

Searching the Hills of West Virginia

By Linda Huey

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David and I took turns driving as our car fought through intense rain for eight hours from western New York south to West Virginia. My brother and his wife were along too, worrying about the weather in the back seat. I had looked forward to this trip for so many months, but remained excited and optimistic that the weather would clear. Just as we approached the West Virginia border, the sky turned blue and the sun came out. It was the first serendipity of many that unfolded during our pilgrimage to find the old homesteads of our great-great-grandparents in the remote hills of West Virginia.

A parallel adventure had begun a few years before. It all started with a wonderful trip back to Wyoming with memories of visiting there as a child more than 50 years before. The high point emotionally was finding that the old hotel/rooming house my great grandparents had built was still standing, uninhabited, but full of Pritchard family stuff left by the last descendant who had lived there until 20 years before. After we left Wyoming I started to think about the Pritchard family and why they left their ancestral home in West Virginia in 1907 for Wyoming. This led to a trail of answers, resulting with having enough to write a “book”! But that is another story.

The theme here for both Wyoming and West Virginia unfolds around old “abandoned” houses that tug at my heart strings. Now that the book was done, I missed having the Pritchard history project to escape into. The only thing left to do was to visit West Virginia to see where the family had come from. I wanted to see the house the Pritchards had lived in. My brother had visited Slab Creek in Ritchie County, West Virginia, in 1981, led by our family’s expert genealogist, Betty Kennedy. They found an abandoned house on what had been our great-great-grandfather Thomas Dickerson Pritchard’s farm. It was on a field, accessible only by walking several miles down a “jeep trail”. I was hoping the house was still there. I also wanted to visit the house of my great-great- grandmother Summers family, three miles up Slab Creek. We knew that an 85 year old man named Don Cox was living there.

Planning our trip to West Virginia, we contacted David Scott of the Ritchie County Historical Society, not knowing how interested and enormously helpful he would become. I told him our story and how we wanted to find out if the house on the Pritchard property was still standing. In early April he made an exploratory trip in his 4-wheel drive jeep and discovered for us that the house was still there. He couldn’t get very close because Slab Creek was too high to cross, but he was able to send us a picture taken through the trees that hadn’t leafed out yet. We were so excited to find this out.



Then there were the communications with 95 year old Clyde Crane, who presently owns the land, and with his daughter, Alison. She insisted the house was built by her grandparents, and Clyde thought it was built by the Haddox family who bought the land from my great grandfather. Somehow I forgot about the Haddox reference, and decided Alison had to be wrong. Now, a big part of this pilgrimage to West Virginia was to find out if the house truly was built and lived in by the Pritchards. Was it where my grandmother was born and grew up as we had thought?

We had three days in West Virginia. We planned to visit David Scott and the Historical Society at the Stone House Museum and then the old Pennsboro Depot (where the Pritchards had boarded a train for Wyoming). There would be a hike to the Pritchard homestead and house, and a visit with Don Cox who lives in our great great grandparents Summers' house. Also, a hike to the Pritchard homestead approaching from the other side of Slab Creek to look for the remains of our great great grandfather Pritchard's gristmill, and to check out another house located across the creek from the Pritchard house. Clara, my grandmother Addie's sister, had written that when she was 8 (in 1895) she had run away from home and crossed the creek to her "Aunt Mandane Wilson's" house. We wanted to see if maybe that was it. Clara's memoir about growing up on Slab Creek is full of wonderful detailed information that was very useful, about the land and the people who lived nearby.

We arrived at the North Bend State Park (where we stayed each night) after driving up and down through rugged hills on extremely winding roads that had few guard rails. Luckily we met a big camper trailer only once on one of the curves on our way to the park. The only thing the landscape of West Virginia and Wyoming have in common seems to be "W". It must have been quite amazing for the Pritchards to adjust to the wide open flat distances of Wyoming after leaving hilly West Virginia.

I will tell the rest of the story of our trip with pictures...



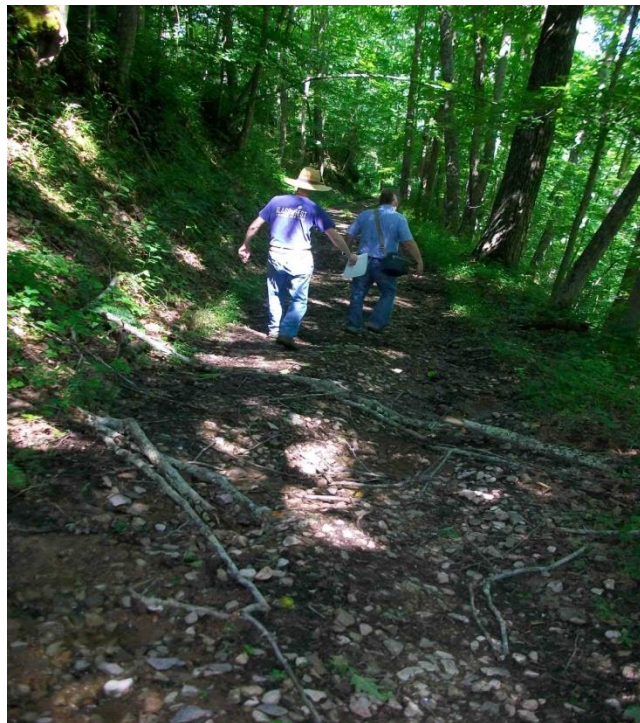
At the restored old depot in Pennsboro we tried to imagine how the Pritchards felt here as they left their West Virginia ancestral home for Wyoming in the spring of 1907.



Quite a crowd might have been there to say good bye.



On our pilgrimage to the old Pritchard homestead... we left the car parked where it could go no further on the rough narrow road and prepared to continue on by hiking. My brother, Paul, and David consulted the topo map. My sister-in-law Lois decided to wait for us in the car, where she got plenty of reading done during the four hour wait for us to return.



We could only hear our footsteps on gravel as we trudged away from civilization and toward the land where my ancestors had lived. It was the same old road that had been there for more than a century. The ghosts of a horse and wagon could have passed us by, my great grandfather waving hello. He might have been on his way to court his sweetheart, my great grandmother to be. They had grown up 3 miles apart on this road that ran along Slab Creek.



Almost two miles later we found the “Pritchard” house on a freshly mowed hayfield. The windows were boarded up and the porch missing, but it was in good condition. Our mission was to find out if it was truly our great grandparents’ house. In order to do that we needed to figure out when the house was built. The date of the house, according to my historian brother, Paul, could be determined by the nails used. Machine cut square nails were used between about 1790 -1900, and round nails after that.



The nails were round!

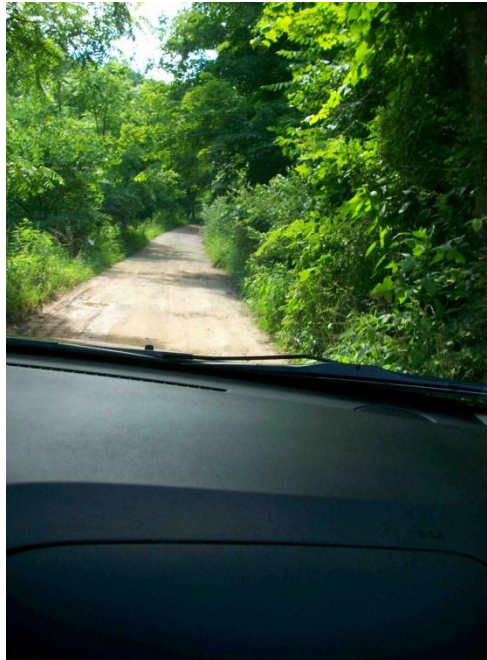
The door was open, and we enjoyed exploring all through the house. It was pretty solid and much the same inside as it had been 36 years ago when last visited by my brother. But we had to finally accept the fact that it wasn’t a Pritchard house! Round nails meant it was built around or after the Pritchards left for Wyoming in 1907. Clara had made no mention in her story of a new house they might have built or lived in. So, we now believe it was built after Sam Haddox bought the property in 1908.



We could hear a tractor on a neighboring field and were able to talk with the farmer to see what he might know about the property. His name was Hardbarger and his family had lived in this hill country for generations. It was perfect that on the day we were there, he was there too. He said his grandfather knew where foundations were in the woods near the edge of the field and that there were a lot of fruit trees. In regard to our great-great-grandmother Mary Polly (Lowther) Pritchard being buried somewhere on the property with some of her children, he said he had noticed piles of stones up on the hill (behind us in the picture) that could be graves.



We also met his grandfather as he drove toward us with a wagon full of hay. We knew he could not see down the road, so we jumped out of the way. He told us that the stone wall at the edge of the creek that we were hoping was from our great-great grandfather's old grist mill was actually an old bridge abutment for a bridge started in 1910 and never completed because the Haddox's objected. We would need to make another trip back in the early spring before the undergrowth fills the woods to do more exploring for the original grist mill and foundations and graves.



The next day we made another hike, reaching the Pritchard property from the other side of Slab Creek using Hardbarger Road. Again, we drove as far as we could, past Hardbarger's farm, and then left the car behind. I still can't figure out how two cars could pass each other on such narrow roads, or what we would have done if our car had met that huge load of hay with fork lift tongs heading toward us.



On Slab Creek, the grist mill foundation that wasn't.



We found Mandane Wilson's house as in Clara's story, shown also on the old circa 1900 farm map with the location labeled "M.L.Wilson". It was covered with tar paper and not in great shape, but it still had glass and screened in windows, locked doors, and furniture inside like someone might be using it in the summer or for hunting. We were delighted to find it had square nails sticking out of hand hewn beams underneath. Did our great-great-grandfather Thomas Dickerson Pritchard build this house? More research is needed. I pressed my camera against the screened in window and took this shot of a fireplace inside...





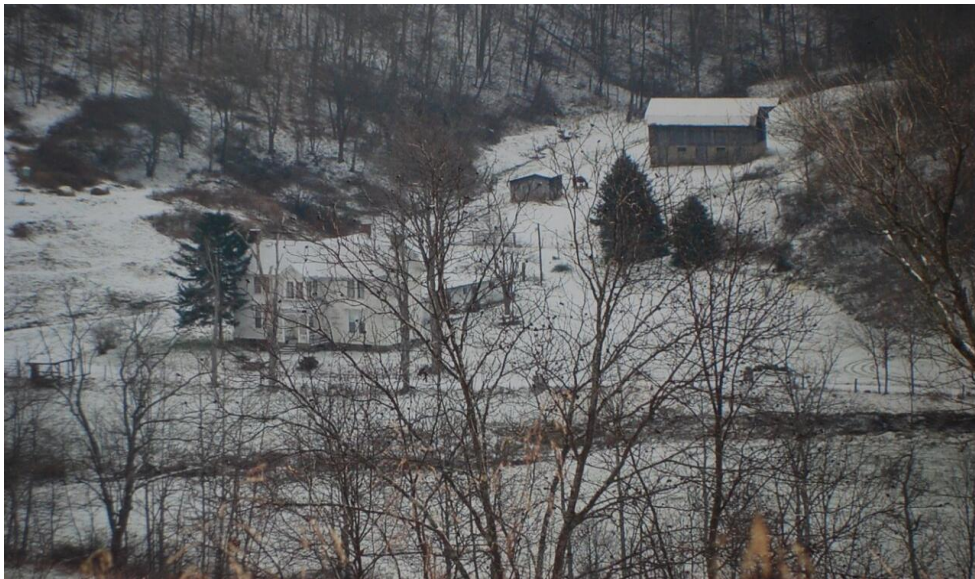
What adventure would not be complete without finding a great little place to eat local, home cooked food called “Circle H Farms Barbeque and Deli” in the small town nearby called Pullman, population 154. I wondered if the delicious coleslaw could possibly be the same recipe handed down to me from my grandmother Addie Pritchard. We found out later the café owner’s name was Hardbarger.



Onward to visit the house of our great-great-grandparents, Miranda and Elias Summers. They had lived in style in a beautiful house. Historian Lois said she thought the house could have been built in the 1840s, which would match around when the Summers arrived and settled in Slab. The current resident, Don Cox, says there is evidence of a log cabin underneath the house. We had a good visit with him.



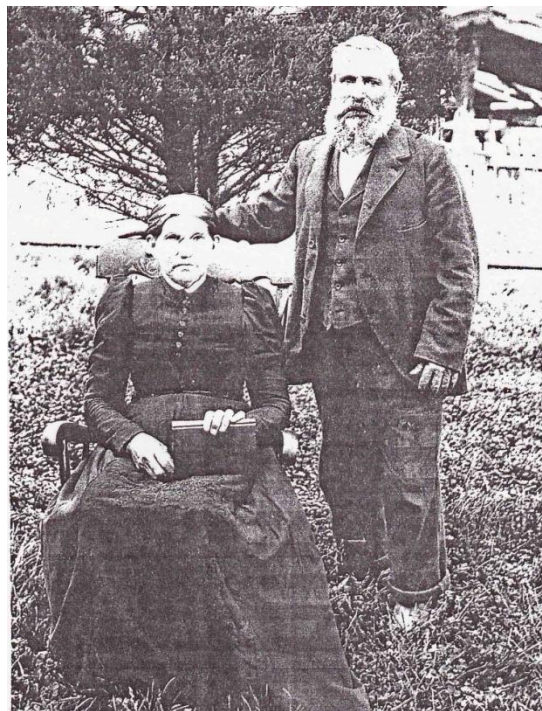
Don is well taken care of by his daughters, including Germaine and Sheila who were there also when we visited. When he stood up for a picture, I was surprised how big and tall he was. We are distantly related, in maybe several different ways. Try this: our great-grandmother's sister, Margaret Luvinia Summers, married John Marshall Cox, brother of Winfield Taylor Cox, who I think is Don's great-grandfather.



Sheila showed us a beautiful photograph of the house in the winter. She said the pine tree by the corner of the house seemed to express spirits that had knowledge of the history of the house. It may sound silly, but I like that idea.



We stopped at the “Washburn General Store, est. 1800s” to see if the proprietor recognized a picture of a schoolhouse where Addie Pritchard had taught. We tried not to stare at the interesting collection of characters sitting out front, and they tried not to stare back. No school house, but we were sent down the road to visit Ike Wass who knew about local history. As we visited with Ike, he soon figured out how we were distantly related and even produced a picture. His grandfather married Cassandra Pritchard, the daughter of Peter Pritchard who was the half brother of my great-great-grandfather, Thomas Dickerson Pritchard. Clara wrote that all the hill town people were related, and I found that to be true as I am still related to people we ran into. Below, Cassandra and Harrison Wass, around 1880-1885.





Speaking of school houses, we went through the School Museum in Harrisville where Addie, Jennie, and Clara attended summer sessions to get their teaching certificates.



A visit to the Pullman Methodist Church cemetery yielded many ancestors, including one that was alive with a last name of Cox. (I assumed I might be distantly related to him but we didn't go into that in our conversation.) This gravestone was one of the nicest...for Elijah Noble Summers and his wife Agnes (Lowther) Summers. Elijah was a brother of our great-grandmother Lucy A.E. Pritchard and they lived in the Summers' house now owned by Don Cox. Agnes was mentioned affectionately several times in Clara's story. We have yet to visit the Cox cemetery where our great-great-grandparents, Elias and Miranda Summers are buried. That location is much less accessible. Next trip!

FARM MAP 1890-1910



- HOUSES
- ROADS
- PROPERTY LINES
- CREEKS