

REMINISCENCES OF JAMES R. CLEAVER'S EARLY LIFE

Editor's Introduction: James B. Cleaver at the request of his youngest daughter, Edith, a school teacher, wrote the following account about his early years in Columbia County. He was born on October 10, 1820, to Jess B. and Adeline Cleaver, who lived on a farm in the Catawissa area, later operated a ferry across the Susquehanna River, and for a period time lived in Dutch Valley.

In these reminiscences he described his family and recalled numerous events. To name a few, he mentioned his parent's involvement in the underground railroad, seeing Indians, attending school, fishing for shad in the river, going to militia training, and burning limestone. His various accounts allow the reader to have glimpses as to what life was like in early nineteenth century Columbia County.

In his early adult life he learned to be a carpenter. Later, he moved to Ashland and in time became a successful coal operator. Having an interest in Schuylkill County politics he became the first treasurer of the county in 1860. In 1877 he and his family were part of the human tide that went West by moving to Kansas. However, it was a short stay; after three years they returned to Ashland. He then became involved in the lumber business. At the age of seventy-two he and his wife moved to Philadelphia in 1892, and six years later he died on May 20, 1898.

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This is Thanksgiving night, A.D. 1895. The days seem longer than those days of long ago and the nights likewise. My youngest daughter says, "Write for our after-gratification; write some of the happenings and doings of years of the long ago and of later times, if you will."

My parents told me I was born on the tenth day of October, A.D., 1820, in a one-and-a-half story log house, half a mile below the town of Catawissa on the north side of the Susquehanna River. My father, Jesse Cleaver, was born and bred a Quaker. My mother, Catherine Richards, was of German descent. I was named after my Grandfather, Isaac Cleaver. I remember him once showing me a bird nest. He died probably about 1828. My other Grandfather, about ten years later. I remember him well. He was such a man as your Uncle John Cleaver - much like John in many respects, physically, and in some other respects in his earlier years especially. My Grandmother Cleaver was a very strict Quakeress, believing in the Spirit; but I did not think she was always moved by the good spirit. But now I have learned that we sometimes charge others with what should have appropriated nearer home. Her name was Mary Davis. She died about 1843. I remember my Great-Grandfather, John Cleaver. He was Quaker all over and around. He had a small apartment of his own in the house on the old Cleaver farm, and no one was admitted unless it was at his pleasure. He was considered wealthy for those times - had some gold I heard whispered about the time he died, 1833.

Three or four years after the date, 1828, my parents had moved opposite Catawissa, and were keeping the Ferry, the only place of crossing between Danville and somewhere above Bloomsburg, taking people over in Bateaux and teams and flats.

I said my parents kept the Ferry, for my first recollections of my Mother and Father were in crossing the Susquehanna - my Father and five other men forcing the large flat up the stream, my Mother steering, and I sitting near her wrapped up in something (a quilt, I suppose). The river was high and the crossing dangerous. (I used *some* words which were more

expressive than at this time. You will have to think back and make allowances.) They ferried many six-horse-teams that were loaded with merchandise in Philadelphia, which they hauled over the Allegheny Mountains to Pittsburgh, bringing back principally skins of wild animals.

Another event that happened about that time had something to do with shaping my future life. One morning, after the men had gone to work, my Mother took me with her to the barn and there I saw my first black man. Mother had his breakfast. I learned in after days that my Father was one link in the chain of the then-frequently-traveled underground railway, as it has since been called. Sometime in the night previous, some Quaker had brought the Darkey to the south side of the river, and on the following night, someone came and piloted him onward toward Canada, the slaves' paradise in those days. This was the way it was done - some Quaker friend and the Darkey to be at certain points at a certain hour, and there be met with the next relief. A few days after this, the Sheriff and his posse were scouring the country and making very searching inquiries of my parents as to their having seen a nigger. I reckon my parents did not tell all the truth. Fine and imprisonment was the penalty for harboring a runaway slave. So you learn I was cradled an abolitionist and have been called one. I was taught to hate oppression, and I can truly say I have always been drawn to take the side of the poor against the rich and the weak against the strong - often to my loss. I don't claim any credit for this - it was in me and I could not be otherwise.

In one of the fields was a place we did not farm (I see the plot now). A number of men, women, and children were scalped and killed by the Indians, and buried there. Why did I say scalped? Because the more scalps the brute could show strung to his belt, the bigger brave he was. I don't wonder when I hear it said "The only good Indian is a dead one."

Here I began my education, perhaps three months out of the year. I remember my first copy in penmanship. The Master called them pothooks. He told me when the sheet was full it looked like turkey scratching. I cried and thought life a burden. All this, and much more, that I might tell, before I was seven years old.

Before I move onward, I must tell you how sick persons were treated. My Father was down with a raging fever. The drink was hot tea and some kind of concoction called "Barks," and then bleeding until the patients were so weak there was nothing left for the fever to work on. If the person rallied, well-- if not, his troubles were ended.

Whilst living at the ferry, Father brought across half a dozen braves (Indians). They had been to Washington to see their White Father. I remember one old Buck who had large holes in his ears. Mother said that was to show that he was a thief. To me that was an object lesson.

In the spring of 1828, we moved into what was called Dutch Valley, three miles from Bloomsburg. The morals of this German settlement were not uplifting. Gambling, drinking whiskey, and very little regard for the Sabbath. We always took our surplus apples to the distillery and had them made into whiskey (applejack). We always had several bottles in the cellar and a little on the shelf. The men always had their bitters before breakfast.

I remember them mashing up tansy in their tumblers to make it more bitter. Hired men expected it as surely as they did their dinners. Father used to employ men nearly all the time, and the rule of payment was one bushel of potatoes for a day's work and two days for a bushel of wheat - not much money used in those days. You see, it did not matter to either party whether produce was high or low. My father always tapped the measure to settle the grain before stroking off the surplus. In harvest time, every time the men cradled around the field, they took a dram. There were few men who became drunkards - only two that I know of. I suppose the reason was, there was nothing in the liquor to create an appetite.

I was early taught to save money. I remember the first three or four dollars I had saved. Two men were going to what was called a "shooting match." They coaxed it from me, promising to pay it back the next day with interest. 'Tis bearing interest

yet! This was a heart-breaking loss, but some that time, since others have worried me longer.

Whilst living in that valley, we were sent to school two or three months a year each winter. In the first school, the teacher taught German and English. I had advanced from the spelling book into the New Testament. Part of the class read German and part English; about twenty in the class and as the verses were numbered, we always knew when it was our turn to read. I may as well go on with my education for the following winter. We lived in the same place from 1828 to 1836. Three months was the school term, but during the winter we had to thresh our wheat and oats.

The way of doing it was to open the sheaves and spread them around on the barn floor and then bring in two pairs of horses and have them march around until the grain was tramped out, while we continually shook up the straw and the grain fell to the floor.

This would keep us home part of the time. I became a pretty fair reader being in the highest class, the English Reader. We had our spelling classes. I was generally pretty well up, and our classes were in numbers. Then there was the chap who said that there was only one above, and being questioned as to how many there were in the class said, "Two."

Just above Catawissa, there was a shad fishery, and Mother and I sometimes watched them as they circled in with their large seines and counted how many they threw out on the island. Sometimes it was a water haul. There was no one there to tell them on which side of the boat to put down the net. I have fished with the seines many a weary half day, but that was after the dams were built in the Susquehanna and shad were few. Every spring before the dams were built, the shad would come in what were called Schools – large numbers of them together moving like an army, not for war but to lay eggs where they would not be disturbed, and then to die, as was then supposed and probably not true, for people said that rarely was a shad seen going down the stream. How wisely are all things ordered! He made them.

The school rooms were finished inside by having one wide plank around three sides and then a bench to sit on. All of us having our backs toward the teacher for convenience. More than once I was sent out to cut some rods. One teacher used to tie more stubborn boys by the thumbs and then tie them to a post so he could be labor at his leisure. One I remember who occasionally became tipsy, and one of the older scholars would throw books and rulers promiscuously about the room. Once I remember someone got up on the roof and closed up the chimney while some other one kept firing up the stove. The whole school was smoked out! The biggest job the teacher had was mending pens, goose quills! Some of the more advanced scholars called upon to assist provided we had sharp knives. Free schools were not thought of in those days. Our parents had to pay so much a head, and we larger boys had to cut the wood at recess time alternately. Spelling, reading, writing and arithmetic are what we graduated in. We had on only Pike's Arithmetic. I did not know until I was eighteen years old that I would have use for dollars and cents in arithmetic. It was all pounds, shilling, and pence. Looking back, it seems almost incredible that such a state of affairs existed.

The river generally remained frozen over for at least three months in the winter, and there was much trafficking [sic] done. My Father was hauling wood over and came near to losing his life. The ice went down taking the sled under, but somehow the horses were saved. Around 1837, Father and I each having two horses with sleds were driving on the ice and my team broke through, but the sled being lighter remained on the ice. The water was not so deep and the horses were saved. We drove pretty lively after the horses were gotten out! We were hauling lime to put on the land. The way the horses were gotten out was this – I saw the people from Catawissa running towards us with planks and boards which they ran under the horses and helped them up on the ice. I remember that often in the spring when the ice was rotten that men would have two boards and one shoved before them so that they could always be on one. Don't forget there were no bridges, and it was often necessary to take risks.

I fear that those who take the time to read this scribbling will say that it is like the Gospels in that the occurrences were not written in the order in which they occurred for occasionally my thoughts have wandered backward. I ought to say something of the religious opportunities of the times. The only service I remember while we lived at the ferry was held in the School House. I remember Father seemed the principal singer. (He sang frequently and I remember his playing on the Jews' Harp.) Some children were christened at the services. After we moved to Dutch Valley, in the eight years I only remember attending one service, and that was German. A lot of us boys went to Bloomsburg because they had a lot of instrumental music. All the services were German, that, with a few Sunday School services the last year we lived in the valley are all that I can recollect. The Germans were all Lutherans, and once a year old and young went to Bloomsburg to take Sacrament. That lasted the majority of them for a year. But doubtless there were some who, according to the opportunities and the Light they had, were serving the Good Lord as acceptably as we of today are – probably more so. I remember Mother telling me about one of the neighbors whom she frequently visited in his last sickness who selected the text to be used at his funeral - The Fourth Psalm: Eight Verse. Don't get the impression that we were not taught our duties to the ruler of the Universe and also to those with whom we had dealings. We were taught by precept and example to be honest in measure and weight, also to fear God. My Mother sometimes told us Bible stories. The one that most lastingly impressed me was the one in which the bears came out of the woods and ate up the boys who called Elisha "The Bald Head!" We were given to understand that this had particular reference to the necessity for having reverence for aged and infirm persons. He were not allowed to forget the lesson concerning Annanias and Sapphira. My Mother used to sing hymns for us on Sunday evening. Sunday was a day of rest. She told us not to whistle, and no work was done on the farm. I remember one or two instances during hay making in a very wet and rainy time that we hauled in a few loads, but we come to believe that it did not pay. When it thundered and lightning we sat in the house. The people were more superstitious and believed in signs and omens more than at present. Father several times seemed troubled after Sleeping part of the night and would get up, take a lantern, and go out to the stables, and, so far as I remember; a cow or a horse was in danger of strangling, or had a foot over the halter chain. The vegetable seeds were always planted by the moon-some in one phase, and some in another. We used to haul out manure in the spring of the year on the meadows, and sometimes it would be raked up with the hay while at other times none of it would be seen. Posts planted at certain times would be continually rising out of the ground; whilst those planted in the right sign of the moon would remain or go deeper. My parents believed there was something in it.

My Father was rather popular for he was elected Constable and did considerable traveling through the country (The office was more important than at this time). In those days, a man could be put in jail if he did not pay his debts, and the creditor could sell everything he had except his cow, an axe, a grubbing hoe, a certain number of bushels of potatoes, the bed he slept in, and, if he had children-beds for them and a few pots and kettles. Now, if he is smart he can have more than the man or woman to whom he owes money. My Father was also a Captain in the Militia.

I have not forgotten his hat with the white feather with a red top, and his sword and belt. I have forgotten how many days a year they had to train. Mother thought, and said, too, that he had better stay home and work; but most all of us want Glory in some form or another. Battalion Day was much bigger than the Fourth of July in those days. On that day, all able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 45 were commanded to meet for inspection and drill, and all who had guns (and the majority of men had) were commanded to bring them; and those who were so unfortunate not to have anything that would shoot were to bring the next best warlike instrument they could; so I think about half of the warriors carried broomsticks and shelalies. They all passed inspection for officers and privates alike were anxious to be dismissed so that they could get their share of ginger cakes and small beer. Of course, we were tired after being marched several miles to the music of the fife and drum and going through evolutions.

Years after this came the Mexican War, and I, with others caught the war fever, and as I belonged to a volunteer company called the Columbia County Blues, we went over to Bloomsburg, the county seat, and offered ourselves to the Government but were not accepted. One man whom I raced as a schoolboy joined a Company from Danville and was killed storming the

Heights of Chipultepec. I was a Second Lieutenant in the Columbia County Blues, and when the Rebellion broke out I wished that I had been a Mexican soldier.

Now we are again in Dutch Valley. In 1832 or 1833 there was what we called "The Year of the Falling Stars." It seemed as if everything in the skies was coming down. It was as light as noon day from midnight until daylight. Hundreds of stars and meteors were shooting continually in every direction, and we supposed that the Day of Judgment had come. What people did! I don't know; for myself, being 12 years of age, it seems to me that I was dumb – speechless!

My parents were very saving but not stingy. People used to visit each other and no person ever went from our house hungry or without something eatable to take with him. In Mother's days before she was married, she did spinning by the day. A certain number of "Cuts" was a day's work. She used to finish her day's work and then spin for herself. She could do two day's work in one day. In those days, from the finest thread to the coarsest toweling was spun and bleached until white as snow. In the times of which I am writing, all store dealings were done in Bloomsburg. Many a basket of eggs and many pounds of butter, I carried to town. For eggs we received six cents a dozen and butter, ten cents a pound. Father settled the storekeeper's account once a year. Our wheat was our principal product sold to them. The way it was marketed was by Arks when the Susquehanna was high taking it down to Baltimore.

In the spring of 1836 we moved over the river on the old Cleaver Homestead, and there for the next six years we worked at what in these days would be called slaving from daylight until the stars shone. But looking back, I have no recollections but those that are pleasant. The land was very poor. No barn, and an old log house, two stories, no garret floor, two rooms downstairs and two above the chimney forming the partition. Many a star shone upon us through the shingle cracks. I don't know that anyone of the seven had a doctor in those six years. Possibly we had, but if so, memory fails.

The first winter we lived there, Father and I went back to a place where we had lived and quarried limestone, hauled them to the banks of Fishing Creek, a tributary of the Susquehanna, and in the spring, hired a flat and floated them down the river as near a point to the farm as we could land, and then hauled them up to the farm, broke them small, then made a stack of them interspersed with layers of coal, and burned on the same principle as bricks were burned in those days, and are yet in some localities, and then spread the lime over the land. By the third year, we raised all the grain we needed. The second year we built a large barn, which still stands, and the last year I worked at home, we built a large brick house. The other boys being pretty stout fellows, Father could get along without me. I was between 21 and 22 years old. I worked for my Uncle George Mears for two years for five dollars a month and my board. My parents gave me my everyday clothes, and Mother did my mending and washing. (Patched clothes were no disgrace in those days.) At the end of two years, after buying my Sunday clothes, I had saved one hundred dollars. We worked from daylight until the stars came out, and, in the winter, worked in the shop making sash, etc. Often when we were making furniture for persons they would come in the shop, examine it before it was finished, and complain. One of his sayings was this "Women and fools should never see a job until it is finished."

We were five brothers all born between October 10th, 1820, and January 30, 1830. All except John are living today enjoying the blessing of health above the average for men of our ages. When quite a small chap, I helped my Mother quite as much as girls of the same age do now-washing dishes, milking the cows, and teaching the calves to drink milk after they were weaned. Churning butter was a work of labor at least twice a week. Having learned to do these things came in handy in after years.

Times were improving and money began to circulate, and about 1840, a charcoal furnace was built near the mouth of Roaring Creek. I hauled many loads of stone for the stack and dwelling houses which were erected for the men working at the Furnace. After the Furnace was blown in, I filled the furnace alternate shifts of 12 hours at the price of \$1.00 a shift,

boarding at home; but Father rigged up a good five-horse-team and I hauled iron ore from near Bloomsburg after the furnace started.

And now comes the greatest loss we boys ever experienced. In November, 1852 Mother was taken with dysentery and left us for a better world. In her sickness everything was done that we could do or get done. A few days before she died I was beside her and she was praying in German. I said to her, "Oh, Mother, You are good enough. Don't worry so."

Her answer: "I must pray!" How ignorant I was! She died about ten o'clock at night and we boys went out and were sitting on the woodpile where we all promised to be good to each other. So far as I know, that promise has been kept, and I believe the other three who are still living would say the same. No disagreement or hard feelings ever came between us, but Brother John would sometimes remind me of that promise when he thought that I was hard on him. I now see that I might have done better for him. In after years, your regrets will not be because you were too kind and forgiving, but because of harsh words and other unkindness.

We had put up a building near the Mill and opened a store. I remember buying the goods in Philadelphia about \$400 worth. Father was storekeeper. The most ready sale of all was Monongahela whiskey. All the farmers bought it for the hired hands during haymaking and harvest. At barn raisings it was indispensable. We built the Mill which is now owned by _____ . I framed it, and it was good job that I was praised for. We raised it in half a day, about 40 men, all the neighbors, as was the custom, expecting only their dinners, which your Mother with her helpers had ready.