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Yesterday And Today—

After 50 Years Nurse Still On The Job

By SHIRLEY DONNELLY

A chance meeting with Mrs. Mabel Leet Gwinn on the street at Oak Hill the other day started a chain of memories to clinking in my mind.

Long a registered nurse, and one of the best of that noble profession, Nurse Gwinn, now a widow, is still on the job. It was June 10, 1923, that the late Wallace Gwinn (1901-1971) of McKendree squired the young student nurse into the long-gone Baptist parsonage at 431 Main Street, Oak Hill, for me to marry them.



It is well remembered that it was a chilly day — June 10, 1923 — and a drizzly rain was pelting down. I had a grate coal fire going in the room in the house then being used as my study.

MISS LEET was at that time a student nurse at the noted old McKendree Hospital, an institution long since joined to the ages.

Up stream on New River and across from the hospital lived the Loomis Gwinn family. Wallace Gwinn was one of the sons in that family and talked the pretty young student nurse into marrying him. A child, a baby boy was born to that happy union but died in infancy.

Well do I recall holding the funeral service — my 82nd funeral — of the child on Oct. 22, 1925. His name was Wallace Leet Gwinn. On June 16, this year, the funeral of Mrs. Ethel M. Ballard was my 2,125th.

AFTER Mable Leet and Wallace Gwinn were married she went on to complete her nurse's training at the Laird Hospital at Montgomery.

Still in good health, Nurse Gwinn is still practicing her profession with the feeling that as long as she is able to help suffering humanity she has no moral right to retire.

That's the way I feel about her profession and my calling as a minister. It is my belief that this is the world for work, with rest being reserved for the next.

WE CHATTED about how the work day of the nurse has changed since Mabel Gwinn embarked on her life's work. As a young nurse she cleaned and scrubbed floors in the hospital where she practiced in addition to looking after the patients.

Her's then was a day from 10 to 12 hours long and being on call in case of an emergency. Wages were small in those times. Today's nurse has it much easier and that's with a salary far beyond what doctors were paid in the early 1920's.

Today the nurse has an aide to assist and the aide has a hospital volunteer to aid him. The aid of today gets a salary more than that of the nurse in the hospital 50 years ago.

Few people do more good in this world than the conscientious nurse who goes about her work with a cheery smile.

MONDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 19, 1962 — FOUR

Yesterday And Today—

Historic Gwinns Of Fayette County: I

By SHIRLEY DONNELLY

The Nov. 6 funeral service of Mrs. Rosa Gwinn, 89, carried me to the ancestral burial grounds of the Gwinns on New River. This is almost opposite the long abandoned West Virginia Miners Hospital at McKendree in Fayette county.

To get there we had to go by way of Terry at the base of Bat-off — really Batteaux — Mountain. There used to be a fairly good road from Terry to the Loomis Gwinn farm, but after the Gwinns all left the road grew up in brush.

In order to carry out the wish of their mother that she be buried alongside her husband, the Gwinn boys hired a bulldozer to put the road in condition for the funeral party. Because of this, the high wheel-base trucks got us there in good shape and returned us safely to our cars which we left at Terry.

SINCE THIS REMOTE region abounds in interesting local history, the trip, though one of sorrow, was fascinating to me. Progenitor of the Gwinns of this particular family was Laban Gwinn. He was born Feb. 28, 1828 and died on March 16, 1900, at the age of 72.

Years ago the Gwinns and others who have loved ones buried in this cemetery erected a durable

link fence of heavy galvanized wire around the cemetery.

Inscription on the weathered marker that designates the old patriarch's grave recites: "Laban Gwinn. Died March 16, 1900. Aged 72 years and 18 days." By his side reposes the dust of his resolute wife. Stone at her tomb has on it this inscription: "Mary J., Wife of Laban Gwinn. Born June 10, 1838. Died April 23, 1910." She lived 71 years, 10 months, and 13 days.

Their story is one of struggle and heroism.

WHEN THE CIVIL WAR broke out in 1861, Laban Wwinn was of military age but he had a family. Added to that, he lived in a county that was Confederate in sympathy and service, whereas Laban Gwinn was a Union sympathizer.

Word of his sentiment for the North was not long in reaching the ears of Captain W. D. Thurmond of Oak Hill who commanded a company of Partisan Rangers and rode herd on all who opposed the Confederacy. Captain Thurmond detailed a unit of his company to arrest Laban Gwinn as a Union sympathizer. Such persons were usually sent as prisoners-of-war to Libby Prison at Richmond, or shot on the spot.

A neighbor boy in the mountain country near by learned of Captain Thurmond's plans and hurried to the Laban Gwinn home to warn him. Gwinn and another man guarded the river crossing near his home that night, with their mountain rifles. Meanwhile,

Mrs. Laban Gwinn was rounding up some rations and getting horses and wagon ready for travel. Thurmond was coming in from the Quinnimont section in the direction of the Gwinn settlement.

GWINN AND HIS LITTLE family eluded Captain Thurmond's men and made their way to the vicinity of Indianapolis, where they remained until the war was over.

However, Captain Thurmond's men reached the Gwinn home and burned it to the ground. After his return to his farm after Appomattox, the Laban Gwinn family lived under a rock cliff for two years until another house could be constructed.

To this day, every Gwinn by the name commonly votes Republican.

While trudging about the old homestead of the family members, whose mother we had just buried, reminisced.

One thing they told of was a unique apple tree. When Mrs. Laban Gwinn started to return from Indianapolis after the crushing of the Confederacy, she broke from an apple tree a water sprout to be used as a horse whip on the return trip. When she reached the old home place she stuck the water sprout down in the rich soil and it took root and grew into a tree. It bore an apple that was shaped like a pear and had a transparent core, according to a son of the late Mrs. Gwinn—Laban Gwinn, of South Charleston.

Years ago the tree died but another has come up from its roots.



Yesterday And Today—

Historic Gwinns Of Fayette County: II

By SHIRLEY DONNELLY

Soon after the Civil War ended there was born to Laban and Mary J. Gwinn, his wife, a daughter, Emily Gwinn. How long people have been buried in the Gwinn graveyard across New River from old McKendree Hospital can be seen on a weather-beaten marker:



"Emily, daughter of Laban and M. J. Gwinn. Born Sept. 22, 1867. Died October 14, 1870." It will soon be a century since that child was born and passed away. On another stone this was noted: "John Gwinn. 1858-1935." Wife of this old settler was "Rosa Gwinn. Died March 22, 1950." She was a Montgomery, of the family for which Montgomery is named.

WHEN WE WERE at the Gwinn home place Nov. 6, it was to lay to rest Mrs. Rosa Bell Gwinn who was 89 on July 11, 1962. She was a Spade before her marriage to George Loomis Gwinn and hailed from Creamery in Monroe County. By her husband we buried her.

Inscribed on his marker is: "Loomis Gwinn, 1861-1927. Gone but not forgotten." He died Jan. 27, 1927, one of his children told me. George Loomis Gwinn and Rosa Bell Spade Gwinn were the parents of 13 children—seven boys and six girls.

Those seven boys were all born first, seven boys in a row. Then came the girls, six in a row. It is doubtful if there is another such record.

Of course, there is the one that Grover Jones and his wife set at Peterstown when their first 16 children were all boys. Then a

girl was born to them and she was the last birth in the family.

Two of the 12 children of Loomis and Rosa Gwinn died in their infancy and are buried in the Gwinn plot.

ANOTHER STONE in this cemetery dolefully heralds these statistics: "Cynthia, daughter of Laban and Mary J. Gwinn. Born August 13, 1870. Died December 12, 1894." She died at 24.

From the lips of her mother she surely must have heard the story of the hardships suffered by the Laban Gwinn family in the Civil War when Capt. W. D. Thurmond's partisan rangers burned the Gwinn home to the ground after the family had fled to Indiana to escape further ravages.

ONE OF THE SEVERAL unmarked graves in this old hamlet of the dead is unusual. In the middle of this particular grave a cedar tree, 10 or 12 inches in diameter, is growing. Partly surrounding the cedar is a huge English boxwood shrub.

"In that grave the remains of nine persons are buried," volunteered one of the Gwinn girls the day we buried her mother. Then she went on to narrate how eight of these were children of a family named Witt. The ninth person was a child who was an aunt of the eight Witt children. All nine were burned to death when the house in which they were living near McKendree station was destroyed. No longer remembered was the date of this tragedy. If any reader has knowledge of it, we would like to know it.

ANOTHER OF THE GWINNS said a big stone bespoke another tragic happening. That stone reads: "J. Lucas Howland, 1877-

1919."

This is the sad story of this man. In the summer of 1919 two sisters and their husbands were on an outing on New River near Thurmond. Two of them were swimming and got caught in the treacherous undertow of the dangerous stream. As they were going down, the two others in the party tried to rescue them and were also drowned!

In some strange manner the two original swimmers managed to get out alive but their rescuers went down to a watery death. J. Lucas Howland and Mrs. Ora Keys, his wife's sister, were the two who were drowned.

Some time later Mrs. Howland, wife of the drowned man, married the husband of the drowned woman. It was about 1922. The drowned woman was Mrs. Ora Keys. Before Mrs. Keys and her sister, Orlie, were married their name was Reed. Some yet living may remember this river mishap of 43 years ago. These people were cousins of George Loomis Gwinn.

ALSO BURIED THERE IS Dennis Reed. He was living with a family in the country near Bluefield. One night a varmint was after the chickens and the housewife, a Mrs. Flowers, got a gun to scare it off. In some unexplainable manner the gun was discharged and the load struck Reed in the face and killed him.

A month after he was buried his body was exhumed and an examination made of it by Dr. Wheeler of the McKendree Hospital. The proceeding was witnessed by some of the Gwinn boys who never forgot it. More of the community history of the Gwinn region on New River tomorrow.

Yesterday And Today—

Historic Gwinns Of Fayette County: III

By SHIRLEY DONNELLY

Across New River from McKendree Hospital lived George Loomis Gwinn on his 88 acre farm. There he raised one of the largest families Fayette County has ever had.

Gwinn built a 16-room house of the best materials the forest afforded. There was not a knot in a single piece of timber used in its construction. A huge porch runs half way round the big dwelling. In the basement is a hand-dug well, 12 feet or more deep and three or four feet in diameter. Laban Gwinn, a son of Loomis, told me he dug the well himself.

To reach the Gwinn farm in the days of its glory they got off the train at McKendree and walked east on the tracks half a mile. Then they crossed the river in the family boat to the Gwinn landing in front of the big house. The Gwinns had a moat—New River itself. Spacious and sprawling were the well-kept grounds. While people in that section were few the 13 members of the Loomis Gwinn family—the parents and the 11 living children—comprised quite a colony.

Labor was not a problem. Gwinn brought up his children to believe that there is grace in honest toil. Corn, oats, and garden products were raised in abundance.

IN THE OLD DAYS Loomis Gwinn had his own grist mill, water powered. In Salt Lick Hol-



low, where he was born in 1861, Gwinn quarried a pair of millstones which he used in his mill. There abandoned, we found the nether millstone which had not seen use in a generation. It should weigh 600 or 700 pounds as West Virginia sandstone weighs 178 pounds to the cubic foot. It was around four cubic feet in content.

A man's millstones were the only thing that could not be sold for his debts in Bible days. In the Mosaic law this was forbidden because the millstones were the man's life. His children could be sold to satisfy his creditors, sold into slavery for a price, but his millstones could not be touched no matter how much he owed.

WHEN McKENDREE Hospital was closed down by the state in September, 1941, the C & O station was little used thereafter. One by one the local trains were discontinued and that made access difficult over hazardous roads.

Around 1942 the last of the Gwinns departed from their big house and the farm—once a show place—was put on the market. It was sold by the Loomis Gwinn estate and others took it over.

When the hospital closed, one of the Gwinn girls was director of nurses. She was Nelle Gwinn, now Mrs. Ira Wriston, and a member of the nursing staff at Beckley Memorial Hospital. She was at her mother's funeral and spoke nostalgically of the old mercy house on the river.

TODAY THE GWINN house and farm is owned, or held under op-

tion, they tell me, by Monroe Worthington, erstwhile Beckley and Oak Hill newspaper man, now in Wheeling.

New River from Thurmond to Terry has the best fishing to be found in West Virginia. If the state were to fix up a passably good all-weather road from Thurmond to Terry, the river bank would be lined with summer lodges, fishing camps, and homes for those who want to get away from it all from time to time.

This is one good bet the state is overlooking. There is enough rock along the road to put in a good road base. A few weeks with a big bulldozer and a rock crusher and a few trucks would give that section a road and do something for this area.

OTHERS BURIED in the Gwinn Cemetery are: "Virgie Gertrude Miller, 1898-1918"; "Myrtle Ettie Miller, 1900-1918"; "Ima, daughter of H. L. and Emma Stalford, 1912-1918"; "Oak and Dennis Reed, sons of Daunt and Sarah Reed"; an infant, "Laban Gwinn, died Feb. 1901"; "John B. Gwinn, Oct. 14, 1904-Nov. 19, 1932"; "Earl P. Gwinn, Nov. 4, 1902-Sept. 22, 1922".

Numerous dornicks are there leaning in the ground. They mark the graves of the pioneers who lived and died there before the coming of the patriarch Laban Gwinn, (1828-1900). One of the Gwinn family said those in the dornick-marked graves must have been there for at least 150 years.

Pioneers followed the water courses and often died along the way.

Tomorrow the last of this series.

THURSDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 22, 1962 - FOUR

Yesterday And Today—

Historic Gwinns Of Fayette County: IV

By **SHIRLEY DONNELLY**

The Loomis Gwinn home is at the foot of the mountain on which the noted Garden Grounds of Fayette County is located. One can reach the Garden Grounds by way of Glen Jean.

When Laban Gwinn, (1828-1900), was in his heyday, his neighbor on the plateau above him was Ben Taylor, cousin of Zachary Taylor, former president of United States and a former general in the United States Army. Taylor operated a hat factory at the Garden Grounds. His wife and daughters manufactured blankets and coverlets from the wool Ben Taylor's sheep provided.

People who lived in places like this seldom went far from home. Gilbert Smith, Fayetteville coal operator and an old friend of the long years, once told me that he and some other coal men got lost in the Garden Grounds. They stopped at a farm house and asked the way back to MacDonald. They talked with the woman of the house who had one baby in her arms and several others standing around her. This woman said she did not know where MacDonald was since she had never been away from where she was born and raised.

AS WE CAME DOWN to the old Loomis Gwinn home from Terry, one of the Gwinn girls told me, "We will soon be coming to Turtle Rock." In a few minutes

we were by it. It is a rock as big as a two story house on the edge of New River and is shaped like a terrapin. An extension of the rock in direction of the river looks like the neck and head of a turtle.

When the Gwinns were children, they rowed across New River to the C & O side and went up the road a short distance to their one-room school. It was called "The Estuary School" because of being built on a sort of estuary at the mouth of a creek that empties into New River at that point. Some years later when the Gwinn children grew in number, Loomis Gwinn and other school patrons erected a school house and requested that the school board send a teacher. This was done and the school operated for years.

LOUIS GWINN was a brother of Loomis Gwinn and he had some children, too. His house was also one of the show places in this area. Estuary School was located on lands owned by John H. Gwinn, another of the clan.

An early fording place on New River was at Stretchers Neck Tunnel on the C & O.

One day one of the area pioneers — Hiram Adkins — needed to have his plowshares pointed up. So he headed for a blacksmith's in the Quinnimont section. He strapped a number of plowshares about his neck with rawhide and started to wade across the river at the ford. In negotiating the stream, Adkins lost his footing on slick rocks and was drowned, with the weight of the plow points holding him down.

Soon, word got out that Hiram Adkins' ghost was seen, or felt,

in the vicinity of Stretchers Neck Tunnel. J. P. Nelson committed the weird story to writing. If you haven't read "The Ghost of Stretchers Neck Tunnel" you have an Edgar Allen Poe thrill coming to you. This story came out in the C & O magazine years ago.

BUT GONE IS THE glory of the old Gwinn place. Over it all may hover still the spirits of those sturdy pioneers but it seemed to me that one could write in the haze that hung over the hollow the day we were there the old Hebrew word of "Ichabod" — meaning "the glory is departed."

The Gwinn children that day talked of buying back the place and using it as a rendezvous for the family.

But they can not reconstruct the good old days when life was in the bud and McKendree Hospital was flourishing. That is all changed now. Grown up in tall poplars are the fields and garden of the farm.

That day as we laid the old mother to rest by the side of her beloved husband, the great winds which swept the deep gorge and the music of New River rushing over boulders seemed to be a fitting requiem indeed. Then as the family turned to roam again for an hour or so the familiar spots so dear to their hearts in the days of their childhood, they were young again—at least in recollection. Then they departed the beloved spot for their homes in four different states, perhaps not to meet again as a family until death claims another of their loved ones.



