RBC