

Memories of My Father—Luther Wallin, Jr.

By Luke Wallin

Special to The Dispatch

My father's grandfather, Francis Marion Wallin, was a logger who fell to a heart attack in the woods, causing his son to leave school after the 4th grade and go to work. As a very young man, Luther Wallin, Sr., saved money and bought a team of white oxen, then another, and became a contractor dragging giant hardwoods out of the Arkansas swamp.

My dad was born in 1912, and by age 6 or 7 he was begging to go with his father out to the big woods, where the men were cutting trees for his sawmill. They lived in tents for weeks at a time, eating squirrels and snapping turtle soup. One day a big buck ran into camp and jumped into a brush pile. Nobody had a gun handy, and my grandfather ordered two men to stand on either side of the pile at one end, each holding a double-bladed axe. "You better not miss," my grandfather said, as the crew set fire to the brush. The deer leapt, the men swung, and the camp had venison that night.

My grandfather finally agreed to let his son visit camp for a week, and left him alone to play during the day while the men were logging. "Go anywhere in this camp," his father warned, "except the hog pen."

Little Luther obeyed for several days, but when he heard the pitiful squeals of a shoat in pain, he had to help. He picked up the baby pig and discovered the thorn in its foot, but now the shoat squealed louder, and its mama charged. My father ran and almost made the fence when he tripped over a limb and fell hard. The hog jumped on top of him and commenced to bite the back of his head. Blood flew, my dad screamed, and Emma, the camp cook, jumped over the fence broom in hand. She beat the sow back and carried the child away in her arms.

The wound was serious and the fastest way to town was an open handcar, manually pumped, on the railroad line that ran to camp. My grandfather had designed this swamp train, with small engine and

cars built in Memphis, and the rails supported by a corduroy road of Sweet Gum poles laid over the bogs. They got my father to safety, sewed his head, and for the rest of his life he carried an L, his initial, back there.

Oh yes, when he was completely healed his father whipped him for disobeying.

In 1936, after graduation from law school, my father chose the lumber business and traveled to Columbus to manage a mill his father had just purchased. My dad moved his loggers into the Tombigbee swamp, following his training, only to discover that this was the '30s, and men were no longer willing to live in the woods full time, no thank you sir!

The trees were mammoth, great oaks and cypresses cut down by two men pulling a long cross-cut saw. There were plenty of rattlesnakes and cottonmouths, and the occasional pather or bear.

In '37 my father married my mother, Ruth McMullan Wallin, and they entered upon a voyage that would last 61 years. They lived in a house that doubled as the offices of Wallin Lumber Company, on 15th St. South just below "the college," now Mississippi University for Women. It was a noisy, dusty place for a young bride to live, within a hundred yards of the ear-splitting sawmill whistle—which used to wake all Columbus—and the rumbling trucks, whining saws, crews putting up and pulling down lumber stacks, and trains that ran right into the kiln sheds. (She just told me it wasn't all that bad.)

As a small boy my father led me around down there. He told stories of the unpredictable and dangerous mules, and we slowly circled around the mountainous log piles. He distinguished red oak from white, hickory from pecan, Catalpa from Hackberry, and spoke of the grades of logs and lumber, the beauty of each. When he built our house in '48, on Seventh Street near Lee Park, he paneled one room in red gum, with numerous dark heartwood boards, one in yellow birch, and a third in bird's eye

maple. On Saturday afternoons, when I was five, I watched him sand boards over saw horses, and experiment with varnishes until he got the process exactly right. The rooms look new today.

He used to take me to the woods and talk about conservation, especially the importance of selective harvest, to avoid clearcutting—and this in the early '50s.

He planted pines, encouraged oaks, but he was never rigid about his practices, and prided himself on looking after a woods with a little of everything—ironwood, persimmon, Tupelo and black gum, wood ducks and fox squirrels. His generation was poised between the frontierism of his father, and the environmental concern of today. For my father, loving woods, logs and lumber all went together; it was simply a question of balance, of moderation and proportion.

When his spirit passed this week we laid his body to rest in a white oak casket, and buried him in Friendship Cemetery on a rise overlooking oak trees beside the Tombigbee river.

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Luke Wallin is a writer living in Rhode Island. He would enjoy hearing from anyone with stories to share of Luther Wallin, Jr., at 64 Willow Avenue, Little Compton, RI 02837-1533.