

## “GRANDPA”

By Agnes W. Pearson

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The memory of my grandfather, W.W. Brakefield, is a small but important segment of the story I'd love to write someday, depicting life and our daily living in Cowan before it was all geared to automobiles and TV.

Grandpa was a real patriarch if one ever lived. His word was law in his household. He rarely ever smiled, showed enthusiasm or talked in general conversation, but made blunt statements that usually ended the subject. He was about 6'4" tall, wore a white mustache and, to cover his bald head, he was rarely ever seen without the wide brimmed black felt hat that was worn at all seasons. The white shirt and black string necktie added to his dignity. We grandchildren would almost freeze when he'd peek from under that hat to us when we were boisterous. Though grandpa was stern, uncommunicative and often glum, there was indeed another side to his nature.

Grandpa was a very religious man, as witness, the well work Bible that lay on a chair beside his bed each night. He was a devout member of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Many can remember at the Sunday Service as he brought the little twig of boxwood from his yard and gently laid it on the window sill below his dear wife's name in the stained glass memorial window. The twig of boxwood brings memories of a story that will be of interest to the latecomers to Cowan and one I've heard many times over.

Grandpa was a passenger railroad conductor for more than 40 years before his retirement. Once, many years ago, maybe 65 or 70, he punched the ticket of a passenger who needed some information concerning his travel plan. A conversation ensued, that turned out to be very fruitful to both passenger and conductor, for the passenger was a man who had recently arrived by boat from England and was on his way to St. Louis to visit his daughter. As a token of thanks to Mr. Brakefield for helping advise and direct he gave a bundle of little boxwood sprouts from the carton of greenery that he was taking to his daughter – boxwood plants from her home in England.

From the few plants of boxwood grew all the boxwoods that were in Cowan for a great many years, before nurseries and greenhouses came into prominence. Grandpa took the scripture literally as in James 1:27: "True religion is visiting the widows and orphans in their afflictions." As soon as ladies in Cowan became widows you could spot grandpa planting boxwoods down their entrance walks. The last ones I remember were for Mrs. Nan Hawkins, long deceased. The Joe McBee family now lives there. Many homes in Cowan still have the boxwoods that grandpa planted. I have silently grieved when I noticed that some have been destroyed. It will no doubt be of interest to some Cowan citizens to know that all the boxwoods in the Cowan cemetery were planted by grandpa from cuttings he rooted from the original plants. Grandpa also planted the long lane of cedar trees in the cemetery. Some folks can remember him carrying the huge pails of water regularly during the dry summer months to keep the little sprouts alive. He took great interest in beautifying the cemetery. He built a seat near the grave of his dear

wife, my grandmother, and could often be seen sitting there hours at a time, reflecting, remembering and meditating on years of happiness with her.

Despite his gruffness and idiosyncrasies he was a devout Christian man and left many visible reminders for us all to see.



Tractor seat at the Brakefield gravesite.

## **GRANDPA – PART II**

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A deep feeling of nostalgia comes over me when I delve into the scraps and remnants of my memory, recalling some of the everyday commonplace things that my grandfather said and did. They were of little consequence at the time, but through the years they have gained importance, often being embellished with the telling.

Grandpa, though stern, relentless and firm in his manner, also had a ludicrous side to his nature. Most of the time the humorous things that he did were never meant to be and he never knew they were different or exceptional in any way.

For instance, Grandpa never thought to clean the dead leaves from the rain gutters until it started raining. It was a common sight to see him on a tall stepladder during a near monsoon throwing trash out of the gutters.

My grandfather was almost totally deaf. He never wore a hearing aid but would cup his ear and think he heard every word you said. He had a very close friend, Mr. Tobe Stewart (Mrs. Myra Evan's grandfather) who differed with him in many ways, particularly on politics. Mr. Stewart was a republican and Grandpa was a Democrat. Once a heated argument took place and because of their deafness they went far up the street so no one could hear their discussion.

Needless to say, everybody in town and in the stores came out and heard it all. Then Grandpa would write his notes on his political views to Mr. Stewart and post them on the telephone post beside the old Presbyterian Church for him to pick off and read while he was home for lunch. Mr. Stewart tacked his answer on the same post as he returned to his office. Grandpa got

so fired up over it all he addressed his last few notes to “Old Tobe Stewart”. Mr. Stewart would retaliate by addressing his notes to “Old Bill Brakefield”.

Another funny thing I can well remember was the time Grandpa set the mouse trap on top of the keg of sweet pickles back in the dark kitchen pantry. The delicious sweet pickles were vanishing far too fast. He told Grandma to listen for the culprit who turned out to be the faithful cook, Aunt Harriet, who had served them for many long years. Grandpa meant for that to be a joke for his household as all were very fond of Aunt Harriet.

Being a devout railroad man, Grandpa took the horn off his car and devised a whistle in its stead. He set that whistle blowing at every intersection just like a train at a R.R. crossing. Grandma wasn't too anxious to ride with him in the little Buick roadster. I can picture her now with one foot on the running board, her hand holding the door slightly open and the other hand holding her bonnet. When the trip was completed Grandma only said, “Phew, I'm glad that's over.”

In talking with my cousin, Avalin Forgy, we had many laughs remembering some of the events from so long ago. Some aren't printable. Space requires that I close this episode of incidents, but with a memory that is dear to us all. It concerns how the long blessings that we bowed our heads and listened to before meals at Grandpa's table all our young lives. And we never heard but two words of it: “Lord” at the beginning and “Amen” at the end. Then he opened his eyes and pointed the tall glass covered bowl of pickled beets that was always at the center of the table. I used to wonder is they had two such glass bowls for there was preserves or honey in one just like it, always on the breakfast table.

My Grandpa was quite a man.



Photo of the Brakefield children, left to right:  
Lula Williams, Alice Williams, Crawford Brakefield, Betty Cowan, Willie Sikes, Lillie Looney,  
and Maude Aldridge.

