

Dolores Thurman

ROBERT THOMAS WALLINGFORD

My grandfather was the 7th child of Thomas Ginn Wallingford and Eveline Debell. Robert Thomas Wallingford, known as Tom to family and friends, was born Sept. 2, 1862 at Retreat, Texas in Grimes County. Retreat no longer exists but it was very close to Courtney and near the Waller County line. Since I know of no other Roberts in the family prior to my grandfather, and he was born during the Civil War, my guess is that he was named for Robert E. Lee.

He was only 7 when his mother died and, according to my mother, was raised by his two older sisters, Martha Clark and Eliza Owens Wallingford. I don't know at what point Fannie was hired as housekeeper but we know Thomas Ginn married her then divorced her in 1881.

When his mother died, there were 2 younger sisters - Annie Debell and Eveline Debell. Little Eveline was only 3 months old and she died shortly before her 4th birthday. My mother said her father never spoke of little Eveline, nor did he speak of the other children who were older and had died, some of them before he was born. Until I began my research, she didn't even know about the deceased children.

Little is known about his childhood. We assume he went to school for several years as he could read and write quite well. When he was about 12 years old he became seriously ill with pneumonia. He was presumed dead and had been prepared for burial. Someone saw one of his fingers move and they realized he was not dead.

As a young man he became engaged to a young woman - exactly who we don't know - and had bought a ring for her. For some reason it didn't work out and the engagement was broken. Then on August 29, 1888 he married my grandmother and gave her the ring he had bought for the other woman. They say my grandmother would never wear the ring because it had been bought for someone else and she eventually gave it to her eldest son.

As was the custom in those days, they immediately set about having children. Their first, a girl, was born in 1889 but she was stillborn. I have never been able to find out if she was ever given a name or not. She was, however, full term. He and my grandmother went on to have 11 more children, 2 more dying in infancy. Of the 9 surviving children, 3 more died as young adults. Life was still not easy.

My mother, Addie Byrd, was the 8th child, born in 1903. As far back as she can remember her father was Sheriff of Waller County and he held this position until he died. She said that he always strapped on his guns before leaving the house, except when he was going to church.

He was ^{assistant} superintendent of the Sunday School department at the Baptist church in the Howth community. He had built the church himself. He was a good carpenter and built his family several houses. He was very neat and everything was well-kept. From time to time, he found it necessary to build a coffin for a friend or family member.

He was very friendly and loved to talk and visit people. If someone was sick he would offer to go and stay the night or give them a shave if need be, anything he could do to help.

As a farmer he arose very early and in the wintertime he would build a fire in the fireplace first thing while singing "In the Good Ole Summertime". Then he would go down to the school house, about a mile away, and build a fire there so the kids would be warm when they came in. He was a very mild mannered man. He often rocked the babies to sleep at night in the cradle. He called it the "doodle bed".

The family lived at Howth and he had a cabin down on the Brazos River where he would stay several days at a time when he was farming. Of course, "batching" meant doing your own cooking. He would make biscuits and have them with syrup from his little syrup pitcher (show pitcher). He was a slight man, weighing only about 130 pounds but he was a hearty eater, probably because he worked so hard.

At some point, he returned to Retreat and tried to find his mother's grave. He was never able to find it and my mother said this grieved him very much.

One day in 1917 he lay down on the porch of his little cabin (probably to rest after dinner) and a norther blew in. He took a chill. He came back home to Howth on his horse. When he refused supper, my grandmother knew he was sick as he always ate. He took pneumonia, the third time he had had it, and died 11 days later on November 27, 1917, his son Marvin's 25th birthday. On that same day my grandmother received a telegram that another son, Thomas (who they called T), was missing in action in France. He did eventually come home however.

At the time of my grandfather's death, my grandmother had never given a dose of medicine to any of the children. He always did it. She had never written a check. He always did it. He was 55 years, 2 months and 25 days old when he died, not a very long lifespan. But I think he accomplished quite a lot in those 55 years.