



My Favorite Tombstone

DANIEL M. ROPER

This is not my church. These are not my people. Nonetheless, I feel at home.

On a sultry July afternoon, I stand alone on a tree-covered hill, immersed in death. Crows caw irately from the canopies of a southern red oak and an eastern red cedar. A solitary great-crested flycatcher mournfully whistles its “weep” call in the deep woods. The dispiriting drone of cicadas fills the summer air. Together, these form a choir singing to a congregation of the deceased, whose modest graves are marked by sunken ground and canted tombstone.

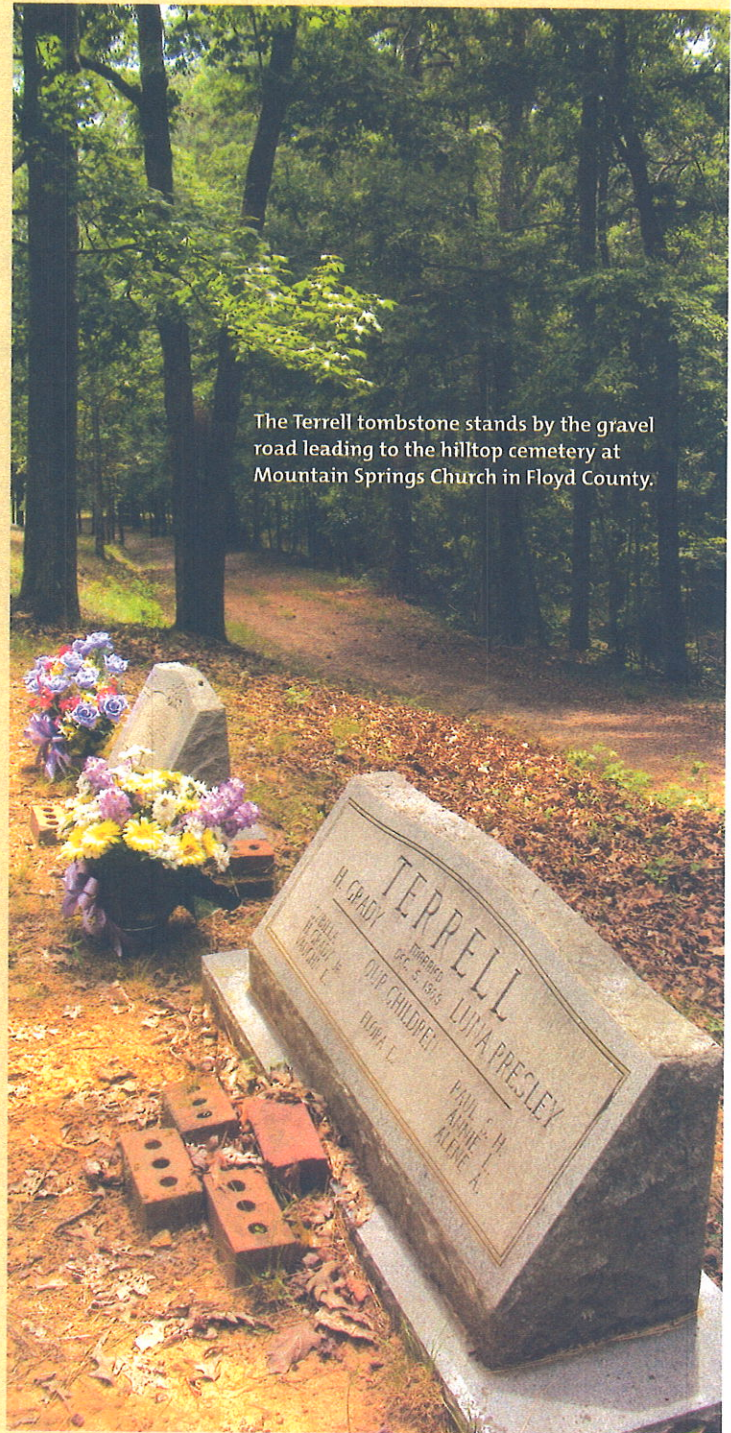
The hilltop cemetery at Mountain Springs Methodist Church in Floyd County bears witness to the all-too-common occurrence of death among the young a century ago. Among the graves are Infant Daughter of Mr. and Mrs. H.C. Camp, Born & Died 1902; Son of Mr. and Mrs. Melvin Beard, Born & Died Oct. 7, 1904; Martha Sybilla Terrell, Safe in the Arms of Jesus, Sept. 9, 1908 – Sept. 10, 1908; and Baby Gail Padgett, Born 5-9-1902, Died 5-9-1902. There are dozens of others, all serving as solemn reminders of the primitive state of medicine in rural areas during that era.

But I’m not here to contemplate death, for this cemetery also holds my favorite tombstone, which celebrates life. The inscription on the wide granite marker under an arching black oak tree lists the names of a husband and wife, H. Grady Terrell and Luna Presley Terrell, but it does not include their dates of birth or death. Neither is there a touting of military rank, membership in any secret society, or an important position in the community. All that is given is the date of their marriage—December 5, 1909—and the names of their seven children: Sybilla, H. Grady Jr., Vaughn E., Flora E., Paul S.H., Annie L., and Alene A.

In all likelihood, Grady and Luna didn’t mean to broadcast a profound postmortem message, but the emphasis on family is unmistakable. During reflective moments while visiting the cemetery over the years, I’ve often thought that these parents must have fully grasped the counsel of the psalmist: “Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, So are the children of one’s youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them.” (Psalms 127:4-5)

Last summer, I decided to find out if Grady and Luna indeed nurtured that kind of family, so I telephoned David Terrell, a Rome realtor. The son of Grady, Jr., David is a gifted storyteller who for an hour spun tails about his grandparents and life in the Mountain Springs community a century ago.

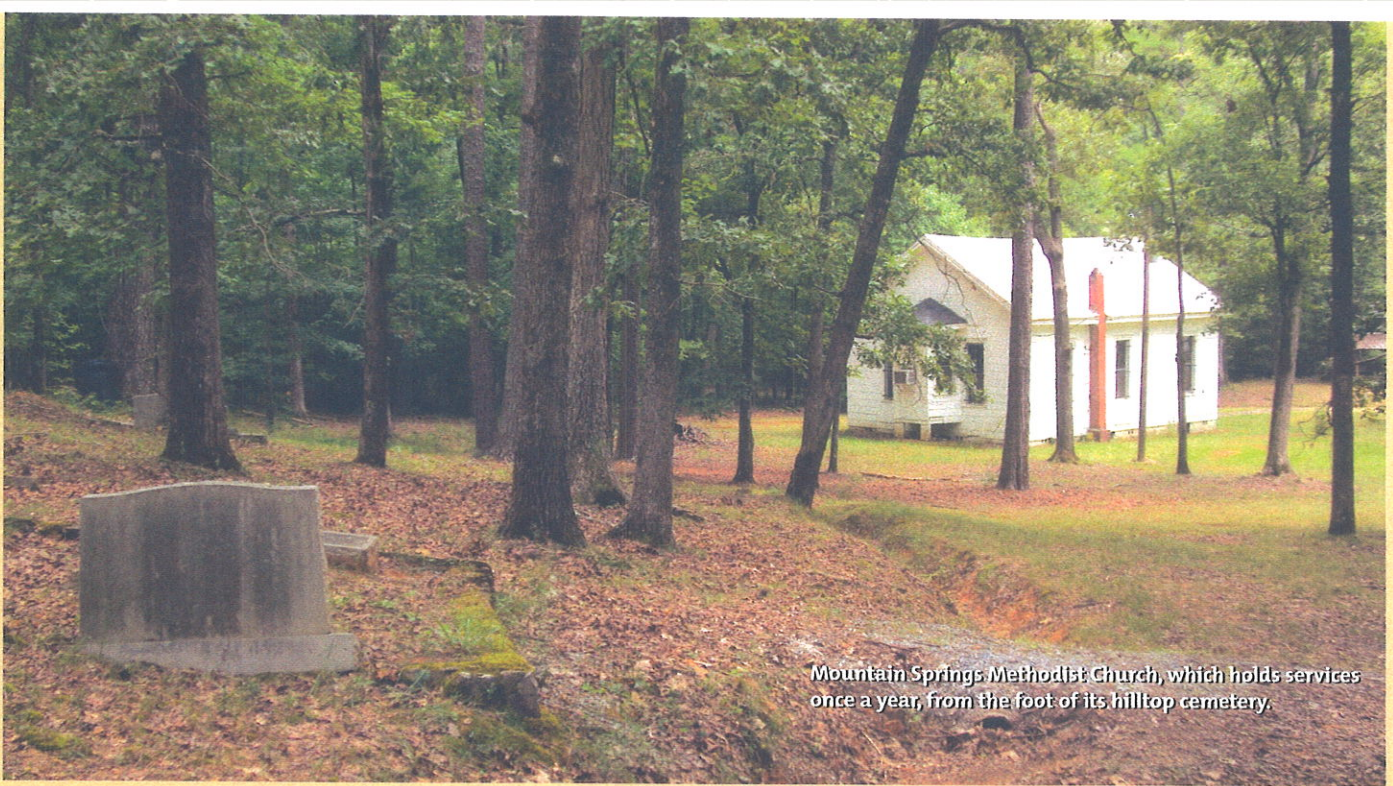
“We loved to get together at granddaddy’s house!” David



The Terrell tombstone stands by the gravel road leading to the hilltop cemetery at Mountain Springs Church in Floyd County.

enthusiastically offered after I had explained the reason for my call. “They were a gregarious bunch; a sweet bunch of people.” When I asked about my hunch that this had been a tight knit family, he replied, “Your take on the tombstone is accurate.”

Times were not easy for the hardscrabble farmers, like the Terrells, who lived in the Flatwoods section north of Rome a century ago. “Daddy spent his life working hard,” David remembers. There wasn’t any bottomland to farm and the soil



Mountain Springs Methodist Church, which holds services once a year, from the foot of its hilltop cemetery.

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was mostly clay type best suited to growing pine trees. The only factory in the area closed not long after World War I and the railroad went out of business in 1923. Times were hard, cash was scarce, and people struggled to make do with whatever they had.

“If they threw it away it was past using,” David says.

Growing up on a farm meant that the Terrell boys were accustomed to working with livestock. “One day when daddy was about 14,” David recites, “he was driving a wagon. To allow a vehicle to pass on the narrow dirt road, he pulled over to the side, with two wheels in the ditch. Whenever that horse got into a tight spot it would balk; it wouldn’t pull. So daddy stopped the man in the vehicle and asked, ‘Will you beat my horse with a tree limb while I hold the reins?’ The man said that he wouldn’t, but that he’d be glad to hold the reins while daddy did. So daddy commenced to whaling on that horse. It came out of the ditch like a shot.”

David laughs, “Granddaddy was soft on animals but hard on kids. So daddy had to hide that horse from granddaddy until those whelps went down.”

Not long thereafter, Grady Sr. and Jr. were back in the wagon on that dirt road and pulled over to let a vehicle pass. David chuckles in saying, “Granddaddy told daddy, ‘He won’t pull out, son.’ To which daddy replied, ‘You might want to try him once.’ Well, that horse shot out of the ditch, much to granddaddy’s surprise.”

Grady Jr. only had a second grade education, but his farm work made him wise in the ways of animals. “One day when

he was eight he drove a steer to get butchered,” David says. “He got so far and the steer just lay down. Daddy said, ‘I couldn’t go get my daddy, so I just had to figure out what to do. I got up on his neck, put my little hands over his nostrils, and he had to get up.’”

Farm life in the Flatwoods managed to insinuate itself even into the family holidays. Grady Jr. described a Christmas celebration at Mountain Springs in the early 1920s, when he was still a young boy anxiously awaiting Santa’s arrival. The jolly, bearded fellow finally showed up in a sleigh pulled by steers. Asked what he thought of this unusual sight, Grady Jr. shrugged, “I thought Santa was running a little short.”

The children of Grady Sr. and Luna grew up to be hard-working, salt-of-the-earth kind of folks who worked in factories, farming and education. As with any family, there was also a sprinkling of disappointment and sadness, but the family always remained close. As David recalls, they “looked for any opportunity to get together.”

The cemetery at Mountain Springs may seem unremarkable since no generals or statesmen are buried there, but every grave might lead to similar stories of life and death, laughter and tears, love and loss, success and failure. While most of the tombstones are testaments to lives cut short, the Terrell grave proclaims the joy of life with a quiver full of arrows.

Hard work. Cash poor. Meager possessions. A family complete.

Who could ask for more? ■