

## Rural Route 4 Ancestors



**Phillip Burgess**

New Year's resolutions. We make them. And then most of the time we break them. "I'm going on a diet and lose some weight," someone says. "I'm going to exercise more," someone else vows. A third says, "I'm going to quit smoking." And then we lose our resolve as life pushes us down the road.

This year my new year's resolution is simple: I want to learn more about my ancestors. So, the other day, I leave home as the faint red and pink of daylight appears on the eastern horizon. I head to Tails Creek, Georgia, a small community near Ellijay in the foothills of the mountains. I'm uncertain where I'm going and will have to rely on memory to find the homeplace of my great-great-grandfather who carved out a living in the rocky soil there and raised 11 children. Mother Nature has long since reclaimed that parcel of land.

Pa Burgess, my grandfather, had left Georgia in the early 1900s and moved to what I fondly call Rural Route 4 on Sand Mountain in north-east Alabama. The rest of the family stayed.

I stop at the cemetery at Tails Creek Baptist Church, where many of my kin rest on a hillside lined with a few cedar trees. I can barely read the writing on many of the tombstones. My great-grandfather has a huge marble memorial and it notes his service in the Georgia Cavalry in the Civil War.

The white church building sits at the foot of the hill, and behind it is a long table where the ladies of the church share their cooking on special occasions, like Decoration Day and Homecoming. I head up the road, which many years ago was a muddy mess when it rained and a dust bowl when it was dry, and I walk until I find a partially-concealed path covered with vines and bushes. It leads to the old homeplace.

Remnants of an old rock wall are barely visible. The rocks, carefully placed by calloused hands more than 125 years ago, are moss-laden. Wild ferns abound, and the oak canopy above showers the ground with acorns. Although it's now forest, the land around the old cabin was once farmed, with a team of mules plowing the corn and cotton growing in the red soil. There also was an apple orchard and, truth be told, the nearby holler may have even had a still or two where a few gallons of moonshine were made.

(Continued on back)

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# Watts Happening



(Continued from front)

My mind wanders as I stand near the rock wall. Leaves gently float in the breeze and I hear a crow disturbed at my intrusion into his neighborhood. The nearby spring bubbles. It was probably the reason this place was chosen for a cabin. Milk and butter were kept in the spring and the never-ending supply of water quenched the thirst of the large family living in the two-room cabin.

I imagine little children, my ancestors, playing in the yard under the watchful eye of a hound. Callista, my great-great-grandmother, is in the kitchen frying side meat on a wooden stove and Ben, my great-great-grandfather, is chopping wood and stacking it near the dog trot. It's a peaceful, serene setting. But that's not reality.

Life here was hard. Terribly hard. No electricity. No running water. Cold winters. Hot summers. The depth of that hardship is found in the names etched in stone in the cemetery. Of the 11 children, several never saw adulthood.

I dig around in the spring and find a large piece of an old churn. I also find a big nail. Near the rock wall, I find a handmade brick and a lead jar lid. Treasures. Links to my past.

I let go of my emotions. There are tears. In a sacred way, I have connected with my ancestors. I knew few of them, save Pa. But I've heard their stories. And I bear their name. What a precious gift!

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**Turn off the lights:** Turn off all lights while you are not at home to see savings on your electric bill. It sounds simple because it is.

**Use lighting controls:** You can save even more money on your power bill by using motion sensors and timer controls.

**Lower the water heater:** One significant way to reduce energy consumption is by lowering the temperature on your water heater. If you will be out of town for more than a couple days, lower your water heater to the lowest setting.