

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.

assistant

He was 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.

Robert Thomas Wallingford

Notes

When Robert Thomas (called Tom) was about 9 years old, he had pneumonia, was very ill and died, or so they thought. In those days, they did not embalm; they cleaned up and dressed the deceased as best they could; placed them on a table or pine coffin until family members could get there. Before they could hold the service and bury him, someone saw him move. Apparently he slipped into a little coma or something; anyway, he did not die until many years later and death was due to pneumonia at that time too.

Tom was a farmer and served several terms as Sheriff of Waller County, TX. He was also Sunday School Superintendent at the Baptist Church where the family attended.

He and my grandmother, "Jenny" or Aunt Jenny, are both buried in Field's Store Cemetery, Waller Co., Texas.

Sources: Addie B. Wallingford Vanderstay (dau); Wallingford family bible; Field's Store cemetery.

LOST & FOUND, BUT STILL A MYSTERY
MY GRANDFATHER'S TOMBSTONE

It was two weeks before Christmas and my mind was a muddle of all the things that needed to be done before the 'big day'. The phone rang. It was Linda Wallingford, the wife of a distant cousin, but a friend as well. "I just received the strangest phone call" were Linda's first words to me. My mind went into overdrive, quickly shifting from muddled to mystified. After all, I rarely hear from Linda at this time of year, our contacts being mostly confined to the time leading up to our Wallingford reunions.

Linda continued. Her phone call had come from a clerk in the Waller County Courthouse, Waller County being the birthplace of most of our present day Wallingfords. According to Linda, the Clerk had received a phone call from a Gavin Smith at Ft. Hood in Killeen, Texas. Ft. Hood? Back to overdrive. Mr. Smith, I later learned, is the archeology curator at Ft. Hood. He had in his possession an old tombstone with the following inscription:

Robert Thomas Wallingford
September 2, 1862 – November 17, 1917
"Gone But Not Forgotten"

Now I understand the reason for Linda's phone call. She knew that this Wallingford – Robert Thomas – was my grandfather. But how did my grandfather's tombstone in Waller County, Texas make its way into the hands of an archeology curator at Ft. Hood in Killeen, Texas? I'm more confused than ever. Linda gave me Mr. Smith's phone number and after a few pleasantries we ended our conversation. Muddled mind or not, I wasted no time in contacting Mr. Smith. After stumbling through a brief explanation of the reason for my call, he told me that the tombstone was on loan from Crawford & Bowers, tombstone manufacturers in Killeen, Texas. He said that it was being used by a Sgt. Jones (at Ft. Hood) as part of a demonstration on drunk driving. Drunk driving? Lord, the mere mention of anything having to do with 'demon rum' would surely cause my grandparents to turn over in their graves.

Still puzzled, I contacted Crawford & Bowers and it was then that I learned that the aforementioned Crawford & Bowers were not only tombstone manufacturers, but a funeral home as well.

I spoke with Mr. Dave Crawford, one of the owners of the funeral home. And yes, he did have the by now infamous tombstone and had had it for quite some time. After explaining to Mr. Crawford that I am the granddaughter of Robert Thomas Wallingford, I asked if there was any chance of getting it back. He very graciously, and to my relief, said "of course".

A few weeks later my husband and I met with Mr. Crawford at his funeral home. One of his employees brought the tombstone out with a forklift and lifted it into the back of our pickup. The little stone looked brand new but Mr. Crawford said it was a mess when he got it. He and his men had spent hours cleaning it up, removing mildew and

whatever else old tombstones are prone to attract. When I asked how much I owed him, he said “not a thing.” An entire family is in gratitude to him. And, of course, I asked what anyone would have asked at this point: “How did you come to have the tombstone?”

He said he had gotten it from a family in Harker’s Heights, a suburb of Killeen. Since he had had the tombstone for quite some time, details were sketchy, but he did remember the name General Hemenway. He did not know if Mr. Hemenway was actually a general, or if that was a nickname or even a first name. I was undeterred and with Mr. Crawford’s permission, I looked through the Killeen phone book for Hemenways. There were several and I copied the phone numbers, as well as first names, of all of them. None was listed as “General” Hemenway.

A few days later I started calling. After a few calls – voila! – I had the right one. But the General himself was out, so I spoke with his wife, which was just as well because it was obvious to me that her mind and memory were quite good. The following is her story as told to me.

Their son was working in construction in College Station. His supervisor asked him to paint a house for him. Some college students had been living there and had moved out. He wanted to clean it up and rent it again. He told young Hemenway that there was an old tombstone on the front porch and to please take it to the dump. The young man did not think it was quite right to just dump it, so he took it to his home in Killeen. Although Mrs. Hemenway’s memory seemed quite good, she did not remember how long they had had it. She did say she tried for a long time to find out whom it belonged to but without success. Thus she was very glad to hear from me and to know that the little tombstone would be returned to its rightful resting place. And as to Mr. Hemenway’s title, yes he was a general. He had served in World War II and advanced to the rank of Brigadier General. I was impressed.

After returning home with the infamous tombstone, we found that while the stone was small, it was very, very heavy. Without a forklift ourselves, we could not budge what was now “a little monster”. My plans were to take it back to the Field’s Store Cemetery from whence it came for a second burial. But after talking with Linda again (she and Bobby live very near the cemetery), I found that there is no caretaker for the cemetery. Linda herself keeps the books and someone comes in regularly to mow and clean up. She recommended going through a nearby funeral home, which I did. But since we were unable to make the trip to the funeral home right away, for the next two weeks or so, the ‘little monster’ happily resided in the back of our pickup, making numerous trips to town, to the golf course, grocery store, etc. One thing I did not worry about was that the tombstone might be stolen. That is, unless someone happened along with a forklift in tow.

But one cold, rainy day a few weeks later, we delivered the little stone to the funeral home in Hempstead with instructions to place it between the graves of my grandparents and at the foot of the graves. You see, when my grandmother died in 1959,

her surviving children placed a double tombstone between and at the head of the two graves. Though I had some trepidations about placing a second tombstone on the graves, and at the foot especially, after consulting other family members, we all agreed we didn't have much choice.

So now we have the tombstone, but still have the mystery. First, when and by whom was the little tombstone removed from my grandfather's grave? At the time the double tombstone was put in place? Maybe, but unfortunately all of those who might have known are now deceased. Secondly, who took the tombstone away? Were they the ones who placed it on the front porch of an old house in College Station? If so, why? Halloween pranks, maybe? Or did the little tombstone reside elsewhere, maybe several places, before its arrival at the house in College Station?

We may never know the answer to the above questions, but in my mind one thing is certain: it has traveled and returned to its original resting place. I cannot help but believe that a couple of grandparents are looking down from their celestial homes with amused – or perhaps somewhat bemused - expressions on their faces.

- D. V. Thurman