

# The Chatham Historical Journal

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## Remembering Granny and Granddaddy Durham

William H. Durham\*

When I knew him up close and at work on the farm throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, my granddaddy was up in his sixties in age and at first very gray-haired, then later completely white-haired. Granny and Granddaddy Durham lived on a farm twelve miles west of Chapel Hill and five miles north of Pittsboro, North Carolina. They owned 209 acres, most of it over on the far side of the highway and beyond the big fish pond he had built in the late 1940s. A smaller pond was situated down by the road to the right of the farmhouse.

Before the war we lived in Bynum and would be over at the farm often. I spent the first five years of my life living with Aunt Louise and Uncle Bland, Margaret Bland, and Frankie Stroud in their home near Bynum bridge. Later we lived in Alabama and the trips were only once a year.

I am William Henry Durham, born in Durham in 1936. I am the son of Ruth Russell Durham (1907-1999) of Lenoir City and Loudon, Tennessee, and J. W. Durham (1909-1983) of Pittsboro. I am the grandson of Mary Ellen Snipes Durham (1877-1961) and Henry Franklin Durham (1883-1965) both of Pittsboro.

Granddaddy was crippled as a young farmer in the early 1920s, not long after he had purchased the land, when a tree they were felling on the farm

fell on his hip and broke it. His hip was never set correctly, and so he was left with a permanently crippled leg for which he ever after needed his cane to get about. He used his cane all the time in one hand while he carried a heavy slop bucket in the other hand to slop the hogs, gimping along as best he could across the road and into the brush on the other side. He gimped along all over the farm all day long with that tan wood cane.

Granddaddy always got up at 4 a.m., every morning of his life, pulled on his denim shirt, overalls, and boots, and went out into the pre-dawn darkness and chill to milk all those cows down at the two milk barns. Then he would go slop the hogs across the highway beyond the small milk barn, come back and feed the chickens and collect the eggs back up at the henhouse not far from the main farmhouse.

Only then, after two hours of hard work, did he return to the farmhouse and sit down in the dining room to a sumptuous breakfast prepared every single morning by my Granny: a big plate of fried country ham with redeye gravy and biscuits, OR a big platter of



Mary Ellen Snipes Durham and Henry F. Durham, 1958

Photograph by Jerry Durham

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*W. H. Durham (Billy in his youth, Bill in later years, and "Bull" in high school) frequently visited his grandparents and lived for a time in Bynum, where his father was a school principal. Durham's State Department career spans forty-two years; he currently manages the Central Washington/Wireless File, a text and transcript service for American embassies around the world.*

*Photographs and newspaper clippings used in this article were provided by the author.*



*At the old farmhouse, 1941: Granddaddy, sister Mary Margaret, my Dad (J. W. Durham), my mother (Ruth), and me; taken by Granny*

fried chicken and a bowl of white chicken gravy, a big plate of hot biscuits and fresh Granny-churned real butter, a pitcher of cold cow's milk from the previous night's milking, chilled overnight in the water cooler outside in a nearby little "cooler house," and jam or preserves and jelly. Sitting around the dining room table inside the French doors every morning at 6 a.m. would be Granny, Granddaddy, me, and usually a couple of guests from up the road or down the road, or in from wherever.

Then, in a while, Granddaddy would be up from the table. Picking up his cane from back of the chair at the head of the table, he would be off to the fields across the highway and up the rocky dirt road to do his chores there for the rest of the morning.

On most days, when he came in from the fields for dinner at noon, he would again have before him a sumptuous feast of fried chicken, corn on the cob, green beans and sliced tomatoes, on which he poured sugar, not salt. Once again, Granny would have made biscuits, and she would have a jar of her homemade Damson plum preserves on the table to go with the biscuits and butter. She made those preserves for the dining room table every year by going out and picking the plums on the tree just beyond the back door of the farmhouse. Granny could see that plum tree directly through her back bedroom window every morning at rising and every twilight at bedtime.

Sometimes, while he took his after-dinner midday nap out under the big oak tree just beyond the front porch, or sometimes on the south porch (known as the side porch) in the shade of a huge chinaberry tree, I would go to the back bedroom just beyond Granny's pantry and listen to "Ma Perkins" on the old radio with her. It was her only soap opera. Later, in the early evening, Granddaddy and I would listen to "The Lone

Ranger" on the radio in that same back bedroom. In the afternoon of Sunday, December 7, 1941, I was sitting on the floor of the living room in front of my granddaddy as we heard the news bulletin from Pearl Harbor. Throughout the war, at various times I was there at the farmhouse, and he and I would listen to the newscasts. Granny and Granddaddy could never afford a TV and never had one; most of America was still that way then, and for a good many years after.

After his nap, Granddaddy would head over to the "back forty" to where he had fields to sow corn in, or to plow fields up there, or to harvest a crop or to clear brush, depending on which season of the year we were in at the time. Often he would hitch up either one or both of the two mules to his old wooden wagon and take it across the highway to "the back forty" to work for the morning or afternoon. He could not have done it all without the able and always dependable help of Julius Alston and Alton Alston, for whom the rocky old dirt road across Highway 87 is now named. The Alstons, joined later by Nate Alston, worked with Granddaddy for decades, separated from each other by less than a half mile in one case and by less than a mile in the other.

Every Monday morning was "wash day" for Granny. In the back yard at a wide spot between the back door and the old well, she would build a wood fire underneath the big black iron pot to heat the water. She would add lye soap and stir it all real good before putting the clothes in. Then she would stand there with a huge paddle and stir and stir the clothes until they were clean. Then she would wring each piece of clothing out by hand and hang them up, one by one, with wooden clothespins on the wire clotheslines back behind the row of hedges where they couldn't be seen by cars and trucks passing along the highway. And there they would be the rest of the day until they dried.

The old farmhouse had a tin roof on it, and after a long, hot summer's day without air conditioning and a long night trying to get to sleep upstairs in the stifling humidity, it was always wonderful to hear the clatter of raindrops on the old tin roof in the middle of the night and to feel the marvelous cool relief it gave to the dark night in the rooms upstairs. They never knew what air conditioning was; it hadn't been invented. They used hand-fans and, in much later years, a couple of electric fans in rooms inside the house.

At twilight my granny and granddaddy went to bed with the chickens, 8:30 p.m., every night of the week, just after taking their complete sets of false teeth out of their mouths in the kitchen and dropping them in

individual glasses of water with salt, leaving them on the kitchen sink until 4 a.m., when they always got up. During daylight standard time, 8:30 p.m. in the summers meant it was still pretty light outside. Going to bed so early was hard for a little boy to understand, until I got old enough to take 8 p.m. and 4 a.m. and see that it amounted to eight hours of sleep every night.

Granddaddy and Granny put in those long, hard days in both the stifling heat and humidity of the sweltering summers and in the chilling, slippery ice and sometimes deep snow of the hard winters. Granddaddy's life was always outside in the raw elements of every day, from the deep chill before dawn right through the soaking heat of sunset. I remember one summer in the late 1940s when he got sunstroke over on the "back forty" at midday. It scared Granny and me, but somebody out there saw him and brought him home in the wagon with the mules. In a few days or so he was back up and out at it again in the fields.

The two mules Granddaddy used to plow the field and to pull the wagon on trips or just to ride around the field across the road were named Maude and Frank. My first cousin Jerry Durham recalls that we used to get to ride them some, under Granddaddy's supervision. My cousin Carolyn remembers those mules seeming to be ten feet tall to her, and when her daddy, my Uncle Jerome, tried to put her up on one of them she would just scream to get back down on the ground.

My granddaddy, due to his gimpy leg, was what we now call "handicapped" and then just called "crippled," but he never complained about his disability nor made any real reference to it that I can recall, except to tell me the story about how it had happened when felling that tree. And even then he would tell the story only if I asked him to, which was a few times over the years. He was always friendly and kind, easy-going and relaxed, and he was the big hero of my youth. The only other real hero I had as a youth was also handicapped and he sat in the White House in a wheelchair. Those two were heroes because they had heart and they had soul and they were co-equals in my eyes and mind. My Granddaddy Durham was wonderful to me, taking me with him wherever he went. He was so warm and friendly, and I never saw him display any ill temper at any time in his life or mine.

When I was a little boy of about ten, my granddaddy would say to me, "Hey, Billy, let's go down to the Chatham County court-

house and see Susie Sharp preside over the court today." And so on several occasions during the years she was presiding, we went five miles down the road to Pittsboro. Granddaddy thought she was a kick, and let me tell you she was! She was already gray-haired in 1946 or 1947, but years later when she had snow-white hair she rose to become the Chief Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court.

Granddaddy was also a writer, which may be where I got my love of writing. For four decades Granddaddy wrote a weekly newspaper column about doings in that little community along Route 2. It was called "The Route Two News," and to this day I do not know of any other member of my family or of any family I personally know who has had his or her own weekly newspaper column.

He had to have his column in by deadline time of twelve noon every Wednesday, so he would sit and write it in his old green rocking chair on the front porch of the farmhouse at different times of the week, and I would always stand beside his rocker and watch him as he wrote, especially late every Wednesday morning about 11:30 a.m. as he scribbled in stub pencil on lined paper the last few words for the week. Then, all of a sudden, he would grab his cane and me and head for his old blue 1949 Dodge, in which we would putt-putt down the road to *Chatham Record* editor-in-

## Mr. and Mrs. H. F. Durham Celebrate Their Golden Wedding Anniversary

By H. F. DURHAM

Well, it was a fine day out this way last Sunday for our 50th wedding anniversary, with some of our friends and relatives beginning to come in before 2 p. m., with the attendance picking up and lasting until after 5 p. m.

Those attending are too numerous to mention by name, except to say they were here from Tucson, Arizona, Kannapolis, Lexington, Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Saxapahaw, Pittsboro, Bynum, Chapel Hill, Carrboro, Raleigh, Fayetteville, South Carolina, and from all over this community.

My wife and I greeted at the door. Miss Mary Blois Bailey accepted the many gifts, and Miss Mary Margaret Durham presided at the registration book.

Mrs. J. B. Bailey invited guests in for refreshments, with Mrs. M. J. Durham and daughter, Miss

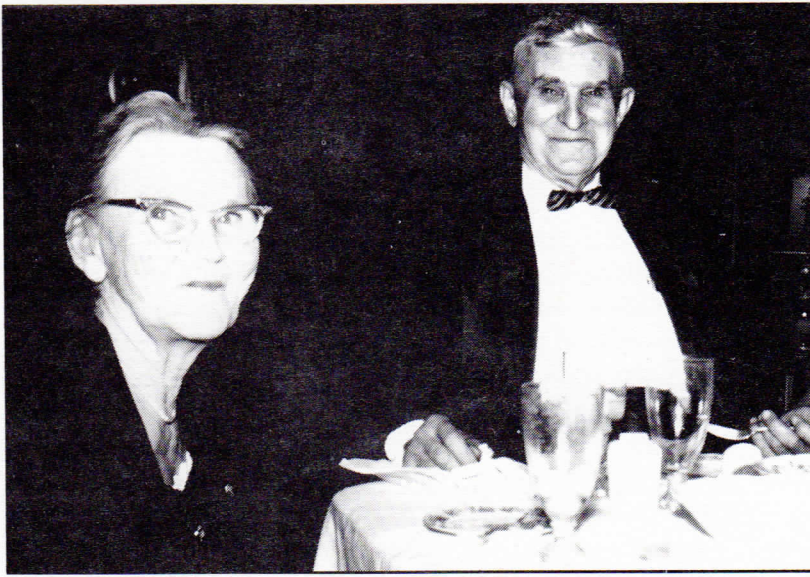
Carolyn Durham, presiding at the punch bowl and serving cake, nuts, and mints. Billy Durham and Miss Linda Ezzell assisted.

Mrs. J. W. Durham said good-byes.

Pictures were made, taking in the beautiful flower arrangements about the room.

Some were no doubt kept away due to church services, threats of rain. It was a cloudy afternoon, but not much rain fell here. Naith Alston and Alton Alston helped with the parking of cars, and no accidents took place while cars were leaving and entering the busy highway.

We are so very thankful for all who came, and for all the nice gifts, congratulations, cards, good wishes for more anniversary years to come. Mrs. Durham appreciated the Mother's Day cards.



Henry and Mary Ellen Snipes Durham, 11 May 1958

Photograph by Jerry Durham

chief Willie Morgan's newspaper office, right there on the main street in the smack-dab middle of town. This was a big deal to a little boy like me! And I read his column in the newspaper when it came out every Thursday afternoon because it was delivered in the noontime mail by the RFD mailman out across the road at the mailbox with the red flag.

In 1958 my soon-to-be wife and I assisted at the celebration of my granddaddy and granny's fiftieth wedding anniversary right there in the living room and dining room of their farmhouse. Granddaddy dutifully wrote and filed a newspaper report in his column for the next week. The only time I ever knew Granddaddy and Granny to "take a vacation" or just "a few days off" was in the fall of 1958 when they came to Winston-Salem for our wedding. That was a whole day off for them, and a genuine rarity.

When, as any writer worth his or her salt will from time to time, he actually committed "truth" and told something precisely like it happened and published it in his weekly column, the immediate hyperreactive sputtering of some in the community would be, "Mr. Henry said what?" and "Why did he write that?" He knew what he was doing, and he also knew what they were doing. My granddaddy is still one of my lifelong favorite writers for those very reasons. He had guts and gumption in addition to a warm and friendly, mild-mannered, wonderful nature, and yet from time to time he could tell it precisely like it was.\*

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\*An editorial appearing in the Chatham Record in 1965 after Henry Durham's death reads in part: ". . . readers of the paper still remember his news stories from the Brown's Chapel section. His style of writing was unique and folksy, and he

My granddaddy, who was a very sociable and friendly fellow all his life, saw how lonely I would sometimes get for lack of friends my own age, and so he would invite some of them, like Johnny Marshall from up near Brown's Chapel or one of the Perry boys from down at Gum Springs, and we played a couple of times out on the big green lawn. Not long after the war had ended, my granddaddy invited his nearest neighbor's son, J. P. Chalmers, son of George Chalmers, up to play with me. J. P. and I were both ten years old then, and J. P. was a friendly fellow, so we had a good time racing each other in a 50-yard dash down in the direction of his house.

Some five decades later, when my mother retired from the Brown's Chapel community, J. P. Chalmers and his family came up to the church and presented her with a beautiful "hands across the sea" plaque. What my

granddaddy had done with J. P. and me in the 1940s was truly a "hands across the sea" (of racism) gesture.

Granddaddy put in a fourteen-hour day every day, six days a week and four hours a day on Sundays, before beginning to run out of steam around 1960 about the same time Granny did. Granny died in September of 1961 of complications from diabetes, and Granddaddy died at the age of 82 of a heart attack.

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wrote just as if he were in conversation with someone.

"Back during World War II many Chatham servicemen overseas received *The Chatham Record*, and the servicemen would turn over their papers to their buddies, most of whom had never heard of Chatham County. The story goes that the first column read in the paper was that of Henry F. Durham.

"On occasion, some of his news had to be censored. About 20 years ago one of his articles was concerned about a party that was held one Saturday night at someone's house. He went on to give the names of all those who attended, and ended up by saying that not a one of them showed up for church the next day."

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