

## Cotton Grove Resonates, Pulls Another Generation.

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### **Article:**

This story begins and ends with Cotton Grove, a place where I have never lived, never even spent a night. Yet the magic of Cotton Grove has captured the imagination of my family for some 60 years following our removal from it, and the attempt to examine its role in our heritage seems likely to occupy my thoughts for many days to come. In part it is a search to discover the world of my ancestors, including my father, who was born there in 1913, his father born in 1887 and his grandfather, born in 1837. More than that, however, it has become a rediscovery of the love for learning and for history that has characterized my family for many generations.

Cotton Grove: the name that resonates like the musical notes of an earlier era. It sounds like it should be located farther south, in the Gulf States, where cotton was king, not in the North Carolina of small farms and yeoman farmers, of furniture and tobacco and textiles. It sounds like the name of a plantation, a grand estate burned by Yankees in the tragic last days of the Civil War. What was it, in fact? Who lived there? What could they have done to seize my interest so many years later?

When I was a small child, I remember my father, a former history teacher, taking me for an Easter Monday picnic to Cotton Grove. Easter Monday was a holiday in the state of North Carolina in those days, and our family always celebrated it with a picnic and a fishing trip to a Piedmont fishing hole. This particular year, my father wanted to take me to the land on which he had grown up, to take me fishing in the creeks where he had played as a boy, to hunt arrowheads of the Saponi Indians who had once lived there even before the Millers came. I remember that the creek (Swearing Creek) was small and shallow, and the fish no more than minnows, and while we enjoyed our picnic lunch of cream cheese and olive sandwiches and my mother's fried chicken and deviled eggs and tea in a little brown jug I still have, I remember most my father's disappointment that the fishing holes were almost gone, probably the victim of erosion and sedimentation. His recollection of Cotton Grove was different from the reality that I saw in my little boy's eyes. I remember that he took us on a tour of the family home, long out of the family's hands, but graciously opened to us by neighbors who had acquired the house and made it their own. My father walked us through the rooms, which had seemed so much larger in his stories, and showed us the house that had been constructed by his grandfather, the Civil War captain, with help from former slaves when he returned home from Appomattox after the war. For a small boy who read historical biographies by the armload, and who had been taken to Vicksburg, where the cannons on the bluff set off a lifelong interest in Southern history, this was heady stuff. I remember spending hours high in the dogwood tree behind our house, firing imaginary shots at Ulysses Grant with my toy rifle and picking off Yankees like a sharpshooter at Bull Run. Not that we were unreconstructed southerners. Far from it. My family was a relatively liberal one in the south of the civil rights era, but the fact of our Confederate heritage made a stronger imprint on a little boy's mind in the years of the centennial of the War than the evils of slavery. As one who devoured history, I could both admire and easily recite Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and still feel the pain in the loss of the southern way of life.

The years passed. My father died when I was 15, but his influence and my interest in history continued to mark my life. I majored in history at Wake Forest. I worked to establish an Archives for the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. Yet after my father died I had never returned to the magic of Cotton Grove. I was aware of it, of course, but not absorbed with it, until on Saturday, March 10, 2000, I sat down to prepare for my role as an adult chaperone on my daughter's eighth grade trip to Gettysburg. I knew that my great grandfather had fought

in the great battle, and I wanted to be able to show my daughter where he had fought and what had happened to his regiment. To do that, I had to do research, because my memories and knowledge were sketchy.

I was unprepared for what I would find.

Imagine the chills that ran down my spine when I realized that the day on which I began my research was the 110th anniversary of his death. More chills when I learned that my own two children shared the name of his wife, Mary Lindsay Miller, a cosmic coincidence of some proportions given that neither of my girls was named for a family member.

My search continued and grew more intense even as my mother lived the last of her 83 years among us. As I began to lose her, my connection to my father re-emerged. When she finally died, they were again equal in their inaccessibility to me. He had been gone for over almost three decades, she but for a short time, and yet neither was still with me, and the stories of both were memories that only I and to some extent my brother still knew. He has encouraged me to write down the stories, and so I have tried to be able to do so.

As my work has progressed, I have felt the pull of Cotton Grove and the pull of the ancestors, and they have led me on a compelling and sometimes satisfying journey to rediscover the magic of that place and the two centuries of time when my family resided there. In the process I have learned about immigration patterns, early patriots, slaveholding and ancestors who flew airplanes in the Great War. I have been to Civil War battle reenactments where I have learned at close hand why soldiers wrote letters to their loved ones before a battle with the foreknowledge of death guiding their pencils. I have reconnected to family members long away from me, and I have enjoyed the discovery of new cousins from distant places. It has been a compelling and at times compulsive search, and I do not want it to end. I have a list of questions to be placed in my casket when my time comes, as there are things I want to ask the ancestors when we meet on the other side. Short of that day, I suspect my search will continue.

Last October, as my father's only sister lay dying of leukemia in a local hospital, I sat alone in the cafeteria at lunch, simply reflecting on the meaning of history and family, watching the pale sunlight filter through the dirty windows of the college cafeteria. I sit there from time to time throughout the year, but the sunlight only looks this way at this particular time. As my friend author Lee Zacharias has written, all is in the angle of perspective. And so I look at my history at this time in my life, when I am moving from the season of production into the season of harvest. As we learn more and more about the human genome, I reflect frequently on the impact of those strands of DNA and how they combine and recombine to weave a living fabric that remains for generations, if only we could see the patterns and textures. I reflect also on the power of environment, of being in a particular place on the globe at a particular time, and having people around who nurture you and help you to find your own place whether you live in a time of peace or one of war.

For all those Millers past, and for those who will yet come, I say thank you. Barry Miller