

CHAPTER XXVIII - SEARCHING FOR ROOTS IN WEDOWEE

Wedowee (pronounced WeDOW), population 876, is the county seat of Johnson County, Alabama. According to the 1850 and 1860 federal census, my great-great grandfather, Jesse Sterling, lived there before the Civil War. My wife, Anita, and I decided to visit Wedowee as a genealogical side trip to a recent vacation. We had just finished a wonderful ten-day visit to Florida, enjoying friends and relatives and were on our way back to Texas. It was Christmas Eve and we knew most everything would be closed for the holiday, but I felt a side trip to the Sterling ancestral home would be well worth the visit.

As expected we found the courthouse closed, but we did find a police officer that was friendly and helpful. He told us that he wasn't a very good source of information because he was raised in Roanoke, 13 miles to the south. He told us that our best bet was to look up Grover Poole, the local bail bondsman. He said Grover Poole was a lifelong resident of Wedowee and had served as County Clerk for years. Mr. Poole also owned the Old Reliable Trading Post and serves as an estate auctioneer.

We found Grover's trading post on the main highway. It was a decrepit old building that once served as a service station and general store. The building was cluttered with everything from produce to spark plugs. The walls were full of antique signs and cutesy cards poking irreverant fun of everything in general. One quickly got the feeling that Old Grover didn't take too many things seriously.

An old light-complected black man greeted us at the trading post and said if we wanted Mr. Poole, we would have to go over to the local restaurant, just a couple of blocks away. He said Mr. Poole spent most mornings there having breakfast and visiting the local gentry. As advertised, Grover was sitting at a large table visiting with three other people, enjoying his coffee and exchanging friendly insults.

We introduced ourselves and told Grover of our ancestral connection to Wedowee. He invited us to sit down and have breakfast with him. We asked him about local cemeteries and wondered if there were any Sterling's left in the area. He told us that all of the Sterling's now living in the Wedowee area were black and all of the Sterling tombstones that he knew of were also black. He said that he knew the cemeteries real well because when he was in politics, a lot of the deceased voted for him every election. He chuckled and said it was ok for him to confess that now because the statute of limitation had run out. He also said that nearly all of the civil war era graves were unmarked.

Grover told us that there was a man they called Reverend Henry Sterling in the area but, he wouldn't go near him because the Reverend was a troublemaker. Several years ago a racially mixed teenage couple was refused the right to attend the high school prom. The incident received national publicity with the high school Principal on one side of the issue and the Reverend Sterling on the other.

Meanwhile, just after we left Grover Pool's trading post, the light-complected black man decided he would make some calls in my behalf. He managed to put me in touch with Anne Sterling Minnefield, a black Sterling descendant. Anne said that she thought her ancestors got their surname because they were slaves owned by the Sterling family. Old Jesse may have owned a slave or two but I don't think so. The 1850 census lists him as a laborer and the 1860 census as a farmer. I was unable to find any slaves owned by the Sterling's in either census. I

did discover that the Stallings were slaveholders, however and that Stallings is an alternate spelling of Sterling.

The slave schedule attached to the 1850 census shows Lydia Stallings as owning four slaves and the 1860 schedule shows her son, Moses Stallings, as owning five slaves. I've been unable to connect my Sterling's with these Stallings but I suspect that they are related. This suspicion is reinforced by Y-DNA evidence from Family Tree DNA. This scientific data shows my 12 marker test is a perfect match with one other Sterling and three different Stallings. This evidence verifies the fact that my surname has been spelled both ways. Old Jesse's family may have been related to the Randolph County Stalling but chose to spell his name differently than them.

The 1850 census also indicates that Old Jesse at 47 was the father of James, a 3 year old son and Martha, a 2 year old daughter. According to that data, it appears that he was about 44 when he started his family. It is quite possible that Old Jesse started an earlier family long before then. Researching my Sterling line, I was intrigued by the discovery of a fugitive named William H. Sterling in "The Georgia Black Book" by Robert Scott Davis, Jr., This wanted bulletin states that, "WILLIAM H. STERLING murdered JONATHAN CLANTON in Upson County on 26 July inst. Issued 29 July 1848. STERLING is 25 years old, about 6 feet high, 40 inches in the breast, weighs 180 or 200 pounds, a florid complexion, has a scar about the lip on his face somewhere or perhaps two scars, dark auburn hair, and very large feet and hands. He has a downcast look, is an intempered man, high cheek bones, and a sharp chin. He has blue eyes, is somewhat awkward in his gait, walks as though he was straddling something, and holds his arms or one of them at an angle with his body." This tall lanky hot headed drunk obviously spent too much time on a horse or behind a plow. Except for his florid complexion and auburn hair he would feel right at home with my Dad and his siblings. This is mere speculation of course. In genealogy you try to look under every rock.

In genealogy the inability to authenticate family history beyond a particular point is called a "brick wall." Old Jesse stands out as my most challenging brick wall.