

**Bruce Hopkins Writes  
A Long Journey Home**

I often wonder what the old man thought as he got off the train on Greasy Creek nearly a century ago. I'd like to know what time of day it was when he got here. Was it early in the morning as the sun was just peeking over the ridge tops or late in the evening as the night closed in? Or did he come during the day when the bustle of the coal camp was at its busiest, with sawmills screeching through freshly-cut logs, making miles of lumber that was consumed immediately with sawdust still clinging to the boards? All around him would have been the metallic clatter of hammers forcing wood into shapes of houses and stores and churches, and he would be surrounded by voices shouting orders in English and mutterings in some alien language as workers strained to meet deadlines. The country's thirst for coal was tremendous, and the McKinney Steel Company was impatient to get the housing ready for the droves of workers that would soon arrive to go into the pits and dig it out for the giant steel mills of the American North.



William and Sarah

He might have come at night, on the train that either pulled up into Greasy Creek or backed up the narrow valley, since there was no roundhouse at the end of the line to turn around a steam engine. By then the workmen would have ceased construction

for the day, unless the construction never ceased and went on around the clock. I do not know what it was like for him when he arrived, but I know he would have seen that these were not the hills he had seen six decades before, when he wore a blue uniform. He was part of a great army then, attempting to strike a final blow against the South and bring the terrible conflict to an end.

I know a little more about him now, unlike the days when my brother or I would carry flowers to his grave because our father wanted his sons to remember soldiers' graves, no matter who they were or where they rested. I learned what his gravestone meant when I read *Gone With The Wind* and learned about the American Civil War. I sometimes created fanciful stories in my mind, envisioning a soldier cut down in battle on a foreign field, leaving behind a sweetheart somewhere far away, a sweetheart whose memories of him would fade as the years passed and she never saw his face again. It would have been a story worthy of a novel, and I could see myself writing his book.

I never did, but the real story was no less romantic.

William Brackin came to Greasy Creek, in Pike County, in the far eastern arrowhead of Kentucky, in the care of his oldest daughter, Mary Jane, and her husband Grafton Willoughby. He would have been nearly eighty years old then. He came from Muhlenberg County, in the western part of Kentucky, where the coal seams were deep underneath the rolling landscape, where his son-in-law learned his trade building houses for the coal camps there. In Pike County, where the coal seams were richer and jutting out of the hillsides, the era of the great coal camps was just beginning. Rail service to Pike County was barely ten years old, and the old man could even have arrived on one of the riverboats that still plied the river, although the death knell for the tiny steamers was already ringing.

All any of us know is that he came here in 1919 and died two years later. My great-grandfather, who was the prime contractor for the Greasy Creek camp, gave the family space in our family cemetery for his grave. For two more years the family tended it, but by 1923, Grafton had finished his work and he and Mary Jane went home. I can imagine her last visit to her father's grave and I can almost see the spots where her tears would have fallen on the white marble stone the government gave him for his service.

I wonder if she ever came back before she passed away in 1936. I suspect she did not; the family told me that sometime between 1925 and 1928 Grafton walked out of the house one morning to go to work and simply disappeared. I doubt that Mary Jane, elderly now herself, would have taken such a long journey, almost to Virginia, especially during the Depression, when money was scarce. Eventually, the Brackin family simply forgot where their ancestor was buried, although they adopted the misspelling on his tombstone for their family name: "Bracken" instead of "Brackin." It might have been Mary Jane's way of making sure he would always be remembered, even if his grave were lost.

But it was never lost; my father and my grandfather made sure of that. They were both soldiers and knew what it meant to serve their country. I remember my grandfather hobbling through the bushes with flowers and returning without them. I learned why he went when my father entrusted me with the job when I grew older. My father made sure all the soldiers' graves in the cemetery were decorated. Two other Civil War soldiers slept in the cemetery. There were two World War II soldiers who fell in Europe, their bodies brought back to us in metal cases after the war was over; and at least a half-dozen more who had left Greasy Creek to fight America's enemies but were fortunate enough to return reasonably whole. They were all my family, except for William, but that did not matter to my father.

I mentioned William briefly when I wrote *Spirits in the Field*; I said that when I was given the task of identifying the unknown graves on my old family cemetery, I knew only one grave that would not have been of my family. That was William's. The rest I struggled to identify, with limited success, for nearly six years, until the spring of 2003 when time was up. Surprisingly, William was the first victory for my cousin Maggie and me when we began our battle against time. Maggie Oliver also descends from both Hopkinses and Praters, and lives in Ohio. Her work on family history began years before I was given the news that our cemetery was in the way of a new road. With her help, we found the Bracken family, who were looking for their ancestor, and made arrangements to have him returned to

Muhlenberg, where none of his family still lived. It was some compensation for the new stones marked “ Unknown” on the relocation cemetery.

We were delighted when we learned that Sarah's grave was known, and we hoped only that we could re-inter him close to her. Sarah was his wife for over thirty years. When she died in 1898, he buried her in a quiet little cemetery connected to an ancient church that still stands, two hundred years after it was erected. William bought her a beautiful marble stone, white in color and laced with pink veins. I suspect she liked pink roses; the Hopkins women did and pink roses once adorned the cemetery where William went to his rest, albeit far away from the spot where his wife rested.

In 2003, I sent him back to her.

I could not accompany him; I still had work to do as the last of my family graves were taken up. Neither could his family be there to see him laid next to his wife, on the very spot where he probably thought he would once sleep himself. It troubled me that no one but the grave contractors would have been there to witness his return, but modern life gives us little opportunity to remember our dead. However, on April 30, 2006, exactly eighty-five years after the old man drew his last breath, we all came together in Muhlenberg to pay our last respects.

It was pouring rain when we arrived that morning, almost like the heavens were weeping for the man we were coming to honor, and I wondered if anyone would be able to hear what I wanted to say about him above the storm. I was asked to tell about the cemetery where he slept for so long and how he came to be returned. I would have liked to talk about his life as well, but I knew little of it. I knew no more than what the family knew and although they happily shared with me the fruits of their research, there was little I knew about the man himself. I learned much of the facts of his life from his records of his pension, a pension he well deserved.

He was a young man when war broke out and he joined the 12th Kentucky Cavalry as soon as it was formed. He was in Company A. Early on, a skittish horse reared and fell on him, permanently separating his abdominal wall. He could have taken a medical discharge then, but he strapped on a wide belt to keep his intestines from bulging out of his skin and kept on serving. Eventually, he mustered out when the regiment did, after fighting through Tennessee and Kentucky and even into Georgia at the Battle of Atlanta.

In the cold December of 1864, he came to Southwest Virginia with General Stoneman, to attack Saltville, where most of the South's vital salt was being produced. Their mission was to destroy the saltworks, wreck the lead mines at Wytheville, where most of the Southern bullets were cast, and burn the powder works nearby. On the way, they would tear up the last railroad tracks linking the Western and Eastern theaters of the nearly prostrate South. It was mean and cruel work, but it had to be done, and I am confident no one took any pleasure in it.

In front of Stoneman was General John Cabell Breckinridge, one of the most important, yet almost completely unappreciated Southern generals, in his last action before Jefferson Davis called him to Richmond to become the last Secretary of War for the dying nation. Breckinridge commanded mostly Kentucky boys, for most of the Virginia boys were away with Lee, freezing in the trenches of Petersburg. Other Kentucky boys rode with William on that campaign, some fighting their own brothers. It had been that way since the War began. Nowhere else was the grand motif of brother-against-brother played out more tragically than in the hills of Kentucky and Virginia. Six of my ancestors fought there: three Union boys, two Confederate boys, and one Confederate who went over to the Union.

I cannot help but wonder if any of them came upon William during that cold December. Most of them were at the Battle of Marion, which Breckinridge managed to win, in spite of three-to-one odds. But victories were now rare for the

South; the young nation was nearing its end, and 1864 had been the most harrowing year of the War. Four months later, it was all over. A hundred years later, Robbie Robertson wrote about it with the song, *The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down*. That was only a song; the truth was far worse, but mercifully, it was the last major action for William. After the summer of 1865, his regiment mustered out and William, still wearing his truss, went back to the hard life of a farmer.

But I was curious about other things.

I'd like to know if Sarah was his sweetheart before the War. Was she waiting for him when he came back, waiting for him alone? Or did she have another sweetheart who never came home and did their consolation grow into something else? Did their love grow from some other loss? In 1865, there was more loss than could be comprehended today. They married in 1866, a fact that would suggest they did not rush into each other's arms after the War.

Yet, he could have waited to see if he could work the farm again after his injury. He could have postponed the wedding until he was sure that he could support a family. Whatever the case, we know their marriage was happy, although in spite of his wartime injury, William outlived Sarah by over twenty years. In some ways, that might have been merciful. She did not live to hear the news that one of their sons, after concluding a business deal in Europe, booked passage on the *Titanic* and never came home. She did not live to see her progeny called to fight another war, the Great War, or see her descendants fight another enemy, one the boys brought back with them: the Great Spanish Influenza Pandemic. Six times more Americans died in the United States than did on the blood-soaked fields of Europe. William saw it all, however, and it seems unfair that he should have to live through the Civil War and had to live through the more modern tragedies as well. Did he become weary from it all, and did he look forward to resting beside Sarah near that tiny Presbyterian country church?

At least, by the time William came to Greasy Creek the old war was long over. When he died, sons of soldiers he may have fought against, or beside, helped lower him into his grave. And eighty-two years later, the great-great-great grandson of six of those soldiers helped lift him out of it.

I promised myself that I would visit his grave some day. I rarely went to sleep at night without thinking of the fact that I had not seen it and was not assured that it would be safe from any other disturbance. I had grown fond of the old man that I had never seen. Tending his grave had brought me close to him and to his family, which I had also never seen, yet the connection between us was palpable.

When I met his descendants, with whom I had only corresponded, we embraced like it was a family reunion. Perhaps it was; we shared a common link in William. Somehow the old man had brought us all together. I signed copies of my book for them and struggled to find something to say different from what I had written for strangers. Oddly, I wanted to sign with something like "Your brother," or "Your cousin," but we shared no blood. So I wrote my standard inscription instead.

It did not seem enough.

They did not seem to be strangers; they told me they felt like they were as much a part of Greasy Creek as I was, and indeed they were, for Greasy Creek was now part of their story, part of the family history they would relay to their children. And they would always be part of mine. I looked for something in their faces that would reveal something of William's. There are no pictures of him, so none of us have a reference, but the face I put together that day was not unlike the one I had envisioned before I met his family. It was a kind face.

When I began my welcoming speech, the rain began to falter; soon it changed to a fine mist, and by the time "Taps" was played, the weather had begun to clear. When the service was over and it was time to depart, it was strangely difficult to

say good-bye to the Brackens, and I sensed that they felt they same. I do not think we will forget each other.

After the last car had pulled out, I walked across the nearly empty field to say good-bye to the old man one last time. I put my hand on the Union headstone that my brother or I had decorated every Memorial Day for as long as I could remember. It felt different this time; it felt at peace, if a quality so intangible can be detected from a block of stone. But the stone was not cold, maybe because the strengthening sun had warmed it, and I felt at peace as well. The thought crossed my mind that some things are meant to be; that it was somehow intended that the old man would come home eventually, and that I was merely an instrument in some greater design. I could almost sense that the old man was satisfied now, that he knew that his family had gathered above him, and his journey, and ours, was finally over.

I'd like to write his story someday; it would be the story of a good man who did his duty and raised his family in spite of tremendous hardship. It would be the story of a family that found itself after its progenitor was lost for decades. It would have the grand sweep of clashing armies, the power of great events, and yet it would have the intricacies of a simple life. It would be a war story, a ghost story, a love story, and above all, it would be an American story.

And it would be my story too.