

A LUCKY FIND

by Dani Crossley

Grandpop Lawson. Everybody should have one. Charming, debonair, small of stature, larger than life in his grandkids' eyes. But most of all, storyteller extraordinaire! When Grandpop Lawson would settle into his chair, cross his legs, and get his jackknife out to scrape around inside his pipe bowl, we knew the entertainment was about to begin. We gathered at his feet on the floor, Indian-style, hands clasped, ready to be enthralled. And he never disappointed, whether it be regaling us with stories of antics with his chums (like tipping over outhouses on unsuspecting inhabitants) or anecdotes of his youth growing up in Crisfield, Maryland on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, crabbing capitol of the world. Grandpop loved the water and had a boat his whole life—a crabbing boat on the bay, a powerboat at the marina in Buffalo, a cabin cruiser on the canals in Fort Myers, Florida. He also had a little runabout with an outboard motor that he taught us how to run. We felt so grown-up and free, zipping up and down the canals behind his retirement home.

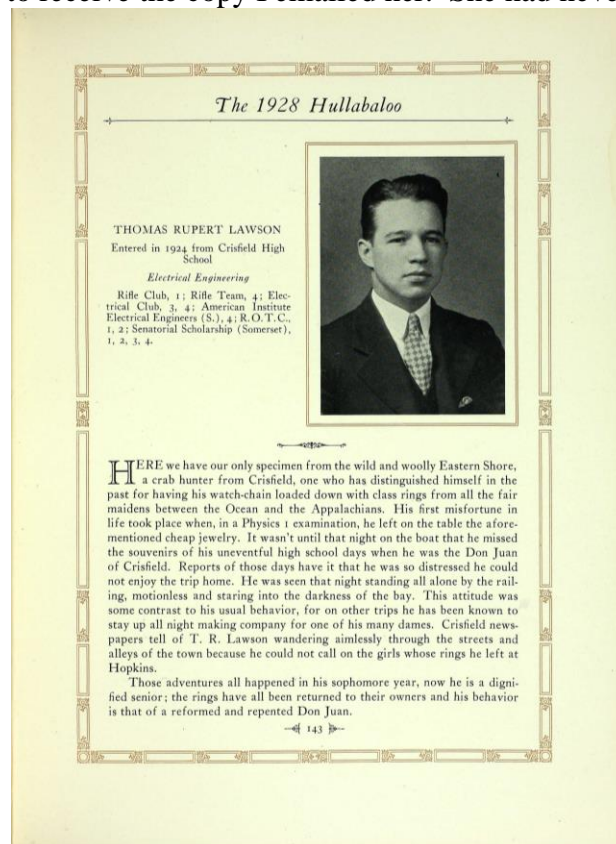
Grandpop's stories certainly wouldn't be considered PC in anyone's eyes today, but they sure made us laugh. He told of his youngest brother, Leo, who would sit unnoticed in a corner of the room or behind a piece of furniture as the adults lingered over coffee after dinner. Leo would unobtrusively begin to crackle and crinkle the cellophane wrapper off a pack of cigarettes. After a while, a puzzled frown would crease one adult's forehead, then another one would slide his eyes quickly around the room. Finally, great-grandpa Duffy would holler, "LEO! NOW &*\$%#@*! CUT THAT OUT!" As the children in Grandpop Lawson's story would fall about laughing hysterically, the children gathered at his feet would nudge and teehee, "Grandpop said a naughty word."

Our Sunday afternoon jaunts to visit my mother's parents in nearby Williamsville, NY were a much-anticipated adventure for the five of us. We loved their modern home on Brompton Road, complete with ice cream treats in the utility room freezer, baby bunnies nestled under the "cats and kittens" in the rock garden beside the driveway, and an enchanting gazebo in a secluded glen on the other side of the garden gate. But best of all, was the time we spent with Grandpop. He taught us how to play Mumblety-Peg in the soft dirt next to the back deck under the towering pines. Playing with knives with an adult's permission! What could be better for five pre-teen kids? He was such a talented man and played the harmonica all the time. He taught me some songs and got me one as a birthday present. Still have it. His study was ringed with duck decoys he carved himself and his prize-winning paintings decked the walls. There was nothing he couldn't do and we loved him!

I often feel I have scoured all available resources for information on mine and Wally's families. But I would be wrong. The other day when I went to Ancestry.com, I noticed they were indicating three new hints about Thomas Rupert Lawson (Grandpop), the person I had open at the time. I almost didn't click on the little green leaf. The first item I saw was the 1940 census for him. Of course, I had checked out all my ancestors when the 1940 census first came out in 2012, but Grandpop was missing from the rest of his family: wife, Dorothy; son, Tom Jr.; and daughter, Joy Lynne (my mother). They were in Murrysville, Allegheny County, PA in April of 1940, just a couple months shy of my Uncle Wes's arrival into the world. So, there Grandpop

was in the Sherman Hotel in Chicago, Illinois! He was an electrical sales engineer for Westinghouse and must have been living there for training or something work-related. I would have never looked for him in Chicago.

Feeling quite happy with this clarifying information, I clicked on the next hint to find the real treasure—Grandpop’s senior page in the 1928 Johns Hopkins University yearbook, *The Hullabaloo*! I have many wonderful memories of my grandfather, but it was so fascinating to see him through his peers’ eyes way back when he was ready to set out on his own in the world. In addition to a very handsome photo and his background/college extra-curricular activities, were the very personal observations of the yearbook staff. See photo and transcription next below. My mother was thrilled to receive the copy I emailed her. She had never seen his yearbook.



“HERE we have our only specimen from the wild and woolly Eastern Shore, a crab hunter from Crisfield, one who has distinguished himself in the past for having his watch-chain loaded down with class rings from all the fair maidens between the Ocean and the Appalachians. His first misfortune in life took place when, in a Physics I examination, he left on the table the aforementioned cheap jewelry. It wasn’t until that night on the boat that he missed the souvenirs of his uneventful high school days when he was the Don Juan of Crisfield. Reports of those days have it that he was so distressed he could not enjoy the trip home. He was seen that night standing all alone by the railing, motionless and staring into the darkness of the bay. This attitude was some contrast to his usual behavior, for on other trips he has been known to stay up all night making company for one of his many dames. Crisfield newspapers tell of T. R. Lawson wandering aimlessly through the streets and alleys of the town because he could not call on the girls whose rings he left at Hopkins.

Those adventures all happened in his sophomore year, now he is a dignified senior; the rings have all been returned to their owners and his behavior is that of a reformed and repented Don Juan.”

My lucky stars were still shining as I checked further back in the Lawson line to see if any more gems would surface. Sure enough, I stumbled upon a land document for my sixth great-grandfather, Hance Lawson, when he purchased a 52-acre piece of property in Somerset County, Maryland, named *Lawson's Adventure*, in 1745. These are the ancestors who supposedly were involved in the Virginia Company in England and the Jamestown settlement here. I haven't found exactly which Lawson was the first one and when he arrived, but they've been here a long time! And, of course, legend has it he married an Indian princess! Doesn't everybody's family have one?