

Joseph Henry McFerrin

Gentleman Farmer, Educator, Lawman, and Entrepreneur

1876-1969

By Greta McFerrin Pinkston

Joseph Henry McFerrin was born July 3, 1876 on the homestead his grandfather John B. McFerrin Sr. and his father, John B. McFerrin Jr. had homesteaded in the early 1870's, located 3 miles south of Compton, Newton County, Arkansas, above the community of Erbie and the Buffalo River. It was a heavily wooded area with rocky terrain. Many of these rocks were picked up and stacked to make fences. Today some of the rock fences remain.

Joseph Henry was the 8th child in the family. He had four older sisters and two older brothers. After him were a girl and a boy so he had lots of playmates. (See attached sheet for names of Joseph Henry's siblings.) His childhood was a mix of hard farm work and fun times of wandering in the woods and along creeks with his brothers and some boys living in the area. They hunted and trapped wild animals, which were abundant in the woods---coons, opossums, foxes and an occasional mink. They skinned them and stretched the skins on boards or tacked them up on barn walls to dry. When they had a stack of pelts, they sold them. They fished in the creeks and even went down to the Buffalo River to catch bigger fish. All of Joseph Henry's brothers grew up and relocated in other places but he stayed on the homestead. After getting his high school education, he taught school in several small one-room schools in the area.

In the late 1800's the Howell family moved down the road from the McFerrins. There were three daughters, Ida, Anthem, and Aley. They were a cute bunch of girls but Joseph Henry was especially taken with the youngest, Aley. In due time, he asked Aley to be his wife. They were married on November 17, 1901.

Joseph Henry asked his father John B. Jr. to sell him a parcel of land, 80 acres, on which to build a home and barn. The plot he chose to build the cabin on was relatively flat and was up the hill and across the narrow road from the year-round spring so water was relatively available.

He cut trees, trimmed them into logs and built a 2-room log cabin with a stone fireplace at one end. He also covered the spring with a roofed log structure to protect the water from animals and falling leaves, etc. He placed large flat rocks above the water that flowed through the springhouse. Milk, butter and other foods were stored on the cold rocks.

He cleared trees from parcels of the land and planted crops---corn, sorghum and some wheat. There was a very large garden area and a big potato patch. He planted peach and apple trees. He prepared raised beds and planted Ginseng and Golden Seal, the roots of both in high demand in Chinese

medicines and each brought a good price. They required shade so a framework of young saplings was erected over the beds, which was covered with leafy branches.

Joseph Henry bought and set up his own sawmill, cutting trees and sawing the lumber needed to build a new house. There was an abundance of fine timber on the land and in the surrounding area. He cut the white oaks into staves which were hauled to Harrison or Kingston and used to make barrels. Cedar logs were floated down the Buffalo River to sell, but most of the pine was brought to his mill and cut into planks or boards. People in the area bought lumber from him to build their own homes or barns.

The pine knots were even saved and used in fireplaces or stoves. They could also be set on fire on the hearth or outside which made bright lights to read by at night.

Some years later, he built a larger, 2-story house incorporating the cabin into the new house, building over and around the cabin. The new house had a large kitchen located in front of the cabin, with a large living room beside the kitchen, with a bedroom behind the living room. There was an unfinished upstairs, just one very large room that served as a sleeping area for the children. On the front side of that room, there were about 4 steps that led up to a higher level that was out over the front porch. This area served as storage and a space for sleeping pallets. The chimney of the stone fireplace gave some warmth in the winter.

A front porch stretched across the whole width of the house, with a door from the kitchen and a door from the living room opening onto the porch. Several cane chairs and rockers were spread across the porch, and enjoyed by all. A smokehouse was a few feet from the kitchen end of the porch. The outhouse was down a path.

The children (or grandchildren) were not allowed in the living room. It was not furnished except for 2 or 3 chairs and Joseph Henry's desk, which was a high, ornately carved cabinet called a "secretary" with drawers and a pull down desktop. Records and paper work of his justice of the peace business were kept in the desk. It was a beautiful piece in shiny walnut wood.

Joseph Henry kept 2 or 3 cows to have milk and butter, and sold their calves to have some cash income. He also raised yearlings to sell that ran free-range throughout the woods and even down in the valley below. There were 2 or 3 horses used for riding or plowing. He also raised pigs and chickens. In the Fall when the weather turned cold enough, a pig or two was butchered, the meat was then hung from the ceiling of the smokehouse and smoked over a smoldering fire in the middle of the floor for long period of time or salted-down and packed into shelves, so they had plenty of meat during the winter months. They also made pork sausage as well as head cheese.

The McFerrin Cemetery was located about a quarter of a mile from the McFerrin home. (See attached page).

In the early 1900's the people of the area began to wish for better roads. Joseph Henry was very interested too. His brother, Benjamin Eugene McFerrin had been elected a State Senator and he began a great campaign for the state to provide better roads in the mountainous rural areas of the State. A

project on Highway 43 was begun with Joseph Henry as foreman on the section from Hill Top to the top of the Ponca mountain. It was difficult work. The crew used shovels and hammers. Road graders were pulled by mules or horses. Also teams of mules were used to move dirt or rocks with "slips" or sleds. To blast off bluffs, 50 to 100 holes were drilled (by hand) in the boulders then filled with dynamite. Drags or large sleds were pulled by the mules or horses to smooth the dirt into place for the finished road.

Not only did the residents of the area want better roads, they wanted better communication. Joseph Henry along with all the neighbors went together and had a phone line put in from Compton to the McFerrin farm, then the line was put over the bluff to Granny Brisco's—the local midwife who lived near Erbie. The line then ran from Granny Brisco's to the Gaither community in Boone County where the early doctors lived, Drs. Fowler and Poyner. Medical help was more easily available.

Joseph Henry's brother John Orestus McFerrin was a medical doctor at Jasper but it was a long horse ride and one had to cross the Buffalo River to arrive at Jasper. (When Joe Cephas was about 3 years old, he was bitten on the ankle by a copperhead snake. Joseph Henry carried him horseback to Dr. John G. in Jasper.)

Joseph Henry was a Justice of the Peace for that area of Newton County for almost 50 years. Anytime there was any disturbance or trouble or any death, he had to drop everything and go investigate and regulate the matter, sign the death certificate, etc. At times he even had to arrest someone and take them, most of the time on horseback, to the sheriff in Jasper.

He performed weddings as well. If the couple came to his home to be married, he stood them in front of the beautiful secretary cabinet in the living room and officiated the ceremony.

Joseph Henry, a tall, slim man, was quiet-spoken, very friendly and well like by everyone. He cared deeply for his family, wife and children and grandchildren. However, he could be stern and forceful, and could arm himself with weapons.

The story is told that one day he was plowing in the south field very near the edge of the bluff. He had just bought and put new harness on his plow horse. At noon time, he stopped the horse and leaving the horse where it was knowing that it would not stray away since it was still hitched to the plow, he walked to the house to eat lunch. When he returned to the field a short time later, he found the horse standing where he had left it, but stripped of all the harness. Joseph Henry had a good idea where the harness had gone—a family with several big boys lived right over the bluff on a "bench" or flat area. Those boys had been known to cause trouble at times. He quickly returned to the house and strapped on his pistol then walked resolutely to the edge of the bluff and followed a narrow foot path to the house. He found only the old man at home. None of the boys were around.

Joseph Henry in no uncertain terms told the elderly man, "Now the harness on my horse disappeared while I was eating lunch. Listen carefully, if that harness is in that field by 8 a.m. tomorrow morning, everything will be fine. If not.....!" And he turned and went home. The next morning right after 8 a.m., Joseph Henry returned to the field—and there lay the harness.

Back in 1919 a local situation got in the national news. According to an article in the Kansas City Star, newspaper of Kansas City, Missouri, called "The Slackers of Cecil Cove", a group of young men of the area refused to answer the draft call to go to the World War I. The story goes that several young men of the Erbie and Compton area banded together to defy the draft call. They saw no reason to go to France and fight the Germans. They decided to hide out in the rocks and caves of the Cecil Cove area of Newton County, also known as Hideout Hollow. Cecil Cove, an area about 12 miles long and 8 miles wide, was situated roughly below and to the west of the bluffs of what we call today "McFerrin Point".

The Slackers Band was made up of about 35 young men to begin with. When the sheriff at Jasper had no luck of making contact with the Band, other law enforcement made up of US Marshalls and Deputies from Ft. Smith and Harrison plus special investigators and even an Army Colonel from Fort Pike in Little Rock all visited Newton County, searching and questioning, and went away empty handed. The Band was just too elusive.

"It is a region of multifarious hiding places, studded with boulders and pocketed with caves. A searcher might pass within 6 feet of a dozen hidden men and see none of them." (Kansas City Star).

As time went on some of the young men dropped out of the Band. One in particular decided he would respond to the draft call. As he was getting his horse saddled, he was slipped a word that he would never be allowed to reach Jasper, that he would be dragged off his horse somewhere along the way. He rode to the homes of John Richardson and Joseph Henry "Joe" McFerrin. John and Joseph Henry armed themselves and rode to Jasper with the young man. His record as a soldier in France was an excellent one.

Finally after many long months there were only eight of the original Slackers when they all decided to capitulate. The editor of the Newton County Times wrote: "Every boy who went into the army has come back changed for the better. They had all gained weight and look brighter. The stoop and hump has been straightened out of their back and shoulders. Moreover, they have returned with an idea of how people live in the more forward communities and they know now what personal sanitation means—not satisfied with slovenliness and ignorance."

Joseph Henry was probably not a Justice of the Peace yet at that time, as another man was listed as justice of the Peace, but his experiences of dealing with the Slackers and working with various lawmen, possibly prepared him and put him into a position to be named Justice of the Peace, a position he held for 50 years. He served also as Game Warden for four years.