Noah M. St. Clair, Sr. - Short Autobiography #1

This is an autobiography written by Noah M. St. Clair, Sr., at an unknown date and covering his childhood only. Noah was born 3 March 1914 in Taney county to James Alvis St. Clair and Lillian Lucettie Evans. His ancestry goes back three generations in the Taney/Christian county area (paternal side) and in Miller county. (maternal side) The original manuscript is in possession of his son, Noah (Mike) M. St. Clair, Jr., who prepared this document. The original is typed, but with quite a number of obvious typographical and spelling errors. In this version these errors have been corrected. In the few places where words were inserted to clarify the meaning I believe was intended, you will find those additions in <angled brackets>. It appears that this story was intended to go further. I also believe that dad started a rather extensive story of his life sometime during his last ten years or so but I am not aware of its whereabouts. If anyone reading this is aware of any other material written by or about him, his parents, or his brothers and sisters, I would appreciate your contacting me: Mike St. Clair, 327 North 800 East, American Fork, Utah 84003; (801) 492-1666; e-mail: mike@saintclair.org.

My birthplace, Day, Missouri.[1] The store, post office blacksmith shop, and water powered grist mill and sawmill, all on the banks of Bull Creek, about seven miles north of Branson, about four miles west of Walnut Shade. All were operated by my dad (that is, all but the post office, which was operated by my mother). When I was five or six months old, a new house (which my dad had built near the store building where the family lived) was about ready for the family to move into, burned to the ground. I know this broke my dad's heart, the house being a real good house for a backwoods community, and which he had dreamed about for years.

A short time after my brother, Leonard, was born we moved to the Combs Ferry on or across the White River. This ferry was on a main wagon road between Reeds Spring, 11 miles North, and Blue Eye, 12 miles South. My dad operated the ferry, an eighty acre farm, and a country store for Roy Drahn. Of course, my mother and the older children in the family helped him. In fact, on the one day a week that dad had to go to Reeds Spring[2] to pick up the groceries, hardware and coal oil which came out from Springfield on the Missouri Pacific Railroad, my mother operated the ferry bout for whatever traffic showed up that day. Sometimes it would be a wagon, sometimes a herd of cattle or a band of sheep.

---

[1]Sometime during the late 1970s I visited the exact home dad was born in. He took me up the creek and showed me where the mill was located. The current residents of the little home were kind enough to let us go inside and look around briefly. The back room of the house was still insulated and wall-papered with newspapers from the 1920s and 1930s. On a more recent visit I found the site was the location for one of the new Branson area highways.

[2]On a visit to a St. Clair family reunion in Monett in the 1990s I was stopped by a local “revenue enhancement officer” in Reeds Spring late one night when returning from Branson. He implied I could pay a fine on the spot, but I chose not to. He then confiscated my driver’s license “to ensure I would show” in court the next day. When I arrived, the license had been left in the officers car and someone had locked an angry German Shepherd inside it. I finally joyfully left town with my license after several hours of delay and a substantially lighter wallet.

Dad would leave about 4 o'clock in the morning with the wagon to go to Reeds Spring, and would leave the ferry on the other side of the river, and when the first ferry customer showed up, she would take a little wooden boat the we called the “canoe” and paddle across, tie the canoe to the ferry boat for the trip back to our side of the river. This ferry was powered with a cable which stretched above the river and was anchored at each end. There was a trolley that ran on the cable, and had a cable from the trolley to a pulley on one end of the boat, then to the middle where it was wound around a windlass, then to a pulley at the other end of the boat, then back to the trolley. By cranking the windlass, which would point the boat at an angle upstream in the river, the force of the water against the side of the boat would propel the boat across the river. Then, by reversing the windlass, the cables would pull the other end of the boat at an angle upstream, and send it back across the river.

My very earliest memory was the birth of my brother, Chan, 7 June 1917.[3] His name is worth a little story: The White River was a very attractive stream, and a float trip on it was very popular with well to do people from Kansas City and St. Louis. This trip was on about forty miles of the river, starting about 30 miles upstream from our store and ferry, and ending at Branson about ten miles down stream. It would consist of a guide in his long or “John” boat with camping and cooking equipment, with two patrons. They would camp on the river bank and cook out on a trip that listed three or four days. Our store was a frequent stop on these trips, for refreshments or to use the telephone to call home to notify their families when they would be home. On the day Chan was born, a man stopped on his float trip to call home and dad heard him identify himself as “Chan Folsom,” and dad chose that name for his new son. Thirty-seven days after Chan was born, my brother, John, died.

Early in 1918, dad and mother bought a 77 acre farm about three fourths <of a mile?> from the ferry landing, and moved the family there. The house was 14x28 feet, divided into two rooms, with a stairway to a semi-attic which had about four foot high wassl[4] on the low side, that tapered up to good standing room in the middle. That space was divided into two rooms. There was a metal roof on the house, and a typical Missouri thunderstorm was quite a noisy affair. We had four beds upstairs, for the children, and the “front” room downstairs had a bed for dad and mother. The room at the other end downstairs was used for kitchen and dining room. Across a little creek (dry about eight months a year) was a little log house which had been converted into a barn, mule shed, and corn crib. It had a hay loft in it, also. The post office department soon found my mother and arranged for her to be postmaster there, and dad built an addition on the house which added another room for the family, and

[3]Dad would have been just over three years old at this time.

[4]I don’t have any idea what this word meant, but it was obviously the outside edge of the house.

an eight by eight foot room for the post office and a six by eight foot "bay" or porch for post office patrons.

A door opened from the "bay" to the big room dad had added, and this was always a welcome place for the patrons to come in out of the cold while waiting for the mail to arrive. The mail came in by horseback from Cedar Valley, about four miles south of our place.[5] The name of the post office was Sammylane, Missouri, the name deriving from the name of one of the principal characters in Harold Bell Wright's famous book The Shepherd of the Hills[6], the locale of which was about four miles away, across White River, and which is now occupied by "Silver Dollar City" where the well known "Ozark Arts and Crafts Festival" is held for the entire month of October each year.

Sammylane lasted until 1941, with mother as the only postmaster. It was discontinued when plans were being made to build "Table Rock Dam" which would cover much of the land of the families that were served by the post office.[7] She retired with a pension of $21.00 a month, about the average she earned while she was postmaster. Besides being postmaster <and the> mother of a large family, she was also the "Dear Abby" of our little backwoods community, and I have heard from others who were patrons of her little office that she saved more than one marriage with her wise counsel. She also had pen pals nationwide that she kept in touch with.

We were never rich while I was growing up, and we had to take a lot of shortcuts to get by. We always had plenty to eat, but only because we produced all of our food (95%), and sometimes the variety of food was limited.[8] We usually had biscuits for breakfast, and corn

---

[5]It was probably during this period that dad's mother, Lillian (Evans) St. Clair, was friends with Marie Elizabeth Mahnkey, who is sometimes called the poet laureate of the Ozarks. Mamie (as her friends called her) lived at Oasis from 1922-1935. This was a few miles south of the White River and just east of the Stone/Taney county line while the St. Clair farm would have been on the river and just west of the same county line. Both Mamie and Lillian were postmasters for their respective communities. There is a great deal of interesting detail about this area and time period in a recent biography of Mrs. Mahnkey: A Candle Within Her Soul by Ellen Gray Massey; Lebanon, Missouri: Bittersweet, Inc., 1996.

[6]An outdoor pageant based on this novel now shows all summer in Branson. When I saw it a few years back both the director and several actors were St. Clair relatives.

[7]During a 1970s Missouri trip with dad he took me to the state park on the lake and showed me how you could still see the tip of the old family barn from the park's picnic ground. One of my poorly defined dreams is to visit the park during the clearest water season (whenever that is!) and explore the old property a bit with fins, mask and snorkel.

[8]Dad mentioned that one of the most common breakfasts was what he called "bread and zip" which was bread of one sort or another topped with Karo syrup or molasses. A "special" meal was called "eggs goldenrod" which sounded something like creamed eggs on bread with the cooked egg yolks crumbled on top.

bread for the other two meals, except for Friday after school. Friday was mother's baking day so we would have “light bread” for Sunday. We had company for “dinner” many Sundays every year, and mother was well known for her fried chicken and gravy, so no one ever turned down an “invite” for Sunday dinner. Chicken was our principal meat year round, since we had no refrigeration, and the hogs we raised mostly had to go to market to bring in a little cash to pay for our other needs.

We couldn't afford wallpaper for the house, so my mother papered the walls with the “Kansas City Star,” the “White River Leader” and the “Saturday Evening Post.”[9] This brings on a note of special interest to me, because when I was five years old, I heard mother and dad discussing whether they should send me to school that year or wait another year, and dad declared “Lets send him this year. He can read, can't he?” I had learned to read on the walls of our house.

I mentioned before that we had plenty to eat, and that we produced it ourselves on the farm. We had two seedling peach trees . the peaches were white meat freestone, much like the modern Babcock, and the trees usually produced many bushels of fruit. Mother never let the peaches go to waste. She canned them made jam , and in peach season, we had peach cobbler every day. She canned a great deal of other foods; green beans, tomatoes and apples. We didn't have any Apple trees, but a neighbor had several acres of apples and would let us pick up the wind falls from under the trees for twenty-five cents a bushel, and mother canned and dried a lot of them. She dried some of the peaches, too. I remember one year she sent me under the house, where we stored the canned goods to keep them from freezing, and I counted over seventeen hundred quarts of canned goods, some in quart jars, but most in half gallon jars.

We had a cellar to store potatoes and turnips in, and pumpkins were kept in the corn “shucks” in the crib to keep them from freezing. I didn't mention before that we had lots of pickles canned with the fruit and vegetables. We had a 25 gallon stone crock that was made full of sauerkraut, and a 42 gallon barrel full of real sorghum molasses. This recalls a special note about another of mother's abilities. We raised the sorghum cane to make the molasses from, and a large mule powered cane mill to press the juice out of the cane. We had a molasses “pan” which had wooden sides and ends and a sheet metal bottom; This pan was about 8 feet long, 3 feet wide and about 8 inches deep. It set on a pit that had a chimney at one end and stone sides so the pan could be set on it and then a fire built and kept going under it after the pan was filled with the cane juice.

At that point, mother took over and tended the cooking until the juice was boiled down until she had about ten gallons of sorghum from about a hundred gallons of juice. This was

[9]See note number 1.

repeated about five times to make enough sorghum to fill the barrel and eight or ten gallon buckets over for us to use first before we started dipping out of the barrel. Since this was during school time in the late fall. the cook off was finished about school was out for the day, so it was customary for almost all the fifty kids in school to come and sample the new "batch" of sorghum. To sample it, they, (and we) would cut a joint of a cane stalk and hollow out one end it for a scoop and pick up a delicious taste of this fine product while it was still hot.

Just before dad bought the 77 acre farm, the other three acres were sold to our nearest neighbors, the Pinkley's. They bought it because the only year around running spring was located on it, so we were always deprived of good water in the summer time. There was a spring about 106 feet from our house which lasted from-about October to May. Dad had a well drilled 80 feet deep but it also went dry in the summer, so we had to get water for household use from a spring about a mile away right on the bank of White River. We brought it home in a wooden barrel pulled by one of our mules; tended by, usually, myself, <and> my brothers, Leonard and Chan. This probably started when I was eight years old and they were younger. There was enough water for the livestock from Pinkley's spring where it flowed across the road into one of our pastures.

About one half of our farm was in "plow" land, and the balance was covered with prime white oak trees and "red" cedar, botanically known as Virginia Juniper. When I was about eight years old, dad started harvesting the oak trees and made them into railroad ties. The family organization for accomplishing this was this: Leonard and I cut the trees down, Chan, then five years old, skidded the 8 foot length, driving the team of mules, to a yard where dad and my brother George hewed them into ties, using broadaxes. In between hewing ties. one of then would come where Leonard and I were cutting down and bucking the trunks into 8 foot lengths, and chopping off the branches from the tops of the fallen trees. Those were saved for fuel for our heating stoves and cook stove. My brother, Bill[10], when we had a wagon load of ties, about 15, would take the team of mules and haul them to Branson, about seven miles, and sell them to the Missouri Pacific tie buyer.

On the days he was doing this, the rest of us would be doing the various farm chores, such as repairing or building fences, hoeing weeds, cutting sprouts. Of course this was in the summer season while there was no school. Sometimes we had to divert the team of mules to many other jobs on the farm, such as "breaking" ground and cultivating the most important corn crop, and tending the gardens, which were too big for all hand work. The income

[10]Dad once told me a story about his brother Bill, who evidently was a tremendous worker. One of the neighbors negotiated a deal with Bill for him to make fence posts for 5 cents a piece. At the end of the week, Bill brought him a tremendous pile of posts, more than he could afford to pay for. The farmer was always very careful after that to pay Bill by the hour rather than by the piece!

derived from the sale of the ties was used mostly to pay for the farm, which <we> had purchased for $700.00

When we finished with the tie project, we started harvesting the cedar trees for fence posts. There was a market for them at Branson, also, but instead of hauling them to Branson, we took them the White River, and made them into a raft, about 300 feet long and dad and Bill rode the raft to Branson and disposed of them to a buyer, who loaded them on railroad cars and shipped them to Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, where there was a shortage.