Family History: Recollections of Sarah Hall Holliman Hatch

The Children of James Franklin Holliman b1839- d1911:

I. Virginia Ann Holliman b1866- d 1934

Virginia was the oldest of the 10 children of JFH . She attended her father’s school in her early years and was sent to the University of Virginia to study to become a teacher herself. Virginia lived at home much of the time after her mother’s death caring for her father and brothers. Even after the older boys (Isaiah and Bailey) were gone and JFH married Bertha Lee Powell (my grandmother), Virginia stayed around to help with the ever growing younger family. She was especially valuable after the death of JFH when Bertha was single and raising five children three to thirteen years old, while trying to farm the land JFH left to her in his will in order to support the family. Land bequeathed to the two women changed hands between them a number of times over the years. Much credit should be given to Virginia as the stabilizing factor holding the young family together. These recollections are of stories told to me by my father, John Hall Holliman.

II. James Isaiah Holliman b1870 -d1954

Isaiah was quite old and blind when I recall visiting him. At that time he was married to Virgie Lee and still lived in the typical “shotgun” style house with chickens running free in the yard. My favorite thing to do while visiting was to drink the cold, cold water from the metal dipper kept in the bucket in the shade of the back porch. My parents lived in a cabin on his property when they first married and grew a garden that was shared with Isaiah and Virgie Lee.

III. William Bailey Holliman b1875 - d1950

I have no recollection at all of ever meeting Bailey. We visited once when he was ill and close to death .I was very young and remained in the car.

IV. Cleon Carlisle Holliman b1897-d1977

Cleon was the oldest of Bertha’s children that lived to adulthood.. JFH bequeathed each of his children a portion of his land. Cleon began farming as soon as he was old enough and able to sustain himself. He married Aunt Pearl and had several children. He spent his life as a farmer and lay minister of the Baptist Church. Bertha’s “laying out” was held at Cleon’s house. He suffered some form of dementia in his later years. My father, John Hall, would visit Cleon in Tuscaloosa once or twice a month until his death in 1977.

V. Leon O’Lenthus Holliman b1900-d1977

Leon, or Lent, also spent his life as a farmer. He married and had three children. We visited fairly often. There exists an in-depth book about the life and times of Uncle Lent and Aunt Pearl. He developed colon cancer in middle age, had a number of feet of colon removed and lived a good many more years before it returned.

VI. Janet Ellen Douglas Holliman b1903-d2002

Janet, John and Mary, the three youngest children of Bertha were greatly influenced by Virginia as she did most of their raising. They stuck together very closely as a family over the years and depended on each other in times of need. Janet married Detoy Williams and spent her life as a farm wife churning butter to sell and raising chickens for the eggs to sell to supplement their income on top of teaching fourth grade. They had no children. Janet and Detoy lived in the typical shotgun house. She was most proud when she was able to have the house painted inside and out, dispense with the tin roof and install a bathroom with running water to it and to the kitchen. Electric lights and gas heaters were a great thing too over the pot- bellied coal burning stoves and kerosene lanterns. Before that were simple wood burning fireplaces and the old wood cook stove. At one point in Janet’s teaching career, she was required to update her teaching certificate. John Hall advanced her the funds for tuition to the University of Alabama summer school program. She passed her teaching courses, but had trouble with the one required PE course, swimming. Her instructor, several years her junior, told her if she could just float for five minutes, he would give her a passing grade. And she did! And he did! After her retirement she devoted herself to assisting “baby Mary” with caring for her son during off and on illnesses. The huge chest freezer in the hall was always full to overflowing with vegetables from the garden and the many cakes, pies and loaves of bread that she loved to bake. During one of our annual visits Janet gave us a loaf of bread intended for our daughter, Sharon, who was in college in SW Colorado. We duly kept it frozen until Sharon came home for a visit. She was late for her return flight to Durango and in the final rush the bread ended up in the lap of her seat mate, Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell. Janet outlived all the JFH children and spouses dying in 2002 at 98 years and 10 months. She is buried in the Fayette Cemetery along side Detoy, Mary, JD, John and Annie Mae.

VII. John Newton Hall Holliman b 9/13/05 d. 9/13/1998

My father, John Newton Hall Holliman, was the talker of the family and was extolled as being very intelligent by all the family. He had great capacity for retaining details. His major interests were history and mathematics along with horticulture and fishing. His specialty was the Civil War and he would sit for hours reading and re-reading the original letters written by his father JFH and Wm. Stewart during their military service. In my school years at home, his habit was to read aloud from The World Book Encyclopedia some topic in which he was interested whether Mother or I was interested or not. I would retreat to my room as often as possible claiming homework to do. During those years his family stories

were fairly typical of any North Alabama farm family of the era, tales of poverty being foremost. In my adult years, his stories changed in tone to the real struggles, often mistreatment by Mike Johnson (Bertha‘s second husband), that Janet, John and Mary endured as youngsters. As soon as he was able, John left home to find work as a farm hand or saw mill worker. Janet worked as household help for local families and later married Detoy Williams. “Baby Mary” was taken to Mississippi by Mike and Bertha where the home situation worsened. At some point one or all of the boys went to Mississippi, collected Bertha and Mary and brought them back to Alabama.

John attended Jacksonville State Teachers College for two years and then the University of Alabama to obtain his degree. By this time he and Annie Mae had married and lost their first child at birth. He ( Wilson) is buried in the Stewart-Holliman Cemetery. They spent their early married years as teacher, principal and coach. John ran for County Superintendent of Schools, Fayette County. He lost. Politics of the day being what they were, John and Annie Mae were forced to leave the county to find jobs elsewhere. John joined the US Treasury Department as a Guard at the port of Mobile shipyard. He spent the next thirty years as Guard, Assistant to the Collector of Customs, Birmingham, Customs Inspector, Mobile, and finally full Collector of Customs for Birmingham district. As a Customs Inspector stationed in Mobile, one of his assignments was to measure the exterior and interior of all newly constructed ships at the Engels shipbuilding yard in Pascagoula, MS to be measurement of record for the Federal government. The purpose being to ascertain there were no hidden compartments available for contraband and that reported volume of cargo matched the space available. This assignment was routinely given to him because of all the Inspectors in Mobile, he was the only one with the math knowledge and skills to complete the task.

In his retirement he shared a huge vegetable garden with a brother-in-law who had been his fishing buddy over the years. He raised camellias at home, “gibbing“ the blossoms to obtain the largest ones possible. He also kept bees at home, succeeding in getting every door handle in the house sticky at honey collecting time.

John died September 13,1998, on his 93rd birthday. He was alert and walking a mile a day until six weeks before his death due to kidney failure. Throughout his life the family was all important to John. He advanced funds, bought acreage to hold and furnished a temporary home to nieces and nephews when needed. He freely offered advise, solicited or not, and was well thought of by most of the family and friends. At the same time he was very critical and controlling of Mother and me. He refused to fund my college education because I chose to follow a pre-med course of study rather than teaching, the only suitable job for a woman in his opinion.

VIII. Mary Elizabeth Holliman b 1903--d 1999

“Baby Mary” was the acknowledged brightest of all of the JFH children. She had a difficult and traumatic childhood that affected her in adulthood. She married John Denver Turner. JD, Mary, John and Annie Mae with me as a baby lived in a house on the main street of Fayette, two teaching and supporting the others while they finished their degrees at the University of Alabama. Annie Mae had already received her degree majoring in English and a minor in Spanish; John majored in History; Mary in English. I’m not sure of JD’s degree, though I do remember he taught high school math. At one point JD also ran for county school superintendent and lost, ending their teaching careers in Fayette county. JD joined the Army and taught math to the recruits. Mary spent the rest of her working years in the county welfare department. JD spent his last career as a rural postman driving thousands of miles a year. Mary battled schizophrenia and other illnesses over the years. When we would visit at their home in Berry, Al. where Mary taught and JD was principal, coach and math teacher, Aunt Mary would drill me in elocution. I had to recite poems to her and she would correct my Southern accent. Her only child, Dr. Jon Douglas Turner, was born in Berry; her mother, Bertha Lee, died while living there in Berry. My family always spent Christmas at Aunt Mary’s house with her little silver table top tree and blue Christmas lights and balls; with Doug’s dog Ginger (a Chihuahua) hiding under the chair; and Aunt Janet and Uncle Detoy driving in from the farm for the day, leaving early to get home for feeding time. My mother’s pecan pie or coconut cake, Aunt Mary’s rum soaked fruit cake and anything Aunt Janet contributed to the dinner was always a big hit with everybody!

Bertha Lee Powell b1876-1948

Bertha was the second wife of JFH. She was born to Elizabeth Hasseltine Powell and Rueben Dodson. She was never acknowledged by Dr. Dodson The family story goes that the Doctor and his wife were childless and this was his own version of fertility test to place the responsibility for that fact. Bertha attended the school that JFH had established upon his return from the Civil War. It is not known what the attraction was between JFH and Bertha. There are no passionate love letters such as JFH wrote to Rebecca to indicate a great love. He was a widower with three children, mostly grown. She was young, pretty with no great marriage prospects since she was illegitimate. They married when Bertha was eighteen and JFH was fifty-five years old. Over the next fifteen years, Bertha had six children. She was only thirty-five when JFH died. JFH died when the youngest, “Baby Mary was three years old; my father was five. Bertha and Virginia worked together to raise the children and hold on to the land bequeathed to them by JFH. There is a dearth of information about Bertha and Mike Johnson beyond he was not a kind man to Bertha’s children. He moved Bertha and Mary to Mississippi at one point. It was in this period that Bertha’s boys went to Mississippi and brought both Bertha and Mary home to Fayette County. Bertha lived with one then the other of her five living children the rest of her life. During those years she helped with all the chores and babysitting duties any of her children needed and made quilts for the family. I still have a quilt made especially for me. In her later years she crocheted afgans. I was taught to crochet when I was six or seven, a skill I still enjoy. Mother and I would stop at Kress‘ Five and Dime to buy multicolored yarn and Bertha‘s big vice, snuff, on the way home from school for her. Yarn came in skeins and it was my job to hold the skein so she could wind the yarn into a ball. Her prized possession was eight silver dollars that she would spill out on the bed and count over and over again. When Mary’s only child was born, she went to live with them in Berry. “Mama Holliman” was diagnosed with diabetes while relatively young. Her diet was an ongoing struggle. The night before she died at Mary’s home in Berry, Al. , she ate a whole quart of ice cream. The most recent medical visit had given her a very short time to live and she was given leave to indulge her sweet tooth. I was eight years old when she died. The “laying out” was at Cleon’s house. Bertha Lee is buried in the Stewart-Holliman cemetery.