

Hence Layne's Pig Dropped Dead

A Talk With Virgil Calvern Thomas

Written by Jackie Layne Partin

Why is it when we reach a certain age, our reference to older folks goes something like this, "Old man Johnny Thomas' boy, Virgil?" Well, I knew old man Johnny Thomas when I was a child and older, and I visited with his son, Virgil, February 25, 2009, in Kimball, Tennessee. I can remember, as though it were yesterday, seeing and hearing old man Johnny sing, "Wonderful Words of Life" and "Heavenly Sunlight," two of his favorite gospel hymns. Ninety-six-year-old Virgil took time and sat down to tell me "wonderful words of life"—his life. He lived an exemplary life worthy of our attention. "Old man Johnny Thomas" would be so proud that his son grew up to be a kind, hospitable, Christian man.

Virgil Calvern Thomas was born October 22, 1912, at his parents' home in Summerfield, Tennessee. His name was "put down" as Calvern, but he began to call himself "Calvin" when he started to school. His parents were John William Thomas and Katherine Hunt Thomas. Virgil's siblings were Mabel, Vernon, Irene, Laura and Marshall. His maternal grandparents were Anthony and Margaret Hunt, and his paternal grandparents were Preston and Tennessee Williams Thomas. John Thomas built the family house before he married and had it ready for his new bride. The house once stood on the left of Summerfield Road going toward Clouse Hill.

At first the family carried water from a spring, but later on John dug a well. Next he had a hand pump put in the well; then still later, an electric pump was installed. The children took their turns in carrying water whenever it was needed. Of course, there was wood to be cut and coal to be carried into the house for the large fireplace in the living room and the grates in the other rooms. When Virgil was older, he took on the job of building the fires for his father. John had designed the house so that every room had its own heat source, but only one large chimney was needed for the smoke to ascend to the outside. Priest Meeks, a local rock mason, cut the stone and built the chimney. The house is now gone, and the land is being developed for housing.

Virgil and his siblings went to the Summerfield School that stood where Billy and Dorothy Nunley once had a business. His fondest memories were of his favorite teacher, Ms. May Justus. Some of the words he used to describe this incredible woman were wonderful, highly educated and highly talented. She wrote poetry and books that the children could understand like The Other Side of the Mountain and The House in No-End Hollow. Virgil told the story that she had a bad birthmark on her face when she was a child in Virginia; as she grew older, the birthmark became an embarrassment to her. When her writings became known around the area, a publishing company recognized her talent and became interested in her work. They made a visit to her

home, and subsequently began to publish some of her work. Soon the publisher began to realize the problem she was having because of the birthmark. After a few inquiries were made, a doctor was found who fixed the birthmark, and as Virgil said, “She was a beautiful lady!” The procedure gave her new confidence and a feeling of pride spurring her on to finish her college education with the desire to teach children.

Dr. Lillian Johnson lived in Summerfield at the time, and she had acquaintances in New York City who had “lots of money.” One of her desires was to insure that mountain people in Grundy County, especially in Summerfield, had access to higher learning. Dr. Lillian built a large nice home over at the old Johnson place; then she bought Ms. Justus the little house that used to stand next to the Summerfield School. It was probably the best-known house in Summerfield. Vera McCampbell, another teacher at the school, came to live with Ms. Justus in later years. Virgil remembered making the two-mile walk to Monteagle to pick up the teachers’ mail for them. He also remembered that Dr. Lillian Johnson spent a lot of money remodeling certain features of the Summerfield School. The old pot-bellied stove was replaced with a coal furnace, and Virgil was paid two dollars a month to build the fires in it. Sweeping floors was another one of his chores, and he happily did both with pride.

When Virgil was in the fifth or sixth grade, he missed nearly a whole year of school. A horse stepped on his foot parting his toes, and “proud flesh,” (*a decaying of the flesh*), set up in his foot taking a long time to heal. Dr. Jackson rode down from Tracy City on his horse to help with the injury. His beloved teacher, Ms. Justus, allowed Virgil to make up his lost work while he was in the seventh and eighth grade so that he was able to enter high school on time with the rest of his classmates.

“Who were some of your classmates at school?” I asked. Usually there was at least one cousin with whom to play. His cousin, Paul Thomas, son of Walter and Della James Thomas, came to mind. They were in the same grade all the way through school. Tom and Jack Campbell were two more classmates. I reminded Virgil that he had not named any girls in his classmate list, so he quickly, and with a sheepish grin on his face said, “Elizabeth Marlowe; that was my girlfriend.” Elizabeth, or Lizzie, as she was better known, was the daughter of Lem and Maggie Payne Marlowe. Quickly I thought of a friend of mine, Gladys Cox Williams, who was born near Summerfield in 1911, and reared not too far from Virgil’s home. She had made the statement to me a couple years before, that she was so old that all her friends had passed on before her. I asked Virgil about her; he remembered her well as being one of his high school friends. Lord willing, I will visit Gladys on her ninety-eighth birthday and proudly tell her that her friend Virgil Calvern Thomas says, “Hi!” That will make her birthday even more special.

After Virgil’s father built a big fire in the cook stove in the kitchen, his mother prepared a breakfast and packed a lunch for her children since the walk home was a little too far for them to go and get back in time for the following class. The children

who lived closer could run out the door and be home for the lunch meal in a matter of minutes. The students kept their lunches at their desks, and Virgil remembered the wonderful aromas that came floating from his lunch, especially when his mother packed him a pear preserves sandwich. He could hardly wait until lunchtime. Sometimes the sandwich was made on a biscuit, but his mother also made homemade loaf bread. Can't you just get a whiff of that yeast bread still baking in the oven of the old wood cook stove? Unless one is old enough to remember those days, he/she cannot understand how much better the food tasted in those days. Of course, I am not so naïve that I don't understand that children were hungry when mealtimes came around back then, but today they snack all day long stifling the yearning for good home-cooked foods.

Emergency grocery items could be bought at Marion Sanders' little store, which was started in the back of his house. He didn't keep a lot of items, but he had a few canned goods. Since Mr. John Thomas worked for the coal company, Katherine took advantage of a delivery program they had for their company employees. Once a month, her groceries were delivered, then she gave them a new list for the next month. If she ran out of something, then she could always go to Marion Sanders Store or send someone to Flury's Grocery Store in Tracy City. From time to time as John journeyed home on the weekends from his job in Palmer, he got off the train in Tracy City and went to Lee and Annie Goodman's café next to Flury's Store. He would buy a gallon of chili to take home to his wife and children. (*That's not the first time that I had heard of the Goodman's chili being so popular with the travelers.*) Then he'd hop the train going to Monteagle and get off at the Summerfield stop.

At first Virgil's father worked at the Clouse Hill coalmines, which were two miles from where the family was living. Virgil remembered that the railroad tracks in Clouse Hill were taken up around 1920 when he was about eight years old. The mines in that area had ceased to operate a few years earlier. His father later went to work for the Company in Tracy City and then Palmer. While in Palmer he stayed all week at a boarding house and came home on the weekends. Virgil's grandfather Hunt worked on the railroad at Coalmont, so his mother would ride the train out on weekends to visit her side of the family. Virgil explained that the first train had one coach on the rear for passengers, but later on, more coaches were added and a station stop was placed all along the tracks in every little community. In 1924, "Papa bought a Model T-Ford from the Jones men in Tracy City. He paid \$500.00 for it, and the tail light was an oil light," explained Virgil. When it got dark outside, the boys got out to light the tail light. The car had a top over it, but there were curtains instead of windows.

The Thomas family always attended the Church of Christ. This led me to ask about a small meeting place in Summerfield that I used to see each school day while riding the bus to high school. The little empty building had obviously been a church house at one time, but I have never been able to get a handle on the name of the group that met there. It stood where the Dick Meeks' house is now; actually, some of the little building may be incorporated into his house. Finally, Virgil has gotten me straightened out on that

question. Before his father married, he worshipped at the little church over in the Summerfield Cemetery that was basically a Methodist Church. Hence Layne was the preacher in those years. Then later his father and others in the community built the little church building beside the Summerfield School for the purpose of having a place for the Church of Christ to meet. Some other names he mentioned were Marion Sanders, his Uncle Walter Thomas, John Scruggs and Bill Parks, as being some of the members who worked on the building. I recalled a conversation that I had had with Thelma Meeks Watley during my search for the history on that little church. She said as a child, her father, Priest Meeks, went to that church faithfully for years and took her and her siblings with him. So I am happy to report that the mystery of the little church in Summerfield has been solved and is now recorded as having belonged to the Church of Christ.

While speaking of Preacher Hence Layne above, Virgil told his most wonderful story of life. It seemed that Uncle Hence had a lot of hogs running everywhere. Those were the days when animals had the free range of the whole top of the mountain. If the Thomas family wanted a garden, they had to fence it, but even that didn't guarantee that the crop would not be eaten by the rooting hogs that came right under the fence. Another one of Virgil's chores was to help his mother in the garden. When the hogs came by, twelve-year-old Virgil ran them off in another direction away from the garden. On one occasion the hogs tore up his fence and trampled the garden. He worked hard to get the garden under fence again. He had just finished that task when he looked up to see more hogs coming his way. He did not know who they belonged to, but he was certain that they were not going to tear his fence down again. Into the house Virgil ran to get an old shotgun, and out the door he went. His aim was to scare the pigs away, but his aim was too good. Some of the shot hit one of the hogs, and it fell over. Fear filled Virgil's heart; he didn't know what to do. Older brothers are God sent, sometimes; in this case, Virgil's older brother was present and helped him drag the pig up and hide it under a brush pile.

The brothers never told their parents about the incident. For some time after the hog was hidden, Virgil watched the sky above for circling buzzards, a sure sign that something was dead in the area. He didn't know whose hog it was, so he didn't tell anyone about it. His conscience bothered him for years over the incident. Many years later, after Virgil had married and was living in Kimball, Tennessee, he asked Arthur Butler, the preacher of the church there, to go with him on a trip to the mountain. He had heard that "Uncle Hence Layne" was quite ill, and Virgil wanted to spend some time with him. So on that particular Sunday the preacher and Virgil went up to Summerfield. After visiting for a while, Virgil asked Hence, "Did you ever lose any hogs?" Hence explained that he guessed he had lost some throughout the years, but he didn't know what happened to them. Virgil answered, "When I was twelve-years-old, I killed a hog. I didn't know who it belonged to, but I think that it could have been yours, and I want to make it right." He went on to explain that the Law of Moses taught that if you had taken anything from another person or owed him/her a debt, you should pay

four times what the value of the item was at the time of taking it away. “Uncle Hence what was the price of your hogs back then?” Hence went on to tell him that he got five dollars a piece for them then. Immediately, Virgil handed him twenty dollars. The preacher who was with Virgil went back that night and told the story to the congregation, and Virgil was embarrassed. What a wonderful lesson!

Virgil did attend High School at Shook in Tracy City, and later at the new Grundy County High School on the hill across from the City Cemetery. During his first year in 1927, he walked four miles to and from Shook School, sometimes walking the railroad tracks, but mostly walking the road, which at times was full of mud holes. Virgil explained that his father worked on the roads near his house and community, filling pot holes and keeping the roads clear of debris; then he kept up with the hours/days that he spent in the county’s interest. When it came time to pay his county taxes, he presented his work hours and was given credit on his taxes for work done. If Virgil walked briskly, not stopping to ponder interesting happenings along the way, he could arrive at school within forty-five minutes. He did this in rain, sleet, snow and heat of the day. Yes, folks, those stories are really true—some of your ancestors really did walk miles to school in the snow. The Jones Garage in Tracy City then started running a bus for the students as his sophomore year began. He graduated with my father-in-law, Grady Edward Partin; other graduates were Edith Speegle, Arthur Roy Curtis, Jeweldean Myers, Gladys Brown, and Marshall Brookman, to name a few from that 1931 class.

During some of his high school years, on Saturdays, Virgil worked for Mr. Ray Ingman on his poultry farm up the road toward Tracy City. After graduation, Ms. Justus wanted him to go to Berea College in Kentucky, but efforts to do that broke down. Since he was already in Kentucky and after searching and searching for work during the Great Depression years, he landed a job with a construction company in Lexington earning two dollars a day. He started the job working on the foundation of the new hospital and stayed until the job was finished in 1934. They wanted him to go to another site, but in California. So Virgil wrote a letter to his mother telling her that he was probably going to go out west and continue working on the construction job. His mother wouldn’t go for that idea, and “she came and got me,” Virgil said with a big grin on his face.

Jim Shook, his brother-in-law, had an ice business in Kimball, Tennessee, and twenty-four-year old Virgil began working for him. His pay was a dollar a day. Virgil probably was thankful to his mother for bringing him back South and getting him the job with Jim because this is how he met his future wife, Mary Ellen Deakins. On March 03, 1935, the young couple became husband and wife. Mr. G. E. Ally was the Justice of the Peace who performed the ceremony. His brother-in-law, Jim, was such an understanding fellow that he upped Virgil’s pay to \$1.50 a day. Three children, Dionne, Virgil Lee and Ronald, were born to the young couple. They filled their home with love and reared their children in a Christian atmosphere.

Over in the Whitwell Pocket, Virgil and his brother-in-law, Jim Shook, were partners and worked the mines for twenty years. It was in one of these mines that Virgil fell victim to a tragic accident in 1959. There were two shifts running the coal machine—one came on at 7:00 a. m. and left at 2:00 p. m. Virgil was working the day shift and operating a cutting machine. The machine stopped working when the cutting chain came off, and he needed to put it back on for the next shift. Since he had to reach through an eight-inch auger in order to fix the chain, he turned off the power and also the switch to the machine. When the shift change came at 2:30, Virgil was still working on the chain. The miner, who was to do all the drilling and operating of the cutting machine, did as he had always done, turned on the power. Virgil stepped on a piece of coal causing him to fall, and in bracing himself for the fall, he accidentally turned on the switch to the fifty horsepower engine. The auger began to spin with Virgil's left hand in it. He desperately tried to get his hand free by pulling back with all his might. When he heard the bone in his arm break, he was able to pull out of the auger. He saw his hand as it worked its way through the auger on its way to the coal pile on the other end.

There were men in the mines who were trained for all kinds of emergencies. They wanted to apply a tourniquet, but Virgil refused, having noticed that there was only a small amount of blood coming from his arm. They took him to the hospital in Whitwell, and the doctor there did put a tourniquet on his arm, which was bleeding profusely by that time. The doctor then sent him on to Chattanooga where he began the long process of healing. Dr. Houston Price cleaned and cleaned the wound trying to save as much of his arm as possible, and with his good work, Virgil was able to have three inches below his elbow left intact. He was fitted with a hook that was improved over the years. "So you had to quit the mines!" I said. He answered with an emphatic, "No!" He went back to the mines as soon as he got out of the hospital and worked until he was nearly seventy-two-years old.

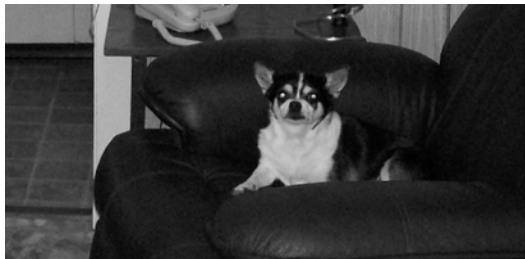
Before our visit was over, Virgil and I exchanged a few stories; the following was one. We can call this our "appendectomy" stories. I told him about my great-grandfather Alex Benson King of Monteagle having surgery in 1912 when he was thirty-seven-years old. The surgery took place on the family's kitchen table. Drs. David Bryan and Douglas Hayes did the appendectomy, but Great-grandpa's appendix had burst, and he died anyway. Virgil had an aunt named Ida Bell Thomas who married Houston Partin, son of Israel and Paralee Partin. In 1920, Houston was thirty-six, and he became ill with appendicitis. Dr. Jackson was his doctor. It seemed that a common remedy for that was to try and freeze the appendix, thus rendering the inflammation harmless, so this was tried on his uncle. He also died. Two young men lost their lives with an illness that today could be tended with positive results.

The two of us recalled the little Church of Christ in Monteagle that his parents attended years after the little church in Summerfield was old and vacant. It is now the home of Jimmy Ray Sampley and family. I told him how my mother allowed us as small children to walk around the corner and attend the Sunday School classes with that

group of Christians. I spoke of his parents making the move with the small church when they went to their new brick building down near the interstate on the west end of town. That is where our story started and ended—with “old man Johnny Thomas” singing “Heavenly Sunlight” and “Wonderful Words of Life.”



Virgil Calvern Thomas and Cuddles-2009

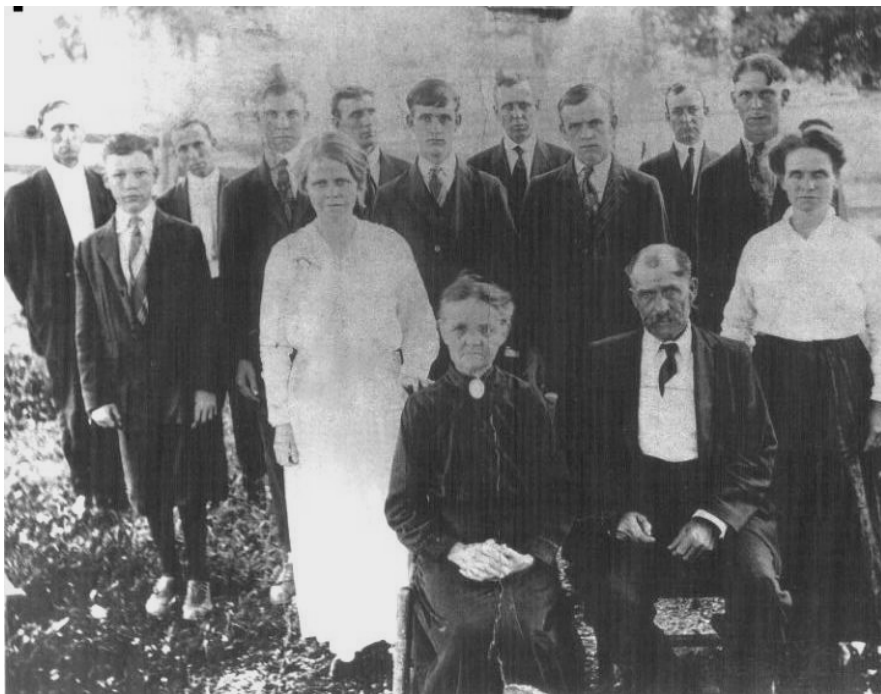


Virgil and Miss May Justus pondered the water pump in her kitchen at Summerfield. Together again—student and teacher visited in the living room of her little house next to the Summerfield School.





Left to right: Vernon, John W. and Caleb Thomas; Ed, Bessie and Irene Hunt; Katie Thomas holding Irene; Lori and baby; in black dress—Jenny Hunt, Lori, Annie holding baby girl; Laura Alice Hunt; Willie Marie Hunt in checkered dress; Cleveland Thomas; Anthony Hunt holding Clint and Etta Hunt; Rev. John Bailey holding ____; Clarence Thomas, ____ Ogelvie; Helen Ruth ____; Clara Ogelvie



Seated front: Preston Temple Thomas and wife Tennessee Virginia (Williams) Thomas
 Two daughters, right: Elizabeth “Lizzie” Thomas and left: Ida Belle Thomas
 Ten sons, back row right to left—oldest to youngest: John William, Walter Lee; Caleb Temple; Allen; Jame Elbert; Front row of boys, right to left: Arthur Edward; Oscar Henry; Emmett Winfred; Roy Buford and Victor Joseph

