

Our Family's First Christmas Tree



Christine Ancell

**The telling of this story was done by
Christine E. Ancell on
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The story took place in the early days of the Colonies when settlers were making their way into what is now the Falls Mill, WV area. My ancestors were among that group and suffered many hardships during their perilous journey. Fate works in mysterious ways as you will see. Please enjoy this family story!



Foreword:

I was born in the winter of 1952 in Falls Mill, WV. My mother was Gladys Bosely and my father was Forest Ancell. My maternal grandparents were John William Bosely and Carrie Campbell. When the kids were little my mother would pull an old newspaper clipping from her Bible at each Christmas. It was the story of my relatives who were early settlers in the Falls Mill area. We would take turns reading the story at Christmastime.

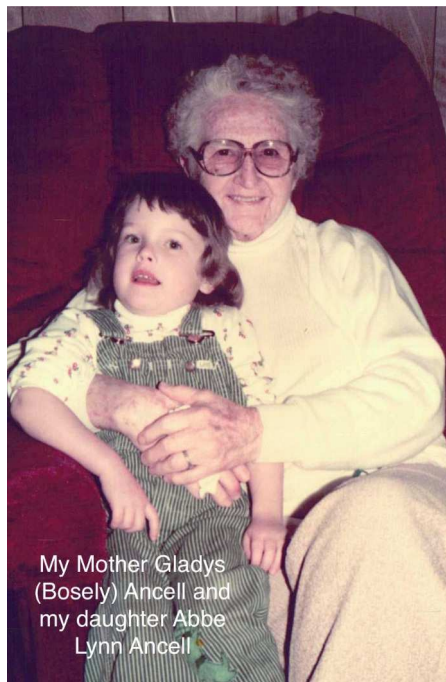
As fate would have it, the clipping was lost over the years and the story became a memory. My wife, in an attempt to preserve the story, has written down her recollections of the tale. Please excuse any historical inaccuracies as the names and dates are approximate. There are very few written records from this era still surviving. Be assured though, that the framework of the story remains true to the original as published in the Braxton Democrat newspaper. So please enjoy this tale of a Christmas long ago in a time that is much different than now with people that were true pioneers.

Jack Ancell, January 2, 2020



Right before Christmas when the kids were little we would be settled in at the Ansell home tucked down Buck Run, a hollow in West Virginia. The family would gather for a huge delicious meal with a variety of game meat and a salt cured ham that my husband Jack, his father Forest and brother Dale butchered that Fall. Almost everything on the table had been a product of my mother-in-law, Gladys' garden. The pies and jams were filled with summer fruit she picked and canned. I only wish I could recreate the smell that filled her kitchen.

After dinner we would settle around the fireside and Gladys would take a newspaper clipping from her bible. It was an article published by "The Democrat" a Braxton County Newspaper that featured a Christmas Story passed down through generations of her 4th Great-grandparents who were traveling over the Appalachian Mountains around 1764 to newly opened territories further west.



My Mother Gladys
(Bosely) Ansell and
my daughter Abbe
Lynn Ansell

Our Family's First Christmas Tree

Granddad David Campbell and his new wife Bedia were expecting a child and it was late Fall. He knew that he needed to build a shelter to wait out the winter. The trail through the mountains was becoming treacherous and his young wife was weary of traveling.

One day he came across an old trapper by the name of Louie. They shared a cup of coffee and Granddad told him about his situation and asked for advice. The trapper told him that there were several Indian villages in the territory and lately one of the tribes had begun raiding settlers in the area of the Gauley River. He warned Granddad to be very cautious when choosing a place to stay. Louie offered to share the rabbit he snared, if Bedia would cook it for dinner. The conversation lasted around the fire until late and Granddad invited Louie to spend the night with them.

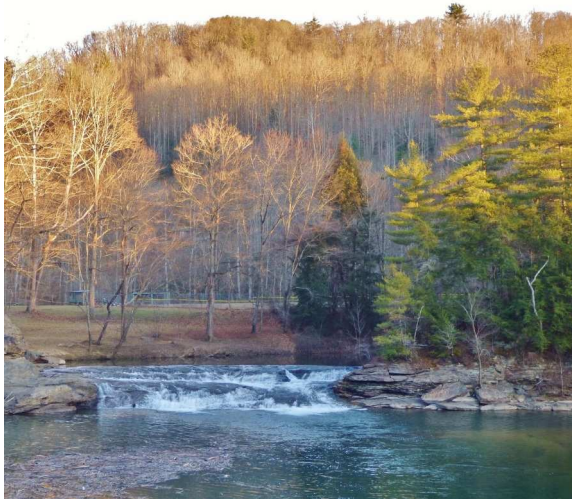


The next morning Louie said that he had to check his traps near the falls along the Little Kanawha River and he remembered a cave not far from there. He suggested it might be a good place for a temporary shelter. He told them If they wanted to follow him, he would show them where it was located. Granddad had two pack horses that carried all their worldly possessions and they had to follow a narrow switchback trail down the mountain side. When the trees opened up to a valley, they saw a winding river between two mountains. It was a beautiful sight and a welcome relief to be able to water the horses and restock their water supply. Louie set off to check his traps while Bedia started a fire and Granddad set up a trot line to catch some fish. Bedia boiled the leftover bones from the rabbit they ate the night before.

Louie showed up just before dark with several beaver pelts and a large turtle he had cleaned and cut the meat to make turtle soup. After a filling dinner they sat around the fire sharing their stories about coming to the new Colonies.



The next morning they followed Louie up the river until they came to the Falls. It sparkled from the shining sun and reflected the brilliant colors of the Autumn leaves. Bedia was overwhelmed by its beauty and it brought tears to her eyes; it felt as if she was home. They made their way across a shallow area and started up the steeper side of the mountain that had overhanging rocks cut from centuries of water eating away the mountainside. Louie pointed, "it's up there, under that boulder". They climbed a little higher following a deer trail and then the ground became level just as a ten foot opening to the cave came into view. As they stood looking down they could see the river below and the rock ledge they were standing on was flat and solid.



"What do you think"? asked Louie. "I can help you cut down some trees and we can log up the front". They were both very excited to have Louie stay on to help them get set up for the winter. They knew that the snow would be coming soon and Louie was an expert on surviving in the mountains. Granddad had hoped that they would be over the mountains by winter and weren't prepared to spend it under such harsh circumstances.

As Fall was winding up and nights were below freezing the three of them had carved out a very nice shelter in the cave on the side of the mountain. The trail was widened by logs being pulled up the hill by the horses. A fire pit made of rocks was set in place on the front ledge for cooking. The log wall was fashioned by hand to fill in the opening of the cave and mud chinking sealed the cracks between the logs to help make it air tight. Granddad and Louie split logs to make a door, window and table while Bedia cleaned and swept the inside. She thatched wooden frames to make cots to use for seating and sleeping. Bedia used cured hides from deer to make covers and bedding. Things were taking shape and the men began to leave out early in the morning to check their traps and hunt. They were stockpiling and curing as much food as they could.

One evening Granddad came home excited to tell about meeting Captain Bull. Captain Bull was from the Delaware Nation and had moved his relatives from his homeland in upper Susquehanna in New York to the area. He asked Louie to help his people get familiar with the new region. Louie had been introducing Captain Bull to the area's forts and homesteads. He assured Louie that they came in peace and would trade and share the land together. Louie told him where Granddad had set up camp for the winter. Captain Bull said that he would visit when his hunting party came to the Falls. Bedia had mixed feelings about Indians coming to visit. As long as Louie was there to translate she would feel a little better about the meeting.

Bedia had her daily chores to keep her busy while the men were out. She would water, then stake the horses to graze near the river while she hauled fresh water up the hillside to the camp. This day she wasn't felling well and was experiencing sharp pains. She went about her business knowing that her baby wasn't due until the end of December and according to her journal keeping, she had another month to go. Climbing the path, she slipped and fell. The pail rolled down the hill, spilling the water. She laid on the path in pain and prayed she could make it to the cave. As she started slowly up the path she found a long stick sturdy enough to support her weight. She made it to the cave,

washed off and went to lie down on the cot. When Granddad and Louie returned and found the empty pail on the trail, they ran up to check on Bedia. They found her in pain and she told them that she may be in labor. Louie said he would ride down to Captain Bull's Camp and ask for help. Later that evening, Louie returned with Captain Bull and an elderly woman who was a mid-wife. The men were put to work hauling water and boiling it in preparation for giving birth. Granddad asked the men to join him in a prayer, that the Lord would bless his young wife Bedia and their first born and keep them at His mercy, so they may live a life in His name.

A few hours had passed when they heard Bedia scream several times. A silence fell across the camp and after what felt to Granddad as forever, they heard a child's cry coming from the cave. A short time after, the elderly woman came to the door with a finger to her lips. They entered to see in the candle light Bedia nursing her new born son. The woman gently picked up the baby and handed it to Captain Bull who carried it outside. Standing on the edge of the cliff he held the baby towards the starry sky. He thanked the Great Spirit for the gift of Life and a new Warrior, who would join his people as a Brother. Then he handed the child to Granddad and said, "Your Son will one day be a great Warrior for peace between Our Nation and Yours".

In the morning Granddad thanked Captain Bull for bringing the mid-wife. He turned to the elderly woman and took from around his neck a small silver cross that his mother gave him before they left on their journey. He said, "If it wasn't for you, my wife and son may not be with me today". He thanked her and handed it to her. She smiled at him and put the cross around her neck.

The next day, Louie said that he had to take some beaver pelts and salt to the Gauley River Trading Post and wouldn't be around for several weeks. He told Granddad to stay close to camp until Bedia got her strength back. Granddad built a small drinking pool, that was fed by a spring close to the cave. Right above the boulder that formed the cave was a wide crevice and there he rocked in a root cellar to hold their food supply and keep it safe from marauding animals.

Bedia's color had returned in her face, and she continued to get stronger every day. She still wasn't back to herself and Granddad was a little worried. They named their son Obed after his father who had passed away several years earlier. He was eating well and although he was born a month early, that didn't stop him from gaining weight. Obed was a happy, alert little guy that brought a smile to his Daddy's face every time he held him.

It would be Christmas soon and with the pelts Granddad caught and gave Louie to trade for him, he hoped Louie would get enough to bring back some surprises. He knew what Bedia wanted but would never ask for.

Bedia and her family were German immigrants and she remembered as a little girl growing up, her father would bring a tree inside to decorate the day before Christmas. She and her brothers would help by stringing nuts and berries. Their mother would attach the strings to apples then drape it around the tree. Her father would finish it off by tying candles on the end of the branches. Her family no longer put up a Christmas tree since they left their homeland. It was frowned upon as a pagan act that detracted from the birth of Christ in the Colonies. She missed that as she looked through the trees to the stars twinkling bright in the sky above, her heart was heavy and she missed her family.



Louie returned two days before Christmas with the provisions that Granddad needed to help get them through the winter. An oil lamp to lighten up the interior of the cave brought a smile from Bedia. She needed that to knit and care for the baby during the winter months. Louie always gave them a pouch of salt from Captain Bull; his people made it and used it when trading. Granddad would salt down their meat as a preservative. The rest were staples; ground coffee, flour, cornmeal, oil for the lamp, a card of combed wool for knitting. "This is from me", said Louie, handing Bedia a block of something squishy wrapped in a piece of deer hide. She opened it carefully to find a chunk of beeswax oozing with honey. Now you can make us an apple pie with those dried apples you have. They had a good laugh and she said, "that would be a Christmas present to All of Us"!

Louie was missing when they woke up the next morning. That was not unusual for him when he needed to get a head start checking his traps. Granddad stayed close by the camp and didn't want to alarm Bedia about a band of hostile Indians that Louie said were raiding homesteads in the north Allegheny Territory and moving further south closer to the Great Kanawha River. A hostile band had been burning small camps near the Gauley River and a local hunting party saw evidence of them outside of Sutton.

Granddad was keeping busy preparing a Christmas present for Bedia. She missed having a Christmas tree since she was a little girl in Germany and this was a great opportunity to give her one. The day before, Granddad and Louie had found a perfect tree. After cutting and fastening it to a base, they went to work pinching pine sap on the end of the branches. They didn't have candles but they figured it would give off the same sparkling effect when lit. They hid the tree out of sight and would surprise her after dark. He swept off the ledge in front of the cave while keeping an eye on the wild turkey he had on a spit cooking over the fire.

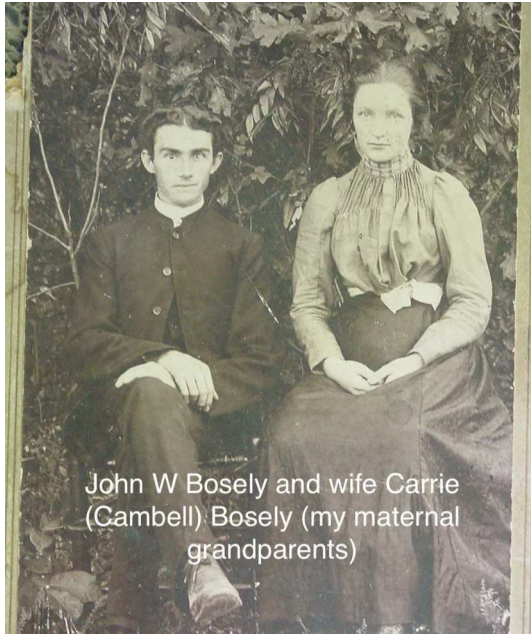
Bedia was up at dawn and fed Obed and after he fell back asleep she made cornbread batter to cook in her cast iron Dutch oven over the coals from last night. She soaked the dried apples overnight and began making the crust to line her cast iron skillet. She brewed a pot of coffee over the fire and was collecting drippings from the turkey in a tin cup. She used a hot knife to extract just enough honey to sweeten the boiling apples for her pie. When the Dutch oven had cooled she had Granddad turn the cornbread onto a plate and slide the turkey off the spit into the Dutch oven. Everything was going as planned and the cave was filled with the aroma of just the right amount of sweet and meat! Bedia was sure that everyone would enjoy their Christmas meal!

Just before dark they heard a jolly laugh coming from down the path. It was Louie wrapped in a bright red and black Indian blanket carrying a sack over his shoulder. He greeted everyone and opened his sack; then pulled out a beautiful beaded cradleboard and handed it to Bedia. Your friend the mid-wife sent this. Now you can carry Obed easily around with you. He went over and picked up Obed and took a wooden rattle from his pocket. He shook the rattle and the baby let out a squeal. "I think we will put this away for another time", he said while handing Obed back to his mother. Then he removed the beautiful red and black Chief's blanket from around his shoulders and draped it over Granddad, "A gift from Captain Bull", he said. Bedia gave Louie a pair of wool mittens and a scarf she knitted for him. Granddad handed Louie a long wrapped parcel, he opened it to find a bow, arrows and quiver. Louie had often expressed his thoughts of one day learning how to use one. They all sat down to a table full of food and bowed their heads while Granddad led them in a prayer of Thanks for all the Blessings that they have shared together since the three of them met that day on the trail.



After dinner Bedia started to clear the table and Granddad told her they had a surprise for her outside but she couldn't go out until they came for her. A few minutes later Granddad came inside and helped her put Obed in the cradleboard and strap him on her back. He told her to close her eyes as he lead her out the door. When she opened her eyes she saw the most beautiful tree with its branches reaching out in all directions holding tiny orange balls glowing in the dark. She screamed with joy and went right into singing the Christmas song about a beautiful fur tree "O Tannenbaum". The men quickly tuned in as loud as they could and they started dancing around the fire pit with their arms waving in the air. Their voices echoed through the valley until the song was stopped abruptly when Bedia let out a scream that frightened all of them including Obed. Their beautiful Christmas tree had erupted into a gigantic ball of fire and they feared it might fall into the log wall of the cave. Granddad grabbed Bedia and carried her and the baby quickly past the tree. He set them down next to the drinking well, filled a pail with water and ran back to the cave. Louie took a long walking stick leaning against the wall and pushed the tree on its side where it was lying on the rock ledge beginning to burn itself out. When Granddad showed up he doused it with the water. "Best fun I've had in a long time", Louie said, trying to catch his breath, as the tree laid there smoldering. Bedia heard Granddad and Louie's laughter echoing through the valley and knew it was

safe to go back. "Well, that was enough excitement for one evening", Granddad said and Bedia took the baby inside for the night. Granddad carried more water to put on the tree and made sure it was completely out before he went to bed.



On Christmas Morning they woke up to a foot of snow, Bedia wasn't permitted to leave the cave until Granddad made sure the rock ledge was safe. He set about spreading the warm coals from the fire over the rock ledge, then started a new fire to make coffee. They had plenty of left overs for breakfast and they sat around the table discussing plans on what they would do in the coming new year.

Louie would be riding with Captain Bull and some of his men to another Indian camp for Tribal Council. They were meeting to speak and vote which tribes would agree on living peacefully in the territory and which tribes wanted to wage war on the invaders coming across the mountains. Captain Bull hadn't been in the territory long but he was known as a great warrior and respected by many tribes as an ally. This meeting was very important to Captain Bull and although it was risky for both of them to attend Louie knew he must go with Captain Bull.

It was cramped in the cave with three adults and an infant, and Bedia would stay busy tending to Obed, cooking, knitting, reading her bible out loud to the men and writing in her journal. Granddad didn't venture far from camp while Louie went out to check his traps before he left and packed supplies to go with Captain Bull. Bedia made some hardtack for him to take along. The morning he left, Bedia gave him a hug and they both wished him well and a safe return.

It was nearing the month of March and the ice and snow were starting to melt. There was still no word from Louie and Captain Bull. Granddad said that they would have to wait out spring thaw until the water level came down enough to cross the Ohio River safely. Bedia said that she was tired of staying in such cramped quarters and was afraid of Obed learning how to crawl while living on a rock ledge.

She suggested that they build a cabin and stay until Obed got a little older. Granddad agreed and told her about the perfect place to build on a hill below the falls. He came across it while hunting and it had a spring with plenty of timber. He told her he would take her there when things dried out.

Bedia loved the building site for the cabin, halfway up the hillside it formed a large basin, with a spring running down the center. Towards the top was a natural clearing and the hillside had a gradual slope with various hardwoods and pine trees for building a cabin and lean-to shed for the horses. They left camp the next morning and took the horses with them. It was about a half hour walk to their site. They ate a picnic lunch in the afternoon and the horses were staked off in the clearing when they weren't in use. Obed enjoyed going along with his mother in the cradleboard.



They returned to camp late afternoon one day to find Louie sitting by the river. "I was getting a little worried about you", he said. Granddad replied, "I can say the same about you" as they shook hands. "We have started to clear some land to build a cabin", Bedia spoke up. Louie was happy that they had made the decision to stay on.

Louie negotiated with Mr. Conrad a settler and his teenage son who lived down a hollow about a mile above the falls. He would agree to help them raise a small barn for their livestock if they would in turn help Granddad and him build their cabin. They got to work the next day. Granddad brought along his crosscut saw which helped the process to fell trees faster on both sites. Bedia came along with Obed and met Mrs. Conrad, who had her young son. They worked as a team and spent alternating days at each family's camp doing whatever job was assigned to them. Each structure would be approximately 16'x20'. A stick and mud chimney was made at one end of the cabin. Bedia wanted a higher pitched roof for a sleeping loft that ran half the length of the cabin. It took two and a half months to complete both projects and they were at a point where they could finish the final details on their own.

Time flew by working on their new homestead, and what had started out as a temporary camp turned into a home that Granddad and Bedia loved. Obed was four years old and played often with friends at Captain Bull's camp when they went to visit and trade.

More people were coming to the Falls to build their

homes and settle in the area. There was an occasional home that would be burned and lives lost but on the most part the Indians nearby were friendly. Captain Bull wasn't happy to see the white mans increasing interest in the area, although he still kept his promise.

One morning while hunting, Granddad found an Indian who had been attacked by a mountain lion. He had deep wounds and had lost a lot of blood. Granddad gave him water and bandaged his cuts to stop the bleeding. He quickly made a travois to haul him back home. Louie saw them coming and helped Granddad get him to a cot while Bedia boiled water to clean his wounds. Louie interpreted the Indians account of the mountain lion jumping on him and the struggle to get it off, but the story he told Louie next caught him off guard. Later while the Indian was sleeping Louie told Granddad and Bedia a shocking story about their patient.



Years prior, this same Indian was among a group of hostiles who were raiding and massacred people in small camps along the Little Kanawha. One night while camping near the falls they saw glowing lights halfway up the side of the mountain. Quietly they made their way up until they reached a rock ledge, as they looked over the ledge they saw Granddad, Louie and Bedia dancing around a fire pit and chanting in tongues. As they were ready to mount their attack the little orbs of light erupted into a huge fireball that reached out and lunged at them spewing fire that rained down all over them. They ran for their lives down the mountainside hearing It laughing at them as they crossed the river. From that day, the Indians knew to stay clear of these white people because they possessed great powers given to them by "Black God" the Fire Deity who protects them.

Several days later the Indian was strong enough to leave. He thanked all of them for their part in his healing, he told them that he would have died if Granddad didn't find him. Granddad thanked the Indian for not attacking them, because he wouldn't have been there to help. Granddad extended an invitation to visit if he came back that way.



For ten peaceful years they lived near the falls raising their children, homesteading and helping new settlers coming to the Falls. It was never easy and everyday they counted their blessings. Granddad knew things would have turned out quite differently if Bedia didn't have her Christmas Tree that Christmas Eve night!

Epilogue

Although my wife has used her literary license in the telling of this tale, we felt it was important to get it down on paper before the memories faded. The story itself is true. As a matter of fact, my oldest sister turned 90 on December 7, 2019 and recalls as a child playing in caves near the home place that had Indian drawings in them! Sons and daughters were born; marriages took place. Some of the descendants of the Boselys stayed and others moved on; further West to the new frontier. To this day visitors to Braxton County and central WV stand a good chance of running into a Bosely!

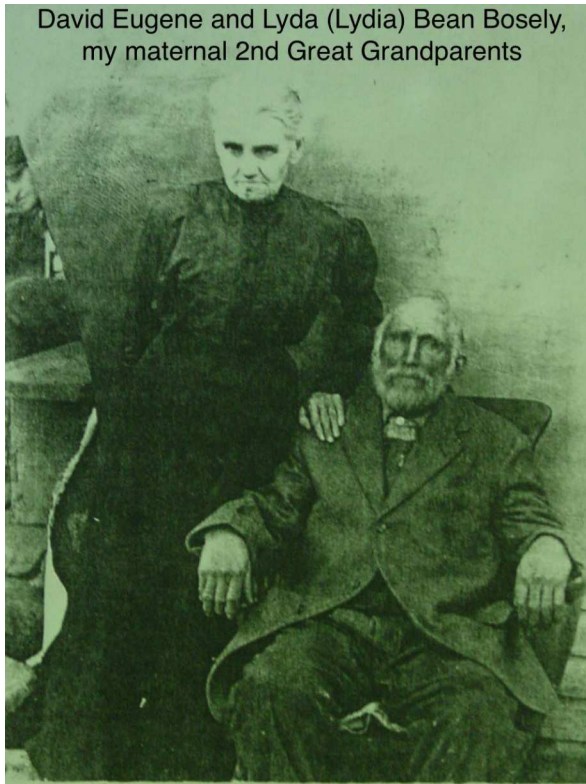
Carrie (Campbell) and John W. Bosely, my maternal Grandparents



John William Bosely, my maternal Grandfather, a self-sufficient mountain man!



David Eugene and Lyda (Lydia) Bean Bosely,
my maternal 2nd Great Grandparents

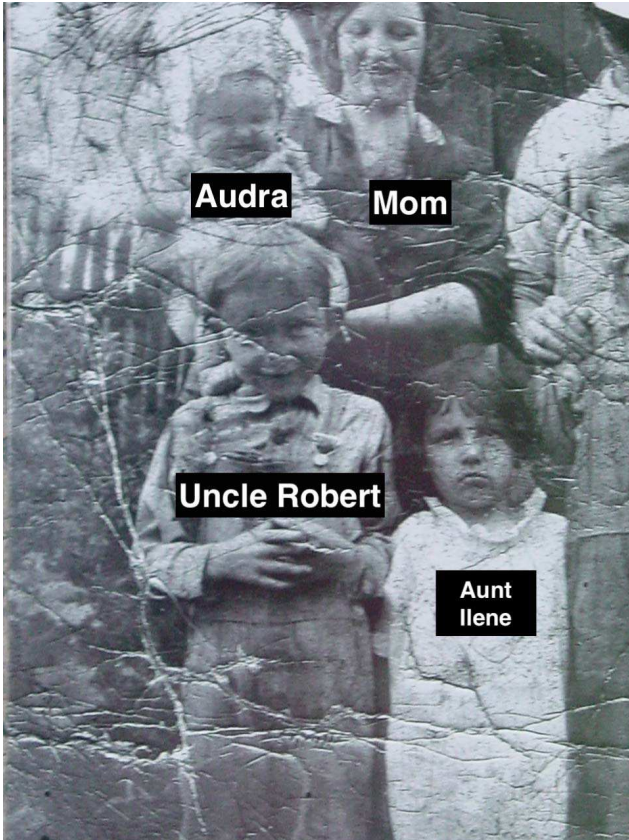




Bosely Family Reunion, 1929 My mother, Gladys (Bosely) Ancell is second from right holding her first born, Audra.



The Bosely's; sometime in the 70's; family reunion, Burnsville WV



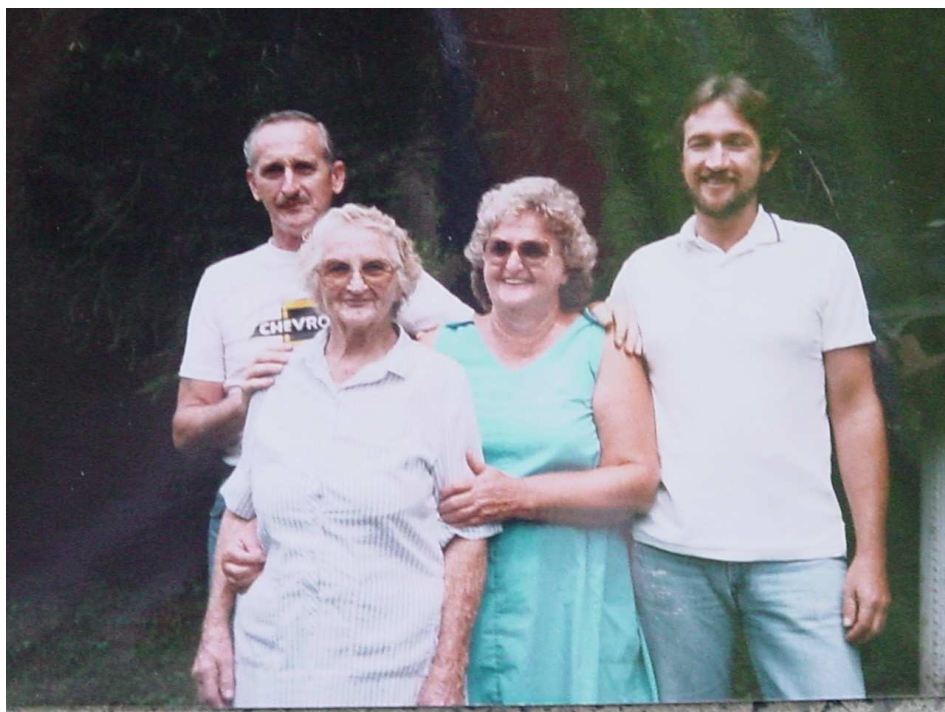
Bosely's and Ancells, 1929, Mom is holding her first born!



Forest Glenn and Gladys (Bosely) Ancell



Glen Ancell, Audra Stalnaker, Dale Ancell, Jason Ancell



From Left, Glen Ancell, Gladys Ancell, Audra (Ancell) Stalnaker, Jack Ancell

Stalnakers and Ancell, Aunt Ilene far right



Family Reunion on Grass Run, Gilmer County, at the Stalnaker residence



We are the chosen in each family
There is one who seems called to
Find the ancestors
To put flesh on their bones and
Make them seem alive again
To tell the Family story and to feel
That somehow they know and approve
Doing genealogy is not a
Cold gathering of facts but
Instead breathing life into all
Who have gone before
We are the storytellers of the tribe

Author Unknown

What is Christmas?

**It's tenderness for
the past, courage
for the present,
hope for the future.**

Agnes M. Pahro

