

The Keyzers in Bath County  
*Part II by Shirley Keyser Gleicher*

As far back as I can remember we always gathered around the stone fireplace and heard the story of William Keyser's life. I remember well the hickory logs spitting and spewing and the bright sparks escaping the fire pit when a door was opened and the cross draft drew them into the room. We all screamed and dodged them. We knew the building of this fireplace was finished in the last month of 1795 and that William took great pride in the placement of each of the fireplace stones. They were from his land and he selected them with care. We knew that every rock in that huge fireplace had a story. Each one was carried, pulled, or carted to the place where the mortar was slouched and patched to make the stones form a pattern. The stone right in the middle directly over the heavy mantel was called Keziah's, because the story was told that Keziah had helped William drag it to the place where they were working. It had an imprint that ran across the middle, and a ruddy tone decorating the edges. The story was that a small caterpillar had been traveling across the surface of the stone when it was overcome by death and his body was entombed. That imprint in the stone was a monument to his life. As a child I always felt sad when I looked at that rock - somehow the story of a brave little worm inching his way home and dying before he got there always broke my heart. Other relatives looked at that rock and remembered Keziah, but as I learned more about her, I know she would have preferred the worm story.

There is no doubt that in May of 1780, when William Keyser walked into the home place in Hanover County, everyone was delighted to see him. He made his way to the Snead home where he found Keziah smiling and single. It is said that he nodded to her and asked, "Do I see that you are not wed Keziah?" "No William, I am not. In fact I have waited for you." It seems like a forward statement for single woman to make in those times, but as we will learn as history progresses Keziah was a woman of few words and an honest approach - the very thing that William most loved about her. They were married in the parlor of the Snead home in December 1783. The Minister was an itinerant self-educated preacher who walked the roads from one county to another, spreading the good news. He was paid two dollars, housed for the night, and left the next morning with enough food to last him for the next leg of his journey. Keziah and William spent that first year with her parents while William constructed a log house on his Father's property.

They lived in that log house for 14 years. William farmed, traded horses, and bred some fine mottled-type dogs. Keziah gave birth to the following children in Hanover County: Polly (1782), John (1784), William (1785), Elizabeth (1787), Christopher (1789), Catherine (1789), and Fleming (1794).

There are legends on top of legends about the gargantuan move from Hanover County to Bath County. The stories involve wagons pulled by oxen, horses, and cattle herded by a young 13-year old William, Jr., and two of Keziah's brothers whose names were forgotten in the generations of story telling.

The county of Bath sits between the Blue Ridge and the Alleghenies, a place that was secretive and hidden in those days, a place filled with springs that ran both hot and cold. Mountains that formed a protective barrier around this little valley of such great beauty that it is said that when Keziah reached the top of what is now called Warm Springs Mountain she gasped as they looked back over the fields, tracks, and trails they had covered. "Are we almost there Will?" she questioned. "It is all downhill from this place, darlin'." His answer resounded with a great sense of pride, for William Keyser decided years ago that he would eventually live in his wondrous place and his dream was about to be realized.

Probably, the bounty earned from his time spent in the Continental army made the purchase of 250 acres from one Richard McElwee possible. He is listed in the tax records of 1795 in Bath County as a household of two adults and seven children. Three more children were born in Bath County - David in 1796, James in 1799, and Sally in 1801.

The Keyser legend began with William telling stories to his children of his time in the Continental army, the many places he had been, and the famous generals under whom he had served. He told of his inoculation for smallpox and that story became the beginning of almost all of the others told about his Continental army experience.

It is said that his first daughter Polly was not only a great dancer of the "buck and wing" but also a talented storyteller. As legend has it, she used accents that she thought sounded like the folks of New York and the "high brows" of the elitist army officers. However, it was truly William Jr. that set the record for stories of the high jinks that happened in those huts at Valley Forge. He spent a lot of time with his Father asking questions and had an exaggerated imagination and a profound thirst for knowledge. He, along with Marshall Dade, Sr., Keziah, and Louisa inherited the Keyser farm and eventually left it to their five children. One of them - Marshall Dade Jr. - was the Great grandfather of Leighton Keyser Gleicher for whom this story is written.

William loved to tell the story of his father at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777 through 1778 - how the wind blew through their lodgings and they ate anything they could find. William hunted - it was an arduous task since gunpowder was so scarce that using it to kill a rabbit or squirrel was unthought-of, so he hunted with a rock, throwing it with great care and usually successfully. He laughed as he told about walking with his head down looking for stones that were slightly round and thin, the same shape used for "skipping" at the river's edge. If the hunt was unsuccessful, they had those dreaded fire cakes and corn meal mush in the middle of the day if they were lucky. Nighttime was the hardest, he said, as he dreamed about the food served at his Momma's table many times. He swore he could smell it in his sleep only to awaken to those awful hunger pains that drilled in his stomach. Many men left, too hungry and cold to even think about staying under the awful conditions that existed. With the arrival of General Nathanael Green conditions at Valley Forge began to improve, and now at last they had vegetables to eat. William said he never knew how truly delicious a potato was until that winter, when local farmers brought some of their produce to that ill-fated place.

William Keyser Jr. married Rebecca Stowertz in February 9, 1827, and they were the parents of five children: William Snead, Marshall Dade, Harrison, Louisa, and Keziah. Rebecca (called Beckie) is remembered as a woman of great culinary talent, as well as a singer and poet. When her sons picked out melodies on an old violin "Beckie" wrote the words, telling of the life on the Keyser farm. It is said that she sang about the spring that was high in the mountains. Every winter when the big snows began the spring would slow down and then one morning there was no water except the small amount left in the well that sat at the back door. The snows in those days, according to the songs Rebecca sang, were deep and heavy and packed the path up the mountain. Even the most trail-worthy hound had to look and search for the right way. Finally when the spring was found the men would dig and burn kerosene-soaked rags to heat the rocks that surrounded the spring to start the thaw. Becky's songs told about burned fingers and icy cold water. None of the verses rhymed but everything was sung to "Oh, Them Golden Slippers."

At Harper's Ferry in 1859 the rumblings of the south's secession began. It was a conflict that for a time almost destroyed the social and intellectual life of the south. Men died and women were left to do the work their husbands had done for years. It was a time of great sadness, hunger, and destitution. In this time of political skepticism, religious faith was the only answer to the conditions that existed. They only had prayer, and that gave them hope that the Great God would show them

the way. Churches boomed and sprung up all over the south, the people had no money but they found a way to support a preacher his wife and children. If all they said - those dramatic and knowledgeable men of God was true, He would surely find a way to deliver food and comfort to those hopeless folks who prayed and read the bible. To this very day the same attitude exists in every true Southern home - questioning the rights and wrongs of the Christian religion was and continues to be a major sin in itself.

Marshall Dade Jr, and his brother, Harrison, made their way to Staunton, Virginia where they enlisted in Company K, 52<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, 1<sup>st</sup> Virginia Line of the Army of the Confederate States of America. Happily singing "Dixie," written by a northerner but adopted by the southern troops, Marshall was sent to the Wilderness, a place of true horror, where swamps burned and southern boys lay dying not even knowing exactly why they were fighting. However, true to southern thinking, they were delighted to fight for the cause - right or wrong it was their cause.

Marshall Dade's brother was captured and jailed for making moonshine and then selling it to northern soldiers. It was a rotten thing to do, but in southern eyes at least he sold it to the Yankees and they probably got sick and died from it. He spent some time in a northern jail, far better off than "MD" as Marshall Dade was called, who was captured and then marched on a gangrenous leg to the infamous prison in Elmira, New York.

Marshall returned missing one leg but full of vigor and hope for the future. He loved the dogs his great-grandfather had bred and he was proud of the flighty and high stepping horses that kept the Keyser boys on their toes. Many suffered a broken arm or leg when they were too sure of themselves with the animal they were training. When this happened they went to the back porch where their father M.D., Sr. grabbed the afflicted limb and with one quick jerk set it into alignment. The pain must have been paralyzing, but it was over quickly and his art was repeated by one generation after the other.

Marshall Dade met the Tinsley girl from over in Alleghany County and he fell in love. She too must have been smitten for Sarah Francis Tinsley said "Yes" and they were married in Bath County on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February in 1865. She was the mother of 14 children - the general of the Keyser household and the woman who simply demanded respect with never a word to announce her standing. She was 4'8" tall with a round busy little body. However, under that sweet southern façade was a woman of immense strength and honor who rarely allowed disagreement.

Her son, Ernest Lange, told her story with love and respect. He told about her riding astride or side-saddle without even thinking about how to do it. She was a natural, and her father, Roderick Tinsley, taught her well. Even the horses seemed to know that she was in charge. Sarah was the only family member that did not lay claim to one particular horse or another. She rode them all - stallions, mares, and geldings and they all did her bidding. She was great admirer of cats, and Marshall Dade was to have said, "just watch them cats. You don't see them doing what she tells them to do." She named her favorite cat Tom, honoring General Robert E. Lee's cat by the same name.

According to Ernest she was a wonder in the kitchen - her fried chicken was cooked in a frying pan that was at least 22 inches wide and hung handily over the stove where the fire wood was stacked. That famous pan had been fashioned by M.D. in his "shop" where he fixed harness, plows and other things important to farming life. He was an inventor - an imaginative and careful man who never used an obscene phrase or word in his life. However, when he said "By Jolly" it was used in anger, happiness, or wonderment. He was a man who hated discord and adored his wife. She in all of her power was a gentle caring woman who loved her children, her husband, and her God, in that order.

Uncle Marsh (Marshall Dade II) was the storyteller with the most imagination. He could make you cry, laugh, and at times, he made you see things that had taken place a hundred or more years ago. However, his best description was the one of his mother Sarah Francis, making the hand-pulled taffy that was always cooked in the fall of the year at corn-shucking time. It was a candy, she once told him, that had to be made in the cool of the year, when the weather was dry and no sign of rain appeared. That was important, she said, for if it was damp the taffy would get sticky and never elastic enough to pull.

He said you could smell the sugar and butter cooking long before the pulling began when his mother stood over the stove stirring and checking the syrup as she mixed it with a wooden spoon. She would hold the spoon over the pan and when the mixture was just the right thickness the big decision began - the drip had to be slow and thick, gliding back into the boiling syrup. She seemed to know the exact minute when it had cooked enough. She heaved the pan to the kitchen table and poured that thick white syrup onto a big flat rock that had been on that table for as long as he could remember. It had a blue-like surface and it was never moved. She used it to roll out biscuits, cut raw and cooked meat, and then scrubbed it with sand to make it clean and pure again. He said he thought it was slate and his father found it over near Jackson River and brought it home to her long before he was born.

When that white sticky mass of taffy began to cool it was moved to the kitchen window, and there it waited till it was cool enough to handle. Then she called two of her children who were made to wash their hands with the lye soap that was cooked and shaped every year in the spring. When their hands were clean and dry she gave them a fresh piece of butter and made them rub the taffy hard into their palms and fingers then they were given a hunk of the cooled taffy and the pulling began. They pulled and stretched and then pulled some more, then they folded it up into a short piece and started the pulling again. That was done until Sarah with her wise candy eyes knew when it was time to stop. She took the glistening white rope and plopped it down on that big rock and with the knife she used for everything else she cut pieces, just the right size to fit in the side of your mouth so it could be sucked and enjoyed for a long time

The pullers carried the taffy on a white dish decorated with little flowers around the edge out to the men in the corn field where the shucking was being done, and every one had a piece. Then the taffy pullers came back to the kitchen where the rest of the family sat at the table and quietly enjoyed that never-to-be-forgotten culinary moment.

Sarah retired to the parlor where she picked up her knitting, with her cat purring sweetly and quietly dozing on her on lap, the needles began to click as she fashioned wool socks for her children. The story told us that Sarah had rules and habits that were followed to the letter - she cooked, she knitted, she bore children, and she organized, but she was not a dishwasher. She is said to have once said "with this many girls I certainly don't have to cook and clean - the cooking I'll do, but the washing-up is their job." The other rule that was followed to the letter was the use of the terms "Ma'am" and "Sir." Those words were used when addressing and when answering or saluting an older person. It was the first rule, and it stood in absolute position.

Uncle Marsh always ended his story of Sarah Francis by pointing out the "Ma'am" and "Sir" point. He said, "If the house was on fire we would have announced its destruction by saying, 'Ma'am, the house is on fire.'" I guess if we forgot to use the word Ma'am, she would have stopped dead and scolded us for that social impropriety. He quickly added, "My Momma was strong in her rules and we all lived by them. Poppa - he was a different kind of person who paid no attention to "Sarah's Laws" except when she was around, and then they were written in stone."

There is no doubt Ernest Lange Keyser was the child that most appreciated his Mother - he understood her fine points and was surely the son that listened and understood her worries. He once told the story of picking her up in his new Ford automobile. She got in and marveled at its beauty and then said, "This is a perfect year for me, Ernest. You own this fine car and are doing well at your work, my taxes are paid and the farm is safe for another year." Sarah was the one who added and subtracted the loss of a horse or a cow, the effect of bad weather, and the terribleness of losing animals due to an epidemic that swept over the county. The last of those was when the hogs were affected with a cholera-type sickness that killed them all, one by one. This was a great loss of money and food for the winter. Feeding a family of 15 people was not an easy undertaking

In the telling he made it sound as if his Mother was the one who shouldered all of the responsibility. Marshall Dade was a dreamer - he walked the pastures, watched his horses and saw things of beauty. Sarah too walked with him, but she saw needs and wants and necessities. She was a practical woman who understood the gifts and pains of living.

She said she would rest on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May in 1918 and to please call her before the company arrived for dinner. Ernest agreed and sat down to read in his sister Lola's living room. About a half an hour before dinner he knocked on his mother's door, there was no answer. He called Lola and asked her to go in and awaken her. Lola went in and found that Sarah Francis Tinsley had slipped away. There is no doubt that within fifteen minutes of her passing she was quickly and adroitly re-arranging things in heaven. She is buried in the Baptist Church Yard in Healing Springs, Virginia, next to her husband, whose life ended on August 31, 1913. He was 14 years Sarah's senior, but she took care of him. They rest together, and they accomplished all that parents hope to realize. They reared good children who obeyed laws, honored their history, and strongly believed in the power of this nation. They took the Pledge of Allegiance to heart and all of them said it with a robust and believing attitude.

It was said by a first cousin, "Look at Ernest and Floyd. They are clutching their hearts when they say that thing [the Pledge of Allegiance]." "Well why not?" answered Pete. "Old William made it possible for us to live here in this free nation. He and dozens of other Keyzers fought for it. You are damn right they hold their hearts."

They, those wonderful men and women were Keyzers, and we are their heirs