

Theron Shoemaker Dersham, (1913-2004)

by

Lois Huffines

While researching the text for *Mifflinburg and the West End* (Arcadia Publishing, 2012), I met John Dersham, who generously offered digital copies of Grover Bierly's photographs from the original glass negatives for use in the book. As John, who currently lives in Alabama, explained his connection to Mifflinburg, he mentioned an uncle, Theron Dersham, who had taught in the Mifflinburg school district for over 40 years and died in 2004. I became intrigued with Theron's Dersham's story—a life dedicated to education and strongly tied to Mifflinburg. I interviewed both Robert Lynch, who had been Theron's close friend, and Terry Dersham, Theron's son. Several of Theron's former students also passed on remembrances of him. Terry invited me to visit his childhood home in Mifflinburg and showed me various items that had belonged to his parents and grandmother. Since John is a photographer, the family history was also visually well documented. The Dersham family story itself mirrors the history of Mifflinburg, a small town settled and developed by strong and talented people.

There are teachers, and there are *teachers*. Theron S. Dersham is certainly of the second variety. With a teaching career that lasted from 1935 to 1978, multiple generations of students passing through the Mifflinburg school system sat in his classroom. This account serves as a tribute to his life-long commitment to education. Many residents of Mifflinburg still remember him as a good teacher and a great human being, who lived with a heightened sense of integrity and generosity. What did he do? What influenced his life? And what values guided him in his long career?

Theron's Parents

The Dersham family has had a presence in the Mifflinburg area since 1754, when Jacob, son of German immigrant Johann Jacob Dersham (born in 1733), settled in Mifflinburg. Theron's father, John Alexander Dersham, born in 1883, worked as an accountant for the Pennsylvania Railroad. Theron's parents married in 1909, and Theron was born on February 8, 1913, while his parents lived on North Eighth Street in Mifflinburg. Later the family moved to a farm on Furnace Road and lived there until his father died in 1920 during the great pneumonia outbreak of that year. Theron was only 7 years old. Theron's mother, Lena Jane (Shoemaker) Dersham, born in 1885, was left with the formidable task of raising three young children alone, Theron, Sara Ellen, born in 1915, and Watson Winaford in 1918. Lena left the farm and moved her family back into town to 300 Green Street.



House at 300 Green Street. (Photo courtesy of Lois Huffines)

Lena was a no-nonsense person. She graduated from Bloomsburg Teachers College in 1906, and taught at Creek School on Forest Hill Road and later at Pike School until 1922. She then taught third grade at the Mifflinburg elementary school until retiring in 1951. Her no-nonsense approach angered some parents of her students, it was said, when she told students in her class that

there was no Santa Claus. She taught all three of her own children in class. She expected her children to be well behaved, make good grades, and to be outstanding at everything they did. Living on a teacher's salary of about \$900 a year, she not only raised her three children, but instilled in them the work ethic and focus needed for successful achievement.



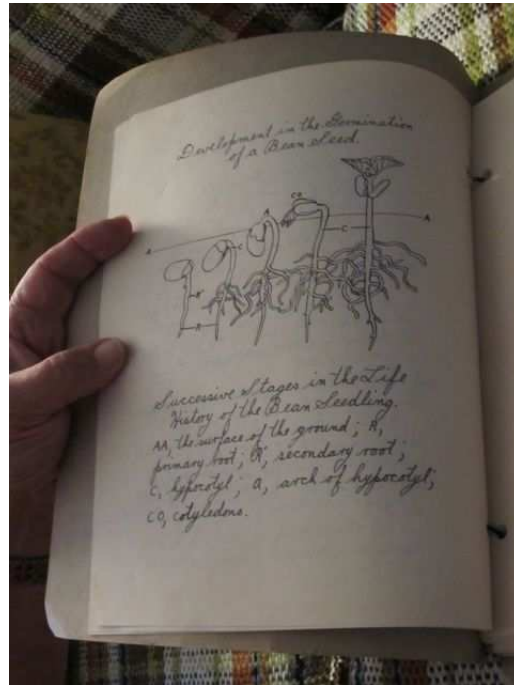
Lena Shoemaker presented class souvenir cards to her students.
(Photo courtesy of Lois Huffines)

During these early years, Theron's mother enjoyed the support of her family while her children were growing up, especially from her sisters Cora (Shoemaker) Watson and Maude (Shoemaker) Kleckner. They often provided her with produce and chickens from their farms. As the family later endured the Great Depression followed by the uncertainty of World War II, Theron learned the importance of demanding the best from himself and the self-assurance that comes from a supportive family life.

The High School and College Years

Theron's high school set the stage for his very active adult life. He excelled in school. Before entering his sophomore year in 1929, he had a botany assignment to prepare during the summer months. It involved the description and collection of summer flowering plants. His notebook still exists, and one notes his careful handwriting and clear botanical drawings. Amazingly, Lena had had a similar assignment, and her notebook also still exists. Although without

the drawings and skill displayed by Theron, Lena's notebook has the same careful presentation of the flowers and plants.



Theron's pre-sophomore high school year summer assignment notebook.
(Photo courtesy of Lois Huffines)

Theron graduated from high school in 1931, and the graduation program listed him as having received several awards: the Alumni Physics Prize, the Mathematics Prize, and a prize for perfect attendance. As valedictorian of the class, and he delivered a speech entitled "The U.S. and Her World Affairs." He was also president of his graduating class of 47 members.

Then it was on to Bucknell University. Theron attended Bucknell from the fall of 1931 to the spring of 1935 as a full time student. During that time he lived at home and commuted via a Model A Ford. As Lena's older son, he must have been a big help to her as the man of the house. While at Bucknell, Theron did not leave his high school alma mater in the lurch. Mifflinburg High School needed an additional person to play football in order to field a team. Theron suited up and helped them out on the playing field, even though he had already graduated. Having worked hard and steadily at Bucknell, Theron was inducted into Kappa Phi Kappa, an honorary fraternity for men in the field of professional education.

Kappa Phi Kappa promoted “the cause of education by encouraging men of sound character and recognized ability to study the problems and principles of the profession” (L’Agenda, 1945). In Theron’s time, Dr. Frank G. Davis was the faculty advisor. Theron served for one year as Vice President.

While attending Bucknell, Theron would have experienced the upheaval caused by the fire that destroyed Old Main, and ruined the East and West College wings of the building on August 27, 1932. Work began immediately to rebuild the structure, but classes needed to be housed elsewhere and other accommodations made. In 1935, Theron Dersham was awarded the Bachelor of Science in Education degree, and graduated from Bucknell along with 167 members of the Class of 1935.



Theron Dersham, 1935 Senior Yearbook Picture.
(Photo courtesy of John Dersham)

Teaching Career at Mifflinburg High School

Theron began his long teaching career at Mifflinburg High School in the fall of 1935. From the start he helped wherever he was needed and coached girls’ basketball from 1935 until 1940. He taught mainly mathematics, but his teaching assignments also included physics, shop, and history. On July 14, 1937, he married Dorothy Ruth Reynolds, and by 1939 he had earned the Master of Science in Education degree from Bucknell University.

All three of Lena’s children graduated from college with master’s degrees, and all three had been outstanding athletes in high school. All three became

teachers. Theron attended Bucknell and spent his career teaching mathematics at Mifflinburg High School. Sara Ellen attended Bloomsburg Teachers College and taught typing and business at Watsonstown, which later merged with Warrior Run High School. Watson taught health at the high school in Knox, Pennsylvania; he later served in World War II, and when he returned from overseas, went back to college for his Masters of Health Education on the G.I. Bill. Watson later went on to be the Director of Health Education for the city of Cincinnati and later the Vice President of the American Heart Association.



From left to right, Sara Ellen Dersham, Watson Winaford Dersham, Lena Shoemaker Dersham, Theron Shoemaker Dersham
(Photo courtesy of John Dersham)

Theron's career at Mifflinburg High School lasted 42 years. He taught mathematics to three generations of some Mifflinburg families, also teaching his younger brother Watson and his own children in the classroom. His work with students did not happen only in the classroom. Younger students first met Theron as the school bus driver, which at least on one morning necessitated stopping a fistfight between Bob Lynch and a pugnacious co-student at the bus stop near Forest Hill. Former students describe him as a "good teacher," who was both strict and gentle. The Mifflinburg High School 1945 Yearbook, *The Nautilus*, describes him as follows. "Mr. Dersham is the glamour boy of the faculty. He is an excellent teacher and always has an answer to your mathematics

problem. His interest in sports, cheery smile, and willingness to help is an essential factor at M.H.S.” One former student noted gratefully that he always attended class reunions. Theron maintained high expectations of his students, both scholastically and behaviorally. His approach was mild but compelling. Bob Lynch describes Theron as someone who taught by example and then expected people to do the right thing.

Family Life

Theron and Dorothy lived at 302 Green Street, next to his mother Lena in a house made into a double. They had two sons, Earle Reynolds Dersham, born August 30, 1941, and Theron (“Terry”) John Dersham, born December 24, 1943. Terry describes his father as “always being there, always teaching him.” As a family they ate evening meals at home together; on weekends there were shared adventures: hunting, fishing, and camping at R. B. Winter State Park. There were summer vacation trips to Ocean City, Maryland, where Theron visited a Bucknell friend. On one fishing trip with their father, young Terry and Earle raced each other to the next fishing hole, quite unaware of running close by a rattlesnake. Theron brought them back, showed them the snake, and lectured them about being more aware of their surroundings. After school, Theron played ball with his sons, each sport in its season. He pitched to them when teaching them to bat,



Theron, Dorothy “Dot,” Earle, and Terry in front, 1952.
(Photo courtesy of John Dersham)

and when Terry wanted to be a pitcher, his dad took on the role of catcher. Theron built a backboard and basket for them at home, and soon all the kids in the neighborhood dropped by to play basketball. He taught them passing and catching a football. When Terry reached age 12, Theron took him deer hunting, having Terry stay at one location while Theron walked the mountain to drive the deer in his direction. Once his sons started hunting, Theron himself seldom got a deer; he spent his time making sure the boys got theirs.

Just as Lena had done before him, Theron expected his sons to be the best that they could be. Earle graduated from Mifflinburg High School as valedictorian of his class and had the singular honor of having had the high school yearbook dedicated to him that year because he was outstanding as a student and as a person. Earle went on to Princeton on a full scholarship, the first student from Mifflinburg High School to attend an Ivy League school. He graduated from Princeton *cum laude* as an aeronautical engineer and later worked as an engineer and distribution analyst for Exxon Mobil. After five years in Alaska, where he survived the Alaskan earthquake of 1964, Terry studied at Indiana Institute of Technology, where he graduated *summa cum laude* and received the Outstanding Electrical Engineering Award at graduation. He worked as a research engineer in microwave technology as a civilian for the Air Force. Having settled in Ohio, Terry served on the City Council of Vandalia, Ohio, and also as its Vice Mayor.

Starting in 1951, Theron worked as a lifeguard at R.B. Winter and was part of the summer work crew. At first he drove to and from R.B. Winter everyday, but by 1952 the family camped there through the summer, returning to Mifflinburg only for Terry's Little League baseball games and to do the wash and re-supply themselves with groceries. Later Theron and Dorothy ran a concession stand at R.B. Winter, which was a popular gathering place for local families, especially on weekends, before public and private swimming pools became more numerous.

The Dershams attended the First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Mifflinburg. Theron taught the senior boys Sunday School class and served for a time as Superintendent of the Sunday School. He served on the church council

every other year from 1941 to 1973 (one was not permitted to have succeeding terms). He sang in the church choir for 70 years. According to Terry, everybody knew him, he had no enemies, and people looked up to him. Theron treated everyone with respect. He was a member of the Free and Accepted Masons Lodge 370 and of the Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite of Free Masons of the Valley of Williamsport. He coached Little League baseball, but in order to avoid the appearance of favoritism, he did not coach the team on which his son Terry played.

The Later Years

In his later years, Theron was an avid golfer and bowler. Terry still displays the many trophies his father won in both sports. As a couple, Theron and Dorothy played pinochle every Friday evening with another couple and followed the card game with a bowl of ice cream. After Dorothy died, Theron continued to play with “the guys”, who included Bob Lynch, Bill Ruhl, and Earl Thomas. The far-reaching conversations during the card games often involved the controversies of the time. In particular, the on-going discussions of which high school the students living in Buffalo Township would attend, Mifflinburg or Lewisburg, was high on the list of topics. At first, from 1949 to the early 1970s, the parents of these students could decide for themselves. Later Mifflinburg, needing the added revenues, sued to have the students come to Mifflinburg. Judge Charles Kalp ruled in favor of continuing the practice of the families deciding. Mifflinburg appealed, and the state ruled that the students of Buffalo Township would attend Mifflinburg.

Dorothy died on March 11, 1970. Theron found it difficult to continue living in the home that they had shared. Lena had died in 1968, and the house at 300-302 Green Street had lost its warmth for him. At that point Theron chose to build a house on the corner of the property at Third and Green Streets. He contracted to have the house framed and under roof and exterior brick work done, but Theron built the interior of the house himself. He had already made cabinets and pieces of furniture and was a skilled carpenter. It is said that the new house was extraordinary in its efficient use of space. Theron lived in that

house with his sister Sarah Ellen until just before his death. Theron died on August 12, 2004 in Riverwoods, where he had resided for 17 days. He was 91 years old.



Watson, Sara Ellen, and Theron in 1997.
(Photo courtesy of John Dersham)

Terry recalls the many trips his father took to Ohio to help him remodel his house. In his 80s, Theron climbed the roof to fix leaks, helped finish the basement, and even re-did work he considered not solid enough. At one point he rebuilt certain corners in the house while Terry was off at work. On seeing what his father had done, Terry reminded him he was never going to put elephants in the basement. At age 90, Theron installed new doors and shelving for storage. He remained active until the final year of his life.

How does one take the measure of a man? By the closeness of his family, the success of his sons, the number of his friends, the accomplishments in his work life, his prowess as an athlete, his skill as a carpenter, the quality of his past times? Yes, of course, all of these together. But more important is the integrity of his character, his willingness to help others, his compassion toward all people, and his service to church and community. When asked what Theron Dersham was like, his student/colleague/friend Bob Lynch responded, "If there were more Theron Dershams, there would be no need for rules and regulations. People

would do what was right.” Strict and gentle, his was a life well lived and well loved. Even those who never met him must admire him for that.



Theron Shoemaker Dersham, the last church portrait,
taken when he was near 90 years old.
(Photo courtesy of John Dersham)

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