A Man Called to the Earth: Chatham County Farmer Clyde Farrell

The following article was written as a high school project by Benjamin McAllister in 1995 or 1996 while he was a student at the Thomas Jefferson School for Science and Technology in Fairfax Virginia. For the story, Benjamin interviewed his grandfather, Clyde Farrell, who lived in the Mt. Pisgah Community of Chatham County off Route 751. The story speaks to the lives of many of eastern Chatham's small farmers, who worked hard to make a living out of the land that has now become Jordan Lake.

We are grateful to Benjamin's father, William McAllister, for bringing the article to our attention, and to Benjamin for allowing us to share it.

Chatham County Historical Association
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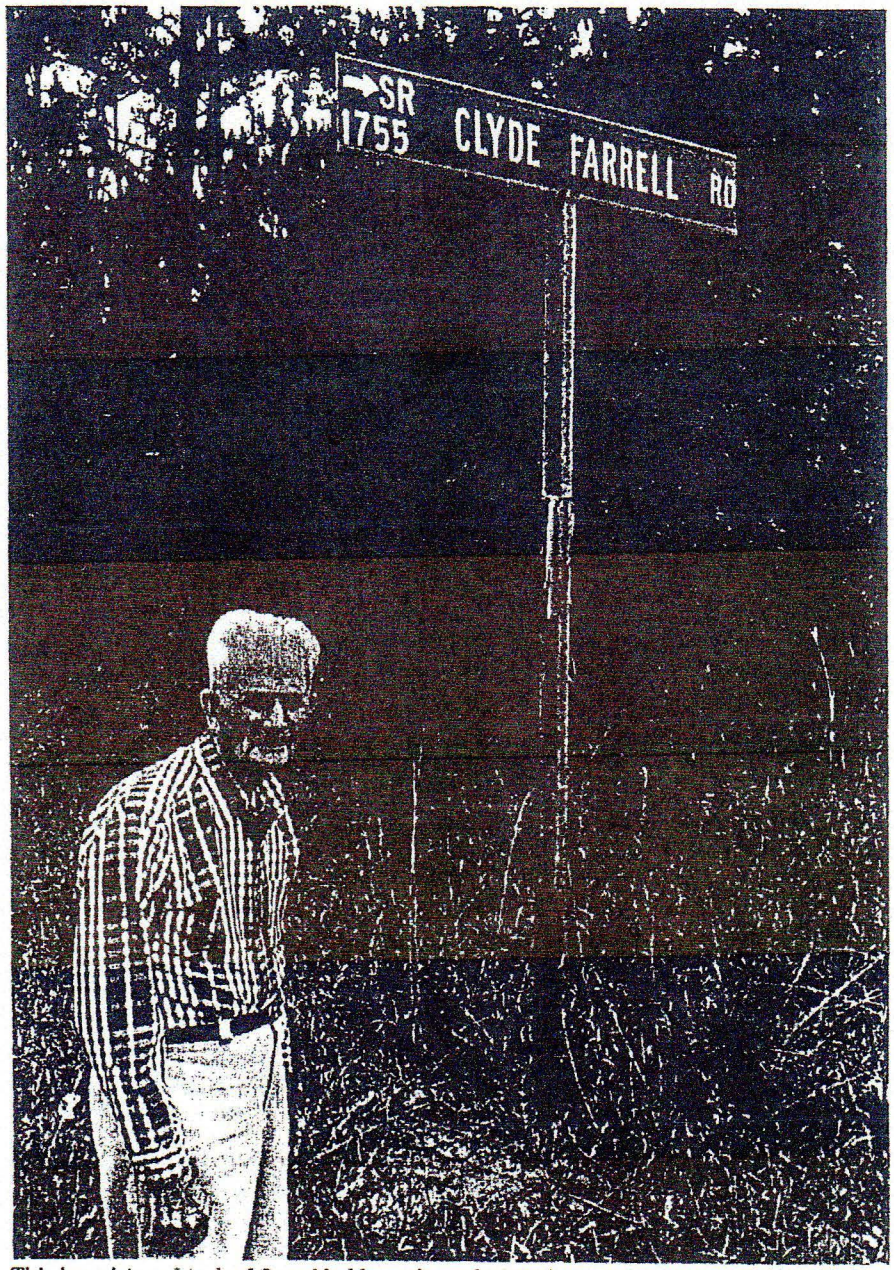
A Man Called to the Earth

All my life, I have made regular trips with my family to my grandparents' farm in North Carolina. Even though I visited them many times a year, I never knew a whole lot about their past. Recently, I sat down with my grandfather, Clyde Farrell, to find out more about his life.



This is a picture I took of Granddaddy at the end of Clyde Farrel Road. It was named for him because it is located on the land the government bought from him.

Born in 1910 to Robert C. Farrell and Exie Christian Farrell, Granddaddy was the third of nine children. They lived on a farm in Chatham County, North Carolina, primarily farming tobacco along with some cotton, a few vegetables and some corn.

His childhood was anything but playful and carefree. Being one of the eldest in the family, he had to help out on the farm often, making school, as he put it, "hit or miss." He stopped going to school all together by the sixth grade.

In 1923, the Farrell family was dealt a serious blow when his father was killed while crossing the New Hope Bridge in a horse and buggy. Somehow, Robert Farrell was thrown from the narrow bridge off his buggy, but no one is exactly sure how it happened. There were two horses and buggies crossing the bridge at the same time, but the bridge was meant for only one at a time. That is all that is known for sure. The rest is speculation. Granddaddy is still not so sure that it was an accident. "I think they knocked him in the head and throwed him over," he said. He has always thought that the story the man in the other buggy told was suspicious. The man said that his lawyer had told him, "Whatever you say happened, that's what happened."

One of the most vivid memories Granddaddy has of his father was the sound of his switch on his backside. "I rememba the last time he whooped me," he says. "I can still hear

that switch—'zzoom....zzoom.'" He is not the least bit bitter about his father's disciplining, though, "I'm glad for it. He didn't whoop me one time that I didn't deserve it."

After his father's death, he stayed at home and worked on the family farm for a few years before going out on his own at the age of 16. His first job was in a sawmill where he worked for about a year. He then went to work in a cotton mill for about two years.

I took this picture on one of our frequent visits to Granddaddy and Grandma's house.

By the time he reached 20, Granddaddy returned to Chatham to do some farming of his own and he moved in with his older brother Glenn. "Glenn was older than me, but I done work just like he done," he said. It was about this time that he started taking interest in his future wife, Fallie Johnson. About two years after she had "started appealin' to me," as he put it, they were married in Halifax, Virginia. They went there one day, got married, and came back the next day. Halifax, said their eldest daughter Jean, was "just where you went to get married" in those days.

Shortly after their marriage, they decided to buy a farm instead of just sharecroping. "I wanted something we could call ours," he said. They acted in part on the advice of Thad Wilson, a neighbor of Grandma's parents, who told the young man, "Boy, you ought to get out here and buy you a farm!" They borrowed $1,000 from her parents and $2,000 from Mr. Wilson, who encouraged them to borrow the money from him. "You can get it when you want it," he said. Of Mr. Wilson's kindness, Granddaddy says "He didn't never stutter." It took them four or five years to pay off their loans, and then the farm was theirs for good.

Their primary crop was tobacco because, he said, "The tobacco was king. Everybody was growin' tobacco." After the long process of harvesting the crop and preparing it for sale, he brought it to Durham to sell at a public auction. The farmers would lay out their tobacco, and buyers from large tobacco companies would buy the crops. Before the Farrells bought their first car in 1948, he had to hire someone with a truck to take him to Durham.

This was how the Farrells made their living. They got paid once a year, and that was the money they had to live on until the next year when they went to Durham again.

It is hard to imagine how they were able to put four of their five children through college with such a small income. "We made every sacrifice," he says. There is a story that he tells which sums it up pretty well. Once, he went into a store wearing a jacket that was a little frayed and the owner made a crack about it. A while later, when he was back in the same store, that man asked him just how he had managed to put four of his kids through college on the money he made. "You remember that jacket I had on? That's exactly how I done it," he said.

Aunt Jean, the eldest Farrell child, was the first person from their community to go away to college. "I always wanted them to have a better life than I had," he says. She had skipped a grade in high school and went away to college when she was sixteen. When she was deciding whether or not to go to college, a woman

from the community, Mrs. Dilly, who sent her children to a neighboring county for school said to Granddaddy, "I don't imagine that anyone from Bells [Jean's high school] could get into college." Mr. Farrell told her, "I don't know, Mrs. Dilly. I'll let you know this fall, though."

One part of their life then that was different from life today was that they ate breakfast together every morning. Granddaddy and Grandma woke up before sunrise every morning around 4:00. The rest of the family woke up around 4:30. "There was never a day in my life that I didn't get up and eat breakfast with the family," Mom said recently.

> "Your job is to ride in that car. My job is to see that it gets paid for."

Farming was then, as it is now, a very risky business. It depends on luck almost as much as it does on sweat. Economic depression can present farmers with major dilemmas. Although the Farrells made it through the Great Depression relatively unscathed, Granddaddy admits, "we had some lean years."

Farming, of course is strongly dependant on the weather. Too much water, too little water and any hail at all can ruin a crop. During the period when Mom was in college in Greensboro, she bugged her dad about getting hail insurance. He felt confident in his decision not to make that purchase and told her, "You make the grades, and I'll make the money."

He never liked people to ask him about money, and when they did, he didn't tell them much. Once, when Mom asked how much their new car cost and if it was paid for, her dad answered, "Your job is to ride in that car. My job is to see that it gets paid for." When another man asked him how much the same car cost, he told him, "Well, that depends on where you bought it."

In 1971, the federal government was planning to build a lake in Chatham County to stop flooding in the Fayatteville area. Granddaddy was forced to sell his farm to the government at what they defined as a fair market value. Later on, this money helped the Farrells enjoy such modern conveniences as air conditioning in their home. The land they sold did not include their house, where they still live today. They were also left with a small amount of farm land, which they continued to till for 12 more years.

Granddaddy finally stopped growing tobacco in 1983. "I'd been wantin' to quit raisin' it for about two years, but I kept raisin' it to let [his son] Pete come out and work on the weekends. One day Pete said to me, and he was kind of sheepish about it, 'You know, Daddy, I think we should maybe stop growin' tobacco,' an' I said, 'Boy, I been waitin' two years for you to say that!'"

When asked what time period he would rather live in, the present or the earlier twentieth century, he replied, "It's two extremes, but I honestly think I'd take it now. We had neighbors then we don't have now. There wasn't much money then. I like having a few dollars in my wallet. We've got conveniences now we didn't have then."

Throughout their lives, Clyde and Fallie Farrell along with the rest of the family have been actively involved in their church. "I went regla all my life, far as I can remember," he says. "I heard Ma say she carried us [Grandma and her siblings] to church since we was one month old," she interjects. Sundays were the one day a week that the family didn't work, but does that mean that they slept in? "Not too much," says Granddaddy. Now, though, having retired from farming, they can devote more time to the church.

They acknowledge that the role of the church in the community has decreased in recent years. "We've had so many people that have dropped out of church," Grandma says. Mom adds, "When I was a little girl, it was the focal point of the community."

Today, Granddaddy and Grandma can still be seen in the fields around their Chatham County home growing corn, cantalopes, green beans, squash, and other vegetables to sell at a farmers' market in nearby Carrboro. When they're not farming, they're off at church or visiting friends. As hard as all my relatives try, they can't get my grandparents to sit still.