

The Story Behind the Pictures

by

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When we think about the history of Union County we tend to focus on prominent families, whose wealth, property holdings, and political decisions make them visible to us, generations later. But the success of those families would not have happened had there not been the far larger number of the county's more ordinary citizens whose labors and lives underpin our area's daily life. Unlike the county's well known families, the small holders faced life's challenges with few defenses and fewer options, relying especially on their links to family and neighbor, and hard work to deal with the heavy challenges that life sent their way.

There have now been seven generations of descendents since Henry Bennage returned from the Civil War to White Deer township and his wife, Sarah Brown. The lives of Henry and Sarah, and of those who came after them across the 19th and 20th centuries chronicle personal struggles and satisfactions that were surely part of the lives of many persons living in Union County in those times.

Henry Simon "Simon" Bennage was a 33-year-old farmer in White Deer Township. He was married to Sarah Brown, who died in 1907 and they were the parents of seven children. In 1864 he became a drafted Civil War soldier.ⁱ He went to war with a local friend, Paul Dieffenderfer. His brother, Enos, was already a member of the 199th P.V.I. and fought in most of the important battles of the war. Simon served in 76th P.V.I. for almost a year. During his war service he kept a diary detailing his activities and locations during multiple battles. Luckily he was uninjured and returned home in July 1865.

Within 10 months of Simon's return, their eighth child, George, was born. Simon continued to keep diaries of his farm life. "His diaries give an account of the daily life of his family on the farm in that day, many of the farm chores done by hand, threshing etc., making shutters for the house, repairing the few farm implements in the farm

	Henry Simon Bennage 1831 - 1917	m 1852 to	Sarah Brown 1829 - 1907		
/		/			
David	Henry Musser	m 1884 to	Ellen Jane Bennage	m 1902 to	Francis Dunkleberger
Mary Agnes	1853 - 1897		1864-1925		abt 1874 - abt 1925
Elizabeth	/	/			/
John	Ralph C.	George W. Musser m 1916 to	Florence E. Walter		Paul
Catharine	Mary M.	1897 - 1977	1895 - 1976		Elmer
Susanna	Sarah	/	/		Mildred
George	Raymond	Marlin	Freda E. Musser never married private		
	Jennie	Gladys	1921 to		
	James	Nevin	/		
		George Jr.	Janet B. Musser m 1955 to	Glenn G. Shively	
		Florine	1939 to	1936 to	
		Beatrice	/	/	
			Lisa Ann 1958	Glenda Lee Shively m 1973 to 1955 to	Harry Lee Zimmerman 1955 to
				/	
				Bonnie Lee Zimmerman m 1997 to Kevin Paul Roush 1976 to	1974
				/	/
				Breanna Lee Roush 2001	Kolby Paul Roush 2004

blacksmith shop. Apparently the farm had a variety of shops including shoemaking, carpentry, etc. The women were baking (bread, pies), quilting, sewing, canning and preserving the food. The social life revolved about the church, the Grange, husking and quilting bees, the G.A.R. [Grand Army of the Republic], visiting among friends and relatives, bobsledding for the young folks" (quoted from Ralph Kostenbader, *Ancestors and History of the Bennage and Brown Families*, 1974).ⁱⁱ

Simon's daughter, Ellen Jane Bennage, was born in 1864 and married Henry Musser in 1884. Henry, born in 1853, was an orphan from Snyder County. His father died before 1860 and after a remarriage, his mother died in 1862. Henry was then raised by his uncle, Levi Musser. By the census of 1880 he was a laborer at a neighboring farm. Ellen Jane and Henry had seven children in 13 years. The last child to this union, George W., was born in 1896. Three months later his father, Henry, died of kidney disease.

Left with 7 surviving children to raise alone, Ellen Jane gave baby George to her father, Simon, to raise. Simon, his wife Sarah and eventually his two unmarried daughters, Mary Agnes and Elizabeth, raised George as their own. George's daughter Freda still says that "he never spent another night at his mother's after going to Simon's."

Ellen Jane struggled to support her family. "Her family lived in one of the Simon Bennage properties on High St., West Milton, east of the railroad crossing on the south

corner. After the death of her father in 1917, she received this property as part of her share of the Simon Bennage estate. She remodeled the property in the early 1920's, making a double frame house. She had a hard life providing for the family after the death of her first husband. Shortly after the birth of three children in



Henry Simon Bennage, daughter Ellen Jane Bennage Musser
Dunkleberger, George W. Musser, Marlin Musserⁱⁱⁱ c.1917

the second marriage, she was left with the same circumstances of raising the family by herself. (Her husband, Frank, was admitted to Danville State Hospital.) She was employed by the Reading Railroad Co. at the station as a janitress and supplemented her income wherever she could find work" (quoted from Ralph Kostenbader, *Ancestors and History of the Bennage and Brown Families*, 1974).

To survive, Ellen Jane did receive public assistance when necessary which was paid back from her estate. Her son, Raymond, lost his wife in the Flu Epidemic of 1918 and Ellen Jane took his three small children to raise. Ellen Jane died in 1925 of cancer. Her granddaughter, Freda, believes she remembers Ellen Jane on the couch during her illness. The house that Ellen Jane owned was bought by Raymond and was eventually

razed after the 1972 flood. Baby George lived in Henry Simon's brick house until he married. The house still stands on the west corner Crossroads and Milroy Roads near the JPM intersection. The house was made from clay from the pond and field that lay in front of it.

George never said much about his childhood though he repeated the story about how the house was built. It is assumed he worked on the farm like most boys did in that time. He fell in love with the neighbor's daughter, Florence Walter, who lived in the house over the hill with her parents, Palmer and Fianna Walter. Palmer



Back from left: Freda Musser (dau of George); Glenda (nee Shively) Zimmerman (now Sheaffer gr granddaughter of Geo); Janet Musser Shively Russell (granddaughter of Geo). Front and center: George W. Musser holding, his gr gr granddaughter Bonnie Lee Zimmerman

and Fianna were tenant farmers on the land across the road from the Bennage house. The home in which they lived now stands abandoned on JPM road near the Crossroads intersection.

George and Florence had 6 of 7 children survive to adulthood. They tenant farmed and eventually bought a farm. During the Depression they lost the farm and they again went tenant farming. They continued to do so the rest of their working years. They moved often to better the terms of their tenancy. During the really rough times George worked on the WPA (Works Progress Administration) in the mountains building bridges and roads. His daughter said he almost froze to death when on this job. He and Florence grew almost everything they ate. They also traded or sold produce for the items they couldn't provide for themselves. Eventually, they sold out, left the farm and

moved to a small home in Mifflinburg in 1956. They lived contentedly for the remainder of their years. George occasionally worked in the local silk mills. They were married over 60 years.

George and Florence's daughter, Freda, lived next door with her daughter, Janet. I, daughter of Janet, was fortunate enough to know George and Florence through my childhood and early adult years. Florence died in 1976 and George passed way in 1977 when I was 22.

George in his old fashioned way kept telling me not to rush life but the minute I was married he wanted to know when I was having a baby. I was fortunate enough to give him his great great granddaughter, Bonnie, nine months before his death. He was a happy man and enjoyed entertaining the children of which I was one.

Today, 2012, his 90-year-old daughter, my grandmother, Freda still talks of her life within this family.

Notes

ⁱ Simon's Civil War diary has been transcribed and made into a booklet. Copies can be provided on request. The UCHS has one on hand.

ⁱⁱ Ralph Kostenbader, Freda's first cousin, was the original genealogist to work on the family. I continued his work to complete my line.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marlin was the first child of George W. and Florence (Walter) Musser. He was a farm laborer after high school and later for Penn Dot. He died in 1970.

