

Spending Time with Family and Friends in the Juniata Valley

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I am a member of a committee that recommends high school seniors for scholarships that are awarded by the Mount Union Area Schools Alumni Association. The application form requests that students respond to a number of questions, one of which asks for hobbies and interests. Typical responses include sports, music, animals, etc., and then almost every one ends with the same catchphrase—“spending time with family and friends.”

It is tempting to believe that the phrase is a cliché and to wonder if the students really mean it. But on further thought I have come to believe that they are sincere. I am grateful that they have grown up in a community where they value friendships and family relationships. Those feelings certainly contrast with those of one of my graduate school office mates, who subscribed to the theory that the reason children get along so well with their grandparents is that they have hated a common generation.

I have an appreciation for my family, an appreciation that extends to several generations before I was born. Yes, I am an incurable genealogist. I have an insatiable desire to find names of ancestors, uncles, aunts, and cousins as well as dates and places of their births, deaths, and marriages. Those who give instruction in genealogy, or family history as it has come to be known in recent decades, stress that one should go beyond dates and places and record stories about our ancestors. That is an admirable goal, but for some ancestors one is hard pressed even to find dates and places, let alone stories.

I would like to tell you about one of the successes of my genealogical research. It concerns one of my uncles, Samuel Sunderland, the older brother of my great-great-grandfather David Sunderland. Samuel Sunderland served in the Revolutionary War and applied for a pension in his later years. His seventeen-page pension file provides a glimpse into his service. It appears that Samuel and his siblings and their parents emigrated from Sowerby, Halifax, England to southern Huntingdon County in the early 1770s. They later obtained land across the Juniata River in Mifflin County, not far from McVeytown. Samuel states,

I marched in the Militia from Cumberland County under Captain Thomas Cluggage of Bedford County & Coln Piper of Bedford County and marched to Lancaster in Pennsylvania & there we met the Hessian prisoners who had been taken at Trenton by

Gen Washington a short time before that. From Lancaster we marched to Philadelphia & from there to Basking Ridge in New Jersey, from thence to Princeton & stayed there a short time 10 or 20 days & we then marched to Trenton & from thence to Philadelphia where we were discharged being out three months.

The next time I marched under Capt Robert Means from then Cumberland County on the Juniata River to Potters Fort in Penns Valley—this was in the year seventeen hundred & seventy-nine.

The next time I marched to Sinking Valley Fort or otherwise called Lead Mine [now known as Fort Roberdeau] and we were in the Fort at the time John Hollidays family was killed at Frankstown or Hollidays burgh. I helped to bury John Hollidays two sons Robert & Adam & his daughter a girl of 14 or 15 years old who were killed & scalped by the Indians at Hollidays near Frankstown.

When I performed my first tour to Philadelphia & Trenton & the Jerseys I was about fifteen or sixteen years--& I am now & against August next I'll be seventy five years old being born in the year 1762. I was never in a battle.¹

Here is a more recent family story. My mother attended high school in McVeytown, a village a half hour from here. I would guess that you could walk from one end of town to the other in much less than an hour. It was March of 1946, Mom was fifteen, and in those days you could leave the school building at lunchtime. One of Mom's classmates asked her to accompany her to the funeral home so that she could pay her respects to a family friend who had passed away. My mother agreed. As they viewed the body of the deceased woman, little did my mother realize that she was looking into the face of her future mother-in-law. The woman who had died was my grandmother Maud Sunderland. My mother had not yet met the Sunderland family, and so as far as we know this is the only occasion when my mother ever saw her mother-in-law Maud.

Now I'd like to tell you about five of my other family and friends from the Juniata Valley.

LEAH CATHERINE KAUFFMAN

As a preschooler my most prized possession was a record player along with a growing collection of children's records. Today I can't name any of the record titles except for one. It was the child's Sunday school song "Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning."

The record was a gift from my Aunt Leah Catherine Kauffman, my grandmother's younger sister. Aunt Leah grew up near the town of Mattawana, on the opposite side of the Juniata River from McVeytown. She was the only one in her family to continue her education beyond high school. She taught at the Lancaster Mennonite School and remained single until her forties. Then she met a widowed Mennonite preacher from Oregon. They were married and he whisked her off to Salem. I remember one of our last visits with Aunt Leah when I was still younger than ten. We were at my grandmother's house

and Aunt Leah opened Grandma's atlas and traced for me the route that they would be taking from Pennsylvania to Oregon.

All who knew Leah Kauffman held her in highest regard. If Mennonites canonized saints, Leah Catherine Kauffman would be an obvious candidate.

JAMES CUNNINGHAM STEWART

A few years later it was time for me to make the transition from sixth to seventh grade. I left the rural New Fairview School two miles from my home where we had two grades in a classroom. Now it was on to the ancient junior high school building in Mount Union and becoming accustomed to new concepts of homeroom and moving from classroom to classroom throughout the day. The trip to school was now eight miles and took me across the Juniata River from Mifflin County to Huntingdon County.

I was fortunate to have James Cunningham Stewart as my seventh grade homeroom teacher and my social studies teacher. He grew up just outside McVeytown and although I had never met him, he knew my parents. At his boyhood home on the north bank of the Juniata River he could easily have thrown a stone into the Juniata from his side porch. His father had been our rural mailman for years and his brother was married to my cousin.

Mr. Stewart had a large map of the world at the front of the classroom, and from time to time he would invite the whole class to come close to the front of the room. With his pointer he would talk about current events, indicating where those world events were occurring.

If someone in the class did a favor for Mr. Stewart, his standard response was, "I'll dance at your next wedding." That would have been an amusing sight, since James Stewart was a rather large barrel-shaped man, probably about 300 pounds. In addition to teaching social studies, he served as an assistant football coach and later became a guidance counselor. In his spare time he operated a farm, along the Juniata River, of course.

Since we came from the same general area, Mr. Stewart occasionally asked me if I were related to a certain person. In response to that question I can recall telling him that the named person and I were distantly related. His response was that we were forty-second cousins, third removed. I assumed that he was jesting, but at that point I didn't quite know what that "third removed" meant.

Decades later my genealogical research led me to the humorous discovery that following the deaths of their first spouses, James Stewart's great-great-grandmother Esther Graham married my great-great-great-uncle Samuel Sunderland, the Revolutionary War veteran whom we have already discussed. So, James Stewart and I are step fourth cousins. That's no doubt closer than forty-second cousins, third removed.

FLORENCE KERR

In my sophomore year of high school I met my English teacher, Florence Kerr. She lived in a huge duplex in McVeytown, about a block from the Juniata River. She could not have thrown a stone into the river from her porch, with the exception of a day in June 1972. That was when Hurricane Agnes transformed the beautiful blue Juniata into a hideous creature of death and destruction. When the Juniata crested, its backwaters had reached the front yard of the Kerr residence.

Florence Kerr taught us writing and literature. She displayed a refined demeanor that was unlike that of most of us ordinary folks who inhabited the area. She also exhibited a distinct mannerism: at the end of each sentence or two she inhaled deeply and audibly. She had been employed at Mount Union high schools since the 1940s, but in 1966, the year after she had taught our class, she left Mount Union to teach at Rothrock High School in her hometown of McVeytown. That move reduced her daily one-way commute from eleven miles to about four blocks, which must have been a delight as she approached retirement.

Her inhalation mannerism did not diminish, however, during those last Rothrock years. The story is told that during one class period, she inhaled so deeply that all the student desks moved several inches toward the front of the classroom!

Over the years Florence Kerr taught English five days a week and a youth Sunday school class on the Sabbath day at the Spring Run Church of the Brethren.

JOHN SHRINER MULLEN

John S. Mullen grew up in McConnellstown, PA, not exactly along the Juniata River, but nonetheless in the Juniata Valley. In the 1970s I was attending the church where Rev. Mullen was the pastor. I was impressed with John Mullen's sincerity, his spirituality, and the eloquence of his speech as he delivered his sermons. He was a devoted family man and was at ease socializing with the parishioners of his three churches and other members of the community. In college he had sung in touring choir, and in later years he was a member of a singing quartet of pastors.

John Mullen was also a serious gardener and I was an amateur. I remember a day when Pastor Mullen, my dad, and I drove a pickup truck to one of those valleys beyond Mapleton. When we arrived we filled the truck bed with one of nature's finest forms of fertilizer. If you had been there, you would have beheld the refined, well-educated Rev. John S. Mullen shoveling horse manure.

DOROTHY BECK

Dorothy Beck grew up in the village of Ryde, on the south bank of the Juniata River between Newton Hamilton and McVeytown, with only Route 103 separating her house from the Juniata River. She

probably could not have thrown a stone from her porch into the Juniata River, but her brother could have accomplished that feat. He played baseball for the local team and Dorothy was an avid fan.

Dorothy Beck became an elementary school teacher and taught hundreds of students in the rural schools of Wayne Township, Mifflin County, followed by ten years in Mount Union. She is an alumna of Mount Union High School and regularly attends the annual banquet meeting of the Mount Union Area Schools Alumni Association, of which I am the current board president. At each banquet, I can expect to receive one of her hugs. In fact, for many years she has represented the earliest graduating class in attendance at that banquet, the Class of 1932. Dorothy Beck taught my father when he was a young lad, and she is still touching lives at the tender age of 103.

For decades, the Newton-Wayne Fire Company has supported itself by serving turkey dinners to the community. Dorothy Beck has been a long-time volunteer at these dinners. Until just a few years ago she was still being assigned one table to wait on. She is an avid follower of baseball, and Dr. Bukowski will be pleased to hear that she is a Pittsburgh Pirates fan.

These five individuals, all of whom grew up in the Juniata Valley, chose to further their education along the Juniata River. James Cunningham Stewart received his B.A. degree in 1948; Florence Kerr received hers in 1946; John S. Mullen in 1962; and Dorothy Beck in 1937. Leah Kauffman attended summer sessions in 1944, 1946, and 1947, all of these at Juniata College. In fact, Dorothy Beck is currently the second oldest alum of Juniata College.

Because I grew up in the Juniata Valley in the fifties and sixties, my life was greatly influenced by others who had received their education from the College on the Hill. Many of you may have been motivated by your acquaintance with a Juniata alum. Certainly the vast majority of those in this room have been guided, shaped, or inspired by at least one recent or current member of the Juniata faculty, staff, student body, or alumni. But isn't that the Juniata tradition? For 140 years, Juniata faculty, staff, students, and alumni have enriched their communities by action and example.

Finally, allow me to give a word to the seniors who are assembled here today. You will soon be departing the Juniata Valley to live and work in other valleys—perhaps the Susquehanna, the Ohio, the Delaware, the Mississippi, the Columbia, the Danube, the Yangtze, or another valley. When you leave this College on the Hill, I urge you to pass the spirit of Juniata on to those about you. In many cases that will happen automatically, but I encourage you to take the opportunity to deliberately spread the word about this special place along the Juniata River. And don't forget to come back to visit as often as you can.

NOTES

1. Compiled from U. S. Revolutionary Pension File for Samuel Sunderland of Mifflin County, Pennsylvania #31585 (as of about 1837-41). Transcription by Dr. Benjamin B. Sunderland, Jr.