

Reginald's Story

We were looking for the old Peay family cemetery in Longtown, Fairfiled County, cousin Marynell and I. Having just left weekend-long family reunion for the living, we were now in search of the dead--- or at least their tombstones, in some of the most remote pinewoods of the piney woods around Ridgeway, South Carolina. We had already stopped at a SevenEleven to ask directions, and felt we were not lost, but in need of directional assistance and fine-tuning. The heat and glare of an August Sunday morning added to our desire to find our object fast. At that moment I spotted a black man walking down the road in the opposite direction, an open book that looked about the size of a phone book in his hands. As I spoke "here comes somebody," Marynell hit the brakes, signaled the walker and rolled down the window. As he obligingly walked round to the driver's side, I could see he held an open bible. "Uh-oh," I said aloud to my cousin, "we may have found a Bible thumper". But he was here now and we were in for at least a quick inquiry. The black man was an average height, perhaps in his forties, with a head of longish hair in a few quasi dreadlocks, but the rest left in its natural state. "We're lost!" shouted Marynell to the bent over face at the window. "What are you looking for?" he asked reasonably. "A cemetery somewhere around here where the Peays are buried." "Well, you're looking at one of them," he said sociably. "I'm one of the Peay family." I held my breath. What would Marynell say now? The Thurman story was still fresh in the public mind and everyone now knows about Thomas Jefferson and his Sally. "Which one?" Asked Marynell, equally sociably. She later told me she thought he meant a descendent of the 'Black' Peays--- one of the Peay family's slaves. Nicholas Peay, the richest man in upstate SC with hundreds of slaves at the time of the Civil war, could easily have sourced the patronym of thousands of slaves' descendents by this time.

But I was right. "My g-g-granddaddy was John Peay," said our Samaritan. You know John Peay? John was an Ammonite, did you know that?" he asks. "Yeah, I've heard that, Marynell answers. Reginald clearly knew his family history. "And who are you?" After a nano second, Marynell answers, "well I'm descended from John Peay's uncle, Nicholas Peay, and we want to find the old Baptist church cemetery, though the church has been gone a long time. It's right across from 'Blink Bonnie'. Ever heard of it?" "Sure... you just go down this road and turn back a little bit, then watch for..." Reginald is gesturing directions... "turn back where?" Marynell asks, so Reginald starts again, then adds, "or I can get in your car and take you right there, if you want me to." "Well, you better get in then," said Marynell, no pause this time, and so he did. I cleared the back seat beside me of maps and folders of papers, and in he got. With cousin Marynell and her husband Bumps in the front seat, and Reginald and me in the back, we began an adventure that none of us would ever forget. "You a Peay too?" he asked me. "No, I'm Perry from Rich Hill, over in Kershaw County. But we're cousins on the other side and several other ways too, so I'm interested in seeing the Peay graves too." "Well, I'm Reginald Stone" says our guide, "and John Peay was my gggranddaddy, with Margaret Stone."

We were soon at the cemetery that proved more extensive than I had imagined, though badly overgrown with scrub and colonized with fire ants. The Peay enclosure was near the front with a four foot wall around it.... no gate. Marynell and I scrambled over behind Reginald and began looking at our find. The Nicholas Peay monument was a tall imposing obelisk, which dwarfed the other substantial stones that stood like soldiers at its base, yet to us, these were the most interesting. At the far right was Elizabeth Mikell, born Christmas Day in 1754, the daughter of Thomas and Jane Starke of Virginia. Next to her rested John Peay, whose marker Reginald pointed out with special interest, then told us that Elizabeth Mickell was his wife. No, we were able to tell him, Elizabeth was his mother, who was married first to George Peay, had John and several other children by him before he died in the 1790s. George was not here because he was buried near the river, about 300 yards south of Peays Ferry. Then Elizabeth married again to a Mr. Mickle and had another family, but most had moved to Alabama, so she was buried here beside her son. "And," said I, warming to my story, "she was caught up in the Battle of Fishing Creek during the Revolutionary war.... It's all written down." "I sure didn't know that." Reginald said. "Now we've helped each other. See... it was meant to happen, you coming down that road this morning and stopping me. God don't make no mistakes." We silently agreed with nodding heads.

Between hopping around the enclosure to out jump the stinging fire ants and talking about how the Peays lying there related to each other and to each of us, a good 20 minutes passed happily in the favorite occupation of southern families, black and white... the who's kin to who and how... plus other tidbits of priceless oral history like John Peay the Ammonite (Mennonite?) story. At last we were ready to leave. Reginald helped us back over the wall as gently as you please, while we asked if he knew where to find the ruins of the old Melrose plantation that Sherman burned. He looked thoughtful, but doubtful, for a minute, then said, "Oh, you must mean the 'old burn down'". He took us across the road and told us of his boyhood, eating peaches after school from the remaining trees of the old peach orchard that once stood near the house. The 'old burn down' was what local folks called the spot, now gone mostly to pine and scrub oak. At last we were ready to leave. Reginald asked us to drop him at the diner and store down the road, and as we parted company, we exchanged email addresses to swap more history and family stories. When Marynell offered to pay him for his time, the response was quick and firm. "No, no," he said mildly. "You are family!" We said goodbye to our new found cousin warmly and gratefully...for such gifts most certainly must come from the Almighty. He took his bible off the seat and went into the diner.

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