

Searching for Mount Hope

Dan Swanson

Wednesday, February 6, the day that young Emory's daddy died, started out like any other day in the lumber camp in the small village of Bacova , Virginia in the heart of the Appalachian Mountains. This day was a somber day for the nation as President Woodrow Wilson was being laid to rest with all the pomp and circumstance befitting a former president at the Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., two hundred miles up the road but in a different world from the village of Bacova.

The year was 1924. Emory and his family had moved a couple of years earlier to Bath County from Lunenburg County where he was born on October 14, 1920. His family was comprised of his older brother, Dewey, age seven, and two sisters. Hazel was five, and Emily Virginia was only eight months old. Emory and his siblings lived with his mother, Nannie Sturgill Swanson, and his father, Peter Arthur Swanson, in a home rented from the lumber company who owned the timber rights and ran the large saw mill outside the village on the Cowpasture River. An African American maid lived with the family to help with the cooking and caring for the small children.

The long journey that led Peter to Bacova had started in 1887 with his birth in a small town on the east coast of Sweden in the County of Kalmar. Growing up in poverty on a small farm during the devastating economic conditions in Sweden in the late 1800's left him yearning for a better life.

The beginning of Peter's search for a better life would be triggered by a beating from his brutal father. He ran away from home at age thirteen and stowed away on a cattle ship bound for America. He was able to avoid detection until the ship landed in New York where he was apprehended and returned to Sweden because of his young age, lack of any money, and no family in America.

The living conditions for Peter only got worse upon his return to Sweden. He began to secretly save his money and vowed to return to America at the first opportunity. That opportunity came just after his nineteenth birthday in 1906. His older sister had immigrated to America and was living in New York. Peter packed all of his worldly

possessions in a cheap cardboard suitcase and boarded the ferry in Gothenburg bound for England and the transatlantic ship ports to America.

Peter gradually made his way down to the Appalachian Mountains area of the country and the opportunity that the vast, old growth forests offered to a young man in the exploding lumber industry. By 1910 he was living in a stringhouse in a lumber camp in Highlands County, Virginia near the West Virginia border with a number of single, young men who, like himself, were seeking their fortunes in the lumber industry.

From there, Peter followed the work in the lumber camps throughout western Virginia and northwestern North Carolina. The large lumber companies would move from one area of old growth timber to another. They would build saw mills and lumber camps and lay narrow gage railroad tracks into each remote area. They would literally pull up the tracks and move the entire operation from one area to another after it was “logged out”.

Peter’s journey had taken him to the remote South Fork of the Pound River in Wise County by 1916. Timber was being cut to support a large saw mill owned by the Currier Lumber Company. Peter was approaching thirty years old, and he longed for a wife and family. Everything changed when he met Nannie Sturgill, a local woman whose ancestry could be traced back to Pocahontas and Governor William Bradford who came over on the Mayflower and led the Plymouth Colony. A rapid courtship led to marriage between Peter and Nannie in 1916 and the birth of their first son, Dewey, in 1917.

While in Wise County, Peter met and went to work for George Kippen who had moved to the Appalachian Mountains from New York to seek his fortune in the lumber industry. George operated a contract timber cutting company, and Peter quickly became one of this most valuable employees. Thus began a relationship where George, Peter and their timber cutting crew would move from location to location as they followed the large lumber companies. The work led them to the Great Smoky Mountains in northwestern North Carolina, to Lunenburg County where Emory was born, and eventually to Bacova.

By 1924 Peter had moved up to a foreman position working for George Kippen. One of Emory’s earliest memories was of a heavy oak table in their home in Bacova. It was made by a local woodworker from a solid two-inch thick piece of oak from one of the old growth trees that often measured several feet in diameter.

Pay day for the timber cutting crew was on Friday. In the days before payroll withholding for income taxes, the workers were paid in cash. Emory could vividly remember Peter counting out money for his timber cutting crew in piles on the thick oak table. Clearly, Peter was well on the way to achieving the American dream that had prompted his long journey that started in Kalmar but would end in Bacova.

Peter had awoken, packed his lunch, and left home early on that fateful Wednesday morning, well before Emory and any of his siblings had left their warm beds. Meeting his crew at the commissary, they loaded into the company trucks to make their way out to the tract of timber that was currently being logged a few miles outside the village. The day had dawned with a cold wind and ominous clouds pouring over the mountains from West Virginia.

Peter and his crew were busily felling trees, trimming off the limbs and tops, and cutting them with their cross cut saws so they could be pulled by the horses down to the log yard to be loaded onto the railroad flat cars and transported to the lumber mill. As one of the trees was cut, a large limb broke off and lodged itself in the forks of another tree in the stand of trees that they were cutting that morning. The lumber business in 1924, as it is even today, was one of the most hazardous professions in the country. Workers were regularly injured or killed by snapping cables, drowning on the float ponds, or falling trees.

Peter was well aware of the risk, but on that particular day he had become distracted as he watched a family of squirrels playing in a hickory tree on the ridge above their work site. The wind had picked up, and the increasing humidity in the air was an early warning of the snow storm that would be coming down from the West Virginia mountains later that day. While Peter was distracted, the broken limb was dislodged by the wind from the fork of the tree. His workers yelled "Watch Out!", but their voices were carried away by the howling wind.

The broken limb struck Peter in the head, fracturing his skull and breaking his neck. His crew loaded him into the back of one of the work trucks to transport him to the hospital in Hot Springs in an attempt to save his life. George Kippen took on the difficult

task of informing the family of the accident. He removed his hat and knocked on the door of the family home, and Nannie Swanson answered.

“Ma’am, I have some bad news. Peter was injured by a falling tree this morning, and we had to transport him to the hospital. It doesn’t look good.”

“Is he still alive?” Nannie asked while trying not to cry in front of the children.

“Yes, but I’m not sure how long,” George replied.

George loaded Nannie and her four young children into the company truck and made their way down to the hospital in Hot Springs. The doctor had Peter in surgery in an attempt to save his life, but his injuries were too severe. The family was huddled in the small waiting room on the hard wooden benches when the doctor came out to tell that Peter didn’t make it. It was 6 PM, and the sun was just setting over the Appalachian Mountains to the west of town. All of the children except Emily Virginia, who was too young to understand, started crying at the loss of their father. As tears streamed down Nannie’s face, she turned to Mr. Kippen and pleaded,

“What will we do? How will we survive without Peter?”

“I’ll see what the lumber company can do to help,” Mr. Kippen replied as he wrapped his arm around Nannie in a vain attempt to comfort her.

The funeral took place two days later. Peter was laid to rest in a small cemetery on a hill outside of Bacova. He was a member of the local Odd Fellows lodge who presided over the burial ceremony.

The grave was marked with a small headstone with the letters “P A Swanson” and “1924” chiseled into the face of the stone. After their tearful goodbyes, Nannie and her four small children trudged down the hill to the main road to be transported back to Bacova and the start of an uncertain future.

The “help from the lumber company” came in the form of a one-way train ticket for Nannie and her family along with a few select pieces of their furniture back to the ancestral home of her parents, Johnny and Mary Sturgill, in Wise County. Johnny picked them up at the train station in Norton. Johnny wasn’t known to be a particularly compassionate man, so his greeting wasn’t what Nannie had wanted.

“Girl, I am so sorry about Peter. Times are hard, and with our small house I’m not sure how we can make room for you and the kids,” he stated.

“Daddy, I have some money that Peter and I saved. That should support us for a while,” Nannie reassured her Dad.

Nannie and her four young children moved into the Sturgill cabin on Rocky Fork outside the county seat of Wise. Like many people in Wise County at the time leading up to the Great Depression, Johnny and Mary eked out a living through a combination of both legal and illegal professions ranging from farming to moonshining. One of Emory’s first jobs at age seven was to ride with his grandpa Johnny on the back of a horse as he made his deliveries of moonshine across the county.

Tragedy would revisit the Swanson family for a second time later in 1924 when Emory’s baby sister, Emily Virginia, died from whooping cough at the Sturgill home and was buried on his fourth birthday on October 14 in the Rocky Fork family cemetery. News spread about Emily’s death, and there was a knock on the door of the Sturgill home early the following Monday morning. The gentleman identified himself as being from the Wise County Social Services Department and asked to talk to the dead baby’s parents. Nannie came to the door.

“Are you the mother of the baby who died?” he demanded.

“Well, yes, and I have three other children to raise. Their daddy was killed in a logging accident earlier this year up in Bath County,” she replied.

“If you can’t care for your children, we’ll place them in foster care,” he threatened as he turned to leave, and Emory and his siblings cowered in the corner.

By the start of the Great Depression, all of the money that Peter and Nannie had saved was gone – “drunk up” by Johnny and members of the Sturgill clan according to some. The entire family struggled to survive. Nannie and the kids ate whatever they could find and lived day-to-day.

Emory and Dewey had fashioned “sling shots” from the forks of hickory tree saplings on the Sturgill farm and hunted birds for food. After one of their hunting expeditions, they had killed enough birds to fill a pillow case. On their way back to the farm through the woods, they spotted a local “game warden” heading toward them.

“What are you boys doing in the woods today? You wouldn’t be doing any illegal huntin’, would you?” the officer gruffly asked as he approached them.

“No sir, we are just out for a hike in the woods,” Dewey calmly responded.

“Don’t let me catch you doing anything that you shouldn’t be doing!” he warned as they parted ways, and he continued along the ridge line.

Luckily, they were able to hide their bag of birds behind a tree to avoid being arrested. They quickly retrieved the bag and headed for home, but the risk became clear. Bird hunting became so common that wild birds virtually disappeared from Wise County.

Emory and his siblings began to feel that not only had they lost their father, they felt like orphans. Their Mom was gone most of the time, and raising them fell mostly to their grandmother, Mary. They were in constant fear of being removed from the home to foster care and the loss of their family. Being raised under these brutal conditions resulted in the development of “hard ass” attitudes by the children and a level of animosity toward their mother that lasted for a lifetime.

Emory was able to survive and enroll in school at the two-room Riner School across the mountain on Indian Creek on the road to Pound. He made it as far as the sixth grade, before he had to quit school to help earn money to support the family. By the time that he had turned nineteen, he had started his first job in a saw mill and courted and married Hasby Collins, his lifelong partner. They raised four sons and a daughter. He was a strikingly good looking young man, like his father at the same age, and he dressed like a cowboy complete with cowboy boots, leather chaps, and a pistol strapped to his side.

Working at such hard work at such a young age resulted in Emory sustaining a hernia that was a source of pain for the rest of his life. His physical condition did result in one bit of good fortune – he was not drafted to fight in World War II. His older brother, Dewey, was not as fortunate. He was drafted and fought in several of the battles in the war including the Battle of the Bulge. Dewey never spoke much about his war experience. He suffered for the remainder of his life as a result of his time in battle with what would be become known later as PTSD. He moved his family to Indianapolis, Indiana where he worked for Western Electric until he retired.

Hazel lived her entire life in Wise County where she raised five sons.

Emory spent his working life mostly in the brutally difficult non-union coal mining business. He and the family moved to the State of Washington in the mid sixties in what amounted to a mid life crisis when he, like his father, worked in the lumber industry in the Pacific Northwest. He returned to Virginia a year later after he discovered that breathing the fumes and dust from a lumber mill was just as damaging to his health as breathing coal dust.

Nannie Swanson lived the remainder of her life up to age seventy-eight in Wise County. Tragedy seemed to continue to follow her when one suitor killed another in a competition for her attention when she was in her forties! She became the family storyteller – a family tradition that was later passed on to her granddaughter.

Peter's children lived difficult lives during very difficult times in the country. They survived the death of their father at an early age, seeming abandonment by their mother, growing up during the Great Depression, and serving in World War II. They became known as The Greatest Generation. There was a feeling among Peter's children and grandchildren that he was destined for great accomplishment and wealth if he had not died at such an early age. He was a success story during a period of explosive opportunity in the lumber industry, and he was well positioned for success when he died.

The fact that Peter's children and widow seemed to ignore that Peter had ever existed was very confusing to the grandchildren. The siblings didn't speak much about the life and death of Peter Arthur as they raised their families. Fifty years after Peter's death, none of his children had even visited his grave. They didn't even seem to know where he was buried.

Emory's son and daughter made it their mission to solve the family mystery. Emory's son "interviewed" Dewey at his home in Indianapolis to record as many facts as possible on Peter's death and burial. Based on this information, Emory's only daughter who lived in Virginia at the time began an exhaustive search for Peter's grave. The search culminated in a trip to the village of Bacova in the early 1980's. She was traveling down the main street in the village when she noticed an elderly couple sitting in rocking chairs on their front porch. Being desperate to find information as part of her search, she stopped her car and approached the couple.

“Hey mister, I’m searching for information on my Swedish grandfather who was killed in a logging accident near Bacova almost sixty years ago. His name was Peter Arthur Swanson. Did you ever hear of him?” she inquired.

“Well, yes, young lady. I have lived my whole life in Bacova, and I remember him well. His work crew called him “Petee.” he replied.

“Do you have any idea on where he is buried?” she asked.

“To the best of my memory, he was buried a few miles outside the village on the gravel road leading over toward the lake,” he offered as he pointed in the western direction.

“Thank you so much,” she said as she headed for her car.

Traveling along the deserted gravel road, she didn’t encounter many landmarks or people. Rounding a curve, she noticed a dirt road leading up to a small church with white clapboard siding on the left side of the road. Feeling a strong attraction out of nowhere, she pulled over and trudged her way up the hill. A man was working on cleaning up the church yard and small cemetery behind the church. He paused to greet her.

“Ma’am, what brings you to such a remote place on such a beautiful day?” he asked.

“Sir, I am searching for the grave of my long lost Swedish grandfather who died almost sixty years ago,” she replied.

“You know, I have spent a lot of time in this small church and tending to the cemetery. There was always one grave that never had any visitors. It is located in the far corner of the cemetery, and it is marked with a small headstone” he stated as he pointed toward the grave.

As she approached the grave, she noticed the headstone that was almost weathered beyond being readable had the three-ringed Odd Fellows symbol, “P A Swanson” and “1924” chiseled into the face of the stone. Her journey was complete! Tears welled up in her eyes when she noticed the name of the small cemetery on a sign on the hill – Mount Hope Cemetery.

The grave became the destination of pilgrimages by several of the grandchildren and great grandchildren. Sadly, Emory was the only one of Peter's children who ever visited the grave. A couple of years later, he bought a large granite headstone and traveled from Wise County to Bacova with his oldest son to install the headstone on Peter's grave. After moving the heavy headstone into place, Emory stood at the grave and quietly spoke to his father, "Daddy, I'm sorry that it took me so long." It was his way of reaching closure.

Emory was forced to retire at age fifty-three due to declining health and spent the remainder of his life tending his garden and apple orchards on the hillside farm that he had cleared himself and living in the small ranch home that he had built with his own hands without a mortgage. He died of Black Lung Disease at age seventy-six and was buried in a family cemetery on the land that he had cleared.

The story of Peter and his family became a story of an American family in pursuit of the American dream. Peter's widow and children held onto hope for a better life as they overcame the challenges of his tragic, early death, the Great Depression, chronic poverty, and lack of education. It is a story of a dream deferred as Peter's grandchildren went on to become engineers, college professors, and doctors. Peter would be proud.