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Stonewall, Nettie, and the Land

By Darryl Tippens



Angeanette and Stonewall Jackson Tippens in 1937.

Drive west of Clinton twenty-five miles, beyond Foss Lake, and you come to a land that is hard but attractive. You see low, red hills, sometimes barren, but resting among them are fertile wheat fields and rich pastures where the Blue Stem grass used to grow shoulder high, and where the buffalo resting spots can still be seen a hundred years after the great herds vanished. When I survey this familiar land, I sense the past and the ways this soil has given my family more than sustenance. In many ways it has made us what we are.

The Tippens family came to Custer County in 1898 from Alabama, by way of Texas. Two hardy people — Stonewall Jackson Tippens (also known as Uncle Jack or S. J.) and his wife Angeanette Pendleton Tippens (or Nettie) — traveled to Oklahoma Territory where they faced the usual lot of settlers: hardship, sacrifice, and loss, but also success. More than most, they took to the land and it took to them.

I have often wondered about the connection between "character" and "place," between a family and the land that nourishes it. As I consider my family roots in Custer County, I am certain there is a mysterious connection between the land and my people. The story of Uncle Jack and Nettie confirms this for me. Their record is a parable of the mysterious tie between the land and its inhabitants.

Stonewall or Uncle Jack possessed considerable talent. He was enterprising, tenacious, and inventive; and his gifts were matched by Nettie's energy, versatility, and hard work. And both

had an uncommon portion of stoic endurance. While many settlers came and went — driven out by drought, flood, blight, and cycles of economic disaster — Uncle Jack and Nettie endured, living out their last years on the beloved homestead. Nettie died in 1939 from the ravages of diabetes, and Uncle Jack was almost 101 years old when he passed away in 1963.

"Stonewall" was an appropriate name for the man who came from Athens, Alabama, to settle 160 acres in this untamed land. As a youth, I used to wonder at his great age, and I was thrilled by the story of the scar on the back of his head sustained during the Civil War when he was thrown out of the path of Union horsemen. He was born August 2, 1862, in the throes of the war. His father, Alcy, a soldier under General Stonewall Jackson, named his son in honor of the brilliant Confederate commander. In many ways the name was appropriate, for both men were known to be resourceful, religious, and sternly disciplined.

Like many single young men after the Civil War, Stonewall struck out for freedom, first settling in north central Texas, at Celeste and Farmersville. In 1889, perhaps at a church "singing school" where he taught harmony and sight-singing, he met his lovely bride Angeanette. Eight years later and with two daughters (two sons having died in infancy), the couple decided prospects would be better in the lands about to be opened in Oklahoma Territory. Uncle Jack filed on the land in 1897. The following year, the family came to El Reno by train and then

traveled by wagon to the new homeplace where they built a dugout and a separate outbuilding which served as a kitchen.

Nettie eventually bore nine children. Mabel, Ruth, Esther, Thomas Edison, and Riley were the five who survived infancy. Mabel perished in the great flood of the Washita River on April 4, 1934. Ruth died in 1974, Esther in 1983. Riley still lives on the homeplace where he was born 84 years ago, and Thomas Edison (my grandfather) still owns land nearby, though he resides in Oklahoma City.

What enabled them to survive those early days? It was a careful mix of several qualities: an enterprising and inventive spirit, a willingness to change with the new environment, diverse approaches to making a living, the total involvement of all family members (men, women and children), and an unselfish community spirit.

Uncle Jack was unusually ready for the changing circumstances of the prairie. To save labor costs when harvesting cotton, he invented his own cotton-stripping machine which consisted of a sled pulled by two horses. The sled had v-shaped heads which were positioned to pop the bolls into a trough as the machine was pulled down the rows. Stonewall read up on farming practices and was quick to implement new techniques even though they were sometimes scorned by the neighbors. Before government conservation programs were established, Stonewall terraced his own farmland. When agents from Oklahoma A & M came to see what he was doing, he said he was "stopping the wash."

Uncle Jack's inventiveness showed in other ways too. Before modern methods of combining wheat, he developed his own method of harvesting by converting a binding machine into a header. Because the wheat stalks were so short in one poor harvest, he decided there was no point to making shocks. Instead, he cut the wheat with his newly improvised header and piled the stalks in large ricks, 50 or 60 feet long. Later, the threshing machine was brought into the fields to winnow the grain. Other farmers followed his example. Uncle Jack also introduced Hereford cattle to the area and was the first to raise sheep (Shropshire breed) along with cattle. He also saw the need for blacksmith work, and so operated his own blacksmith shop to serve area farmers.

His enterprising nature was not confined to agriculture. In about 1911 he and a neighbor, Jodie Moad, strung the first telephone line from Elk City to Hammon, and while doing so, he and Jodie ran a line to the Tippens farm house making them first in the area to have telephone service.

Uncle Jack and Nettie recognized the need for education in order to do well in life. It is a theme that became ever more pronounced in succeeding generations. After being farmers and businessmen, the Tippens descendants most often have been educators. Stonewall received some college education while in Texas, and he continued to teach in singing schools in Texas and Oklahoma. While reading was his principal method of keeping abreast, he required his children to receive formal instruction.

Thomas Edison (or T. E.), was enrolled in the academies of two church-related colleges. In 1906 Nettie took the children to Cordell to attend the grammar school at Cordell Christian College. They lived in Cordell and attended the school for two years. In 1917 T. E. and his sister Ruth were sent to Thorp Spring Christian College, near Granbury, Texas. After completing his high-school studies at Hammon, T. E. attended the college in Weatherford where he excelled in wrestling, football, baseball, and basketball. Upon completing a two-year certificate at Southwestern in 1922, T. E. began a twenty-nine-year career of teaching and coaching. T. E. has fond memories of winning many district and regional athletic championships (including 82 trophies) for schools like Gracemont, Hammon, Pie Flat, Three Corners, Herring, and

Midway.

Uncle Jack and Nettie were more than rugged individualists. Without a strong willingness to share their resources, life would not have been possible. Uncle Jack and Nettie were helped out by neighbors in hard times, and they reciprocated. Nettie always kept extra food and blankets on hand to help out neighbors who had fallen on hard times. Nettie and Uncle Jack were devoted members of the Church of Christ and helped to establish new congregations in Hammon, Butler, Elk City, Canute, and Foss. An old-timer in Hammon recently told me that Stonewall had a beautiful tenor voice and that he loved to lead congregational singing. Stonewall's concern for the community could also be seen when he brought the first medical doctor to Hammon by soliciting one through the Tennessee Medical Society. He helped found the first Anti-Horse Thief Association, and he was always interested in the success of the Democratic Party.

While Uncle Jack and his boys worked hard in the fields, it is certain the family could not have survived without the women. Nettie, despite a severe diabetic condition, always worked to sustain the family with the abundant help of daughters, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, and maids. Nettie and her daughters-in-law Ruth Rector (married to T. E.) and Nancy (married to Riley) maintained large gardens and orchards, annually canning hundreds of quarts of fruits and vegetables. They raised chickens, preserved meat, sewed, quilted, crocheted, helped in the fields, and cooked for armies of harvest hands. In the lean years, when the crops failed, it was the women's enterprises — the canning, the chickens, and egg money — that kept the family on the land, alive and healthy.

Nettie and her helpers brought some beauty to the land as well. While Uncle Jack was solidly utilitarian when it came to the home place, Nettie loved flowers. So, despite the burdens of cooking, sewing, canning, and a hundred other duties, she insisted on her flowers: rows of lilacs and other colorful plants lovingly maintained in front of the house.

Of the families who homesteaded southeast of Hammon in 1898, none has remained except the Tippens clan. The Dunlaps, the Clymers, and the Witts have long vanished. Quietly, almost elegiacally, T. E. who just turned 88, remarked to me, "I don't know of a one that's left. . . not one.

That's something."

Though today the descendants of Stonewall are numerous, men and women who are successful in law, medicine, business, banking, teaching, the ministry, government service, and of course farming and ranching, and though they reside in many places, most still feel the lure of this land. I, who am perhaps the least agriculturally bent of any of them, still love to return to the family place just north of Elk City, where my father T. E. Jr. farms 1800 acres. Those low hills and the fertile bottom land along Panther Creek and the Washita River contain a strange attraction. Perhaps it is because the landmarks constantly remind me of what went before me, of the labors and the love that made my life possible. The courage of Nettie, Stonewall, and their children to brave the unknown, test the elements, and make something of this red loam surprises and humbles me. It is not idle sentimentality to say that Stonewall and Angeannette founded a tradition. The traces of it are still visible in the bright eyes and the weathered faces of my parents and grandparents, my aunts and uncles.

But it's not just in the people. I fancy that it's also in the soil and in the breezes that sweep over the grazing land and the alfalfa fields. Though it's not the Rockies or a New England forest, it is remarkably attractive, when the buttercups blossom in the spring, or the teal skies yield to the fiery orange of an October sunset, or the emerald-green winter wheat is streaked with a February snow.

Behind this beauty is a land of many moods and voices. . . harshness, solitude, and trial, but also stoic tranquillity and a special sense of community with the earth and your neighbors, of hard-fought battles, and success that comes only through determined labor. Here in the land of my fathers and mothers, Stonewall, Nettie, and the rest, I find the shadows of my own past whose contours are hard work, perseverance, fearlessness, courage, and faith. ■

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