

Digging Up Grandpaw
Harvey Franklin Chittum Jr.
Kerrs Creek
b. Aug. 14, 1927 d. Feb. 19, 2019
by Sarah Clayton

“When I gotta holt of that skull, it was quite a moment,” says Harvey Chittum, flipping through the pages of an old scrapbook. The “skull” is that of his great-great grandfather, Nathaniel Jacob Chittum, born July 11, 1798 in Goochland County in eastern Virginia, and dying in 1894 on Hayslette Creek on the southwest side of House Mountain. For 106 years he’d lain in Rocky Hollow Cemetery which, over the years, had become a pigs’ pen. Now a developer had bought the land, and was about to sell lots.

“The tombstone had done fell over and hogs were in it,” says Harvey, sitting back in what is obviously a beloved chair in his Denmark home in Upper Kerrs Creek. “One thing or another, and I asked the new owner, I said, ‘would you give me permission to take my grandfather out.’ He said, ‘ya need help?’”

“I didn’t realize there was so much involved in diggin’ someone up,” Harvey says. “I had to go to the funeral home and get papers for another interment and for taking him up. Had to go to the health department. Finally got all that done, and we come over and dug him up.” He points to a fuzzy photograph in his scrapbook. “Now this is where we started diggin’,” he says, and diggin’ and diggin’. He was down six feet.” He picks up another picture. “There’s the coffin handles my friend at the funeral home told me to be on the lookout for. He said to measure 18 inches from the first and you’d find another one. And, lo and behold!” He points at another picture, “we found a second one and a third one. My friend said, he said, ‘if you go across the casket, you’ll find three more on the other side.”

Harvey leans back in his chair, the scrapbook open across his knees. "Tommy Chittum, a cousin of mine from Florida, was all for getting grandpaw dug up and us outta there. But I wanted to find those handles. When we got them all out, Tommy kinda liked them. Said he'd like a set too. We agreed the other four sets would go in the new casket."

Back to the turning of pages, our heads bent low like we're trying to squeeze right into that scene. "There's his leg bone," says Harvey, "and believe it or not but his hands were still crossed."

"Here's a bone I picked up." He points. "There's a root that's growed all the way through that bone. See it there? I got down in that hole and brought up all the bones. A feelin' goes through you doing those things. Tommy had talked to me that huntin' season. Wadn't sure he could do it, and I told him I'd do it." He turns the page. "There's another leg bone. Just different pieces we'd come bringin' out. Put 'em on a cloth on the tailgate of my truck. The funeral home furnished a baby coffin."

"I went over to the church (Kerrs Creek Baptist Church) and dug the new grave by myself, by hand." He sighs. "My son's in that graveyard. My father. momma's there. Uncle Herb, dad's brother. Grandpaw Chittum and his wife."

They put Nathaniel Chittum's bones and the four coffin handles into the small coffin. Before they closed the lid on his great-great grandfather for the last time, Harvey gently laid the skull in. "Maxine, my sister, put roses outside of the casket. We put it down with ropes and (the roses) went with it. I had Paul Chittum say a prayer, and we sang a coupla songs." He closed the book and stared out the window towards the mountain, hidden now behind the leafy green of summer at the edge of his land.

“Grandpaw was almost 96 when he died and in the ground 106 years before we dug him up. It was a job had to be done, and we done it.”

According to Harvey, the Chittums came from Germany and England to Jamestown, then further west to Goochland County in the Piedmont, and, finally, “some of them migrated across the Blue Ridge Mountains and got into Rockbridge.”

For the heck of it, I started down the rabbit hole of Harvey’s lineage on Ancestry.com and what a warren it was, ending up on his maternal side with a nine times great grandfather, Britz Entsminger, born in 1610 in Wolfskirchen, Bas-Rhin, Alsace, France. His wife, Rosina Schmidt, came from the neighboring Rhineland, Palatinate region of Germany. Alsace and the Palatinate were two of the top places of origin for German immigrants to the Shenandoah Valley back in the 18th century. Britz’s grandson, John Nicolaus Entsminger, born in France, came to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1733 where he died 53 years later at 86. Following his line down, his son, Johannes Heinrich (John Henry) Entsminger’s son, David, had a daughter, Jane (b. 1823 in Augusta County, Virginia), who married Thomas Hughes in Rockbridge County. Their daughter, Catherine, married a Hartbarger, and produced Mary Melvina who married Andrew Jackson Wilson. Their daughter, Mary Willie Hartbarger Wilson (b. 1874) married Nathaniel Jacob Chittum in 1891, the grandfather Harvey dug up and reinterred in the Kerrs Creek graveyard. Hughes, Chittum, Entsminger, Hartbarger, Wilson are names around the mountain, all of whom I went to school with at Highland Belle.

I followed the Chittum line back to Harvey’s great-great-great grandfather, John Chittum, born in England in 1750, and dying in Rockbridge County in 1834.

On August 18, 1927, Harvey, whose mother was Lula Virginia Gaylor Chittum, was born in Stonewall Jackson's home, the local hospital until the early 1950s. My brother, Chris, born late in 1954 was in the first group of babies born in the new hospital, which, while added onto and improved over the years, is still our local hospital. My son, Edward, was born there in the midst of a blizzard in January 1996.

"I was born in the kitchen of the Stonewall Jackson House," says Harvey with a great pride. "That's where all the babies were born. Now, my two sisters were born at home, right up the road here. Dad must have had four or five dollars, I guess, and I lucked out."

The logs of Harvey's childhood home at the corner with White Rock Road and Rt. 60 are now covered with white-painted clapboard. A hundred yards east is the neat, attractively landscaped brick ranch house Harvey and Sandy built with its beautiful views of House Mountain in the winter and a showcase vegetable garden in the summer. Their steep driveway up from Rt. 60 was part of old highway 14, Harvey says. "The Lexington, Clifton Forge, Covington turnpike. Momma and Daddy peddled stuff in Lexington and Daddy said many a time that that hill, my driveway, was the hardest pull on a team of horses on the route. Momma and Daddy'd go to town (nine miles away) in the morning. Take all day to get there and back."

"Now, about the time I was born," says Harvey. In '25, '26, they built the new highway and called it 60 (U.S. 60). Just a dirt road then." It's a two lane paved country road today at the bottom of Harvey's drive, the main road west when I was a little girl in pre-interstate days.

His father had been laid off from the railroad in '23 and the family hit lean times.

“Then the Depression hit. It was tough in the early 30s. I know what being poor is. Everybody helped everybody whether they were kin or not. Momma looked after us kids and Daddy looked for work. Most of the people around here made their living by farming when I was little. But we helped each other.”

He went to Denmark School, alive now only in old photos and memories. It was a big, non-nonsense, square clapboard building like the old Highland Belle School down the road a couple of miles or the first Effinger School on the south side of the mountain.

“One day,” says Harvey, “well, Momma told my sisters when they was leaving for school. ‘Ya’ll take him with you. Get him out of my hair for a while.’ I was only five years years old but when I got over there, Miss Crabtree said, ‘get him registered for school.’ I don’t know if they overlooked something or what, but the next thing I knew I was going to school. Grandpaw Chittum had made up some sandboxes for the school so I think, when the school found out I was only five, they said, ‘oh let him come on.’”

“There were four big rooms. Two grades to a room. Grades one through seven and a coal or woodstove in every room. Rev. Cash (John Samuel Cash) lived across from the school and every morning he’d be over there. We’d go into the auditorium and he would give us a verse in the Bible.” Harvey’s slipped back through time, staring out the window. “There was something about Mr. Cash. He’d stand up there with the Bible and call us all by name. He was very different,” Harvey says reverently.

“I’ll tell you somethin’ else,” says Harvey, springing back to the present. “A lot of fighting went on in that school. There weren’t real bad fights but they’d disagree and smack each other around. Miss Crabtree would come out and take ‘em into the school house and set ‘em right down. She’d tell ‘em, ‘don’t you move till school’s out.’” He

laughs. “If it was real bad, we had to go out and climb over the fence and get a switch. She’d say, ‘there’s no point in you goin’ over there and gettin’ a rotten one. You get a good one. If you don’t, you’re goin’ back.’ She’d whip the daylights out of you with that switch...right in front of the others.

“The girls would get into it too. Scrappin’. The boys would always take the girls’ punishments. Don’t know why. That’s just the way it was.

“We went barefoot to school spring of the year into fall. Nobody had any money. You went to school regardless. Two feet of snow. Didn’t make any difference. I’ve seen my father shovel snow down Rt. 60, literally shoveling it, so we’d have a path to walk in on. Crabtree would always select a couple of kids to get there early and make sure the fires were goin’.

“We were always into somethin’ back then. But we had a good time and I got a good education out of it.”

I think everybody who lived in the shadow of House Mountain got a good education just being in its presence. It’s esthetically a grand land and anyone who grew up on a farm was a genius at critical thinking. If the tractor broke down in the middle of haying and the storm clouds were gathering, you had no choice but to figure out what was wrong, fix it and get back to work. It takes some come-to-reckoning to chop the head off that first chicken, or slit a hog’s throat to let it bleed out before butchering. And more times than you’d want to know, “a snowball was sometimes breakfast,” as a friend of mine on the mountain once said.

“I got one new pair of shoes a year. From Fitzpatrick’s store down there (on the creek). Most of the country stores sold the same stuff—nails, kerosene, overalls,

shoes. Rector Engelman owned the store in Denmark. Mr. Engelman was a mighty good man. Gave me Mrs. Engelman's piano when she died. She'd given piano lessons for years. Mr. Engleman sold the store to a Mr. Buchanan. He sold it to one of the Ayers boys.

"Miz Myers, she lived near the store. Drowned. She was coming back from the spring house when the water come through. We found her in a tree down 'air in Kerrs Creek 'bout four miles from here. Wasn't a bone in her body that wasn't broke."

Harvey was baptized in that creek. "Nineteen thirty-eight. I was 11 years old. We dammed up the creek. Four or five of us boys got baptized. Rev. Cash took us one at a time (into the creek), talked to us. He asked me if I was afraid of the water. Did I want to hold my nose. I said no. He put me backwards in the water. I guess I was scared but I really don't know. Then I walked back home. Wet and everything. I had overalls on.

"My grandpaw helped build the church. Dad was just a pup then, but he told me about it over the years. Grandpaw set up a sawmill right in the parking lot and sawed the lumber for the church. Different people hauled logs in. Linkswallers. Ayerses. Different ones. Later Dad done a lot of carpentry work helpin' people. He helped build the store. Engelman's. And, the year I was born, he was laying the floor in the gymnasium at the Clifton Forge High School. To get there he'd walk up to the top of the mountain (North Mt.), then go down Bratton's Run and on to the Rockbridge Alum Springs (a 19th century spa resort) five or six miles. They'd back the train from Goshen up to Rockbridge Alum. It'd cost a nickel or a dime to ride the train from there to Clifton.

He'd carry his tools with him. Stay there all week then ride the train back and walk across the mountain."

Harvey's built up a head of steam telling stories, and is chugging right along. He drove for the Trailways Bus Line during the 1950s, which entailed carrying the mail as well as passengers. Denmark had its own post office at that time. Harvey was on a run to York, Pennsylvania, when the mail clerk came on the bus and they got talking.

"'Son,' he said. Where you from?' He was a lot older than I was. I said, 'if I told you, you wouldn't know.'"

"Try me," he said.

I thought a little bit, then said, "Denmark."

"Post office alongside the creek," he said. "I know exactly where you're talking about."

"I thought, this old cat knows more than I think he does so I ask him, 'where you from?'"

"I was on the Titanic sorting mail when it hit the icebergs. Down in the hull. Well, you know what happened after that. I was about 14. They say somebody threw me off the ship thinking I was a passenger. They fished me out and got me on a boat and saved me."

The National Postal Museum in Washington, D.C., notes that "none of the Titanic's (five) postal clerks survived the sinking."

"Orville Liskey was his name," says Harvey. "Lived in Harrisonburg."

Harvey met his wife, Cicely (Sandy) Kemp on a bus run. "She got on the bus one day to go see her boyfriend in Warrenton." Three months later she and Harvey were married.

"My grandmaw was born out of wedlock. Her Mother was a Hartbarger and she got pregnant and grandmaw was born. They never sent grandmaw to school. Back then, if you had an illegitimate child, you kep' 'em in the back room all the time. Didn't give 'em any education. She was a real nice lady. grandmaw was a good woman."

Out of the window near Harvey, I can see a groundhog, like an over-stuffed rat, waddling across his yard. I point it out to Harvey.

"Lord, I've ate many a groundhog," he says. "It's tough but good. Put it in the pot and boil it. When it's done, eat it. I don't know if I've eaten raccoon but we ate a lot of ground hogs. It was meat.

"We'd hunt. That's where we got a lot of food. Didn't shoot deer or bear. There weren't any back then. It just wasn't much game and they wouldn't let you hunt. Just squirrels and rabbits. You didn't have to have a license or pay fees back 'en.

"Dad would give me a coupla shells and a gun. Shells were expensive. You didn't dare miss."

After graduating from high school, Harvey joined the army air corps.

"I didn't want to leave the county, but you got to go where you can make a living. I'll never forget when I left here, I thought these mountains were miles and miles away. But I come back from overseas. I'd been far and wide by that time. The mountains were so close."

After the army, he worked for the bus company, then in the oil and tire business.

"I woke up one day and said to Sandy, "we gotta go back to Rockbridge County.

"I never did get up House Mountain till later in life. I used to walk it but I take the four-wheeler now. We ride as far as we can, then we get off and walk. We walk up from the Saddle and out on the ledges (at the top). There's still some apple trees up 'air (in the Saddle). Sandy makes apple butter out of 'em smokehouse apples. That smokehouse apple will melt in your mouth...the best apple ever was. I don't remember any houses up 'air but they used to farm it.

"I've worked hard all my life. I don't know anything but work." He looks about as comfortable and self-satisfied as a person can look slouched back in his favorite chair. "I'd always wanted a farm here. Now I got four hundred acres. Never even had it surveyed."

Harvey Franklin Chittum Jr. ,91, died in a single car wreck near his home on Feb. 19, 2019. He's buried in the Kerrs Creek Baptist Church cemetery with the rest of his family including his great-great grandfather whose remains he dug out of a pig pen in Collierstown and reinterred in Kerrs Creek.