

## Plain Every-Day People of Rockbridge

Edmund Pendleton Tompkins (1868–1952) was a physician by profession and a historian by passion. He was a founder of the Rockbridge Historical Society and an officer until his death. In his final month, RHS approved publication of his book *Rockbridge County, Virginia: An Informal History*. He had written essentially all of it but had not yet assembled it into final form; that task was



The author

completed by Marshall Fishwick, professor of American studies at Washington and Lee University, who wrote: "If ever a man probed deeply into our county's soul it was he."

This article, consisting of most of the book's last chapter, draws a portrait, as Dr. Tompkins saw it, of a typical Rockbridge farm family's progress in the century and a half up to then.

By

### Edmund Pendleton Tompkins

**I**N ORDER TO GIVE some picture of the people who don't make the pages of the history books, but live full lives on the land, I'm going to sketch the saga of one typical Rockbridge farmer and his family. This little story is the composite of several that could be told from real life.

The ancestors of our subject came to America in the eighteenth century. They were sturdy, hard-working, liberty-loving people who came to take up virgin land in the new world. The family is still living on the land their ancestors broke with a wooden plow. Theirs is not a large holding, about 100 acres, only a part of which is tillable. The soil, being largely clay, is not naturally fertile, but requires very careful farming to maintain in any state of tilth. The history of the farm is largely the history of the man.


The early history of the family in this generation was tragic. Our man was one of a family of six children, four girls and two boys. When he was small the whole family of six contracted diphtheria. In less than a week all four of his sisters died, while he and his older brother recovered. Some years later, however, his brother was taken sick with smallpox. He also died, leaving this one son the only survivor. At the death of the parents he inherited the farm. It has been more than half a century since he followed the last one to the cemetery,

and came back to a lonely home. Only last year he and his wife celebrated their golden wedding. Being mindful of the scriptural admonition: "It is not good for man to live alone," he married a wife who has been to him all these years a devoted and able helper. And around this couple have grown up a sizable family.

Going back a little in time, I will endeavor to give a picture of his boyhood home. The house itself was a comfortable log structure, set on level ground 75 yards from the public road, and near a never-failing bold spring. Life in that household, in those days, partook decidedly of the primitive, measured by present day standards of living. The principal room of this house was a rather large one, which was living



room, dining room and kitchen combined. At one end was an immense fireplace, with stone hearth, on which always burned a cheerful fire. When I say always I mean exactly what the word indicates. Here all the cooking was done, in kettles suspended from a crane, or in “dutch ovens” placed upon the embers. Every day in the year smoke ascended from the wide throat of the chimney, at least three times a day. Never by intention was the fire permitted to go entirely out. When it did die out for lack of attention it was a minor calamity, for someone must be sent to the nearest neighbor to fetch a burning brand by which to rekindle. From this habit of “borrowing” fire came the slightly derisive and wholly hospitable quip: “What’s your hurry – did you just come to get a chunk o’ fire?” whenever a visitor showed inclination to shorten his call. Before the days of friction matches, which we use so constantly and so heedlessly today, it behooved the householder to preserve his embers or a smoldering brand covered in the ashes – else rekindling might be tedious. From this habit or custom amongst people of the olden time came the word “curfew” a bell which was sounded every night at nine o’clock to indicate the fire must be covered (in the French, *couvrir feu*).

 S A BOY I used to delight to visit in such a home, and the cheerful serenity of the household. The spinning-wheel on one side was not there as an antique ornament, but was for actual use; and sometimes as one approached the house he heard the soft hum which told



it was going. How pleasurable to sit and watch the soft rolls of wool lengthen into a long strand in the hands of the spinster, as she walked back and forth, one hand holding the end of the roll, the other holding the small wooden pin with which she rotated the wheel. “Spinster” took its original meaning from the art of spinning; and in this particular instance either its original or its later meaning might apply, for the one doing the spinning in this family often was an elderly maiden aunt. “Aunt Ann,” she was known to all the neighbors, and for many years she made her home with the family.

Besides the interest in spinning, other attractions to a small boy may be mentioned. Aunt Ann knew a small boy’s likings. Usually ginger cakes would somehow appear, or a basket of luscious apples, with the friendly advice: “Pick for a good one.” Another thing often on hand was persimmon beer. It was always forthcoming should one’s visit be in the late fall or winter months. To me it was not an appetizing drink, but many people seemed to find it so. Wool was spun on the “big wheel” in contradistinction to that done with the “little wheel,” which was used only for spinning flax. After the wool had been spun the yarn was dyed with walnut bark, either black walnut which produced a dark brown, or white walnut, which gave a dark yellow shade. Then it was taken to the loom-house, a separate small building standing in the yard, and there woven into linsey-woolsey for the women’s clothing, or into butternut jeans for the men’s.

Money as a medium of exchange in those years was little in evidence. This family was one of independence, or rather self-dependence. They raised on their own land practically all their food. Their wheat was taken to the neighborhood mill and ground into flour for their bread, their corn likewise into meal for spoon-bread or corn-pone. Their garden gave an abundance and a plentiful variety of vegetables. Their livestock grazed on their own hills and furnished all the meat required: sausage, ham, spare-ribs, and side meat for cooking with greens, cabbage and snap-beans. It was dressed and cured, salted, dried or corned, a whole year’s supply at one time. For fresh meat they had chickens and ducks, with an occasional lamb slaughtered and divided among the neighbors, who later would return the favor in like kind. Comparatively little money was in circulation, or was required. Barter at the



neighboring country store of butter and eggs, a few bushels of potatoes over and above what was required at home, sometimes a bushel of dried beans – these articles served in lieu of currency to exchange for sugar and coffee. With them, as with most other agricultural folks, the chief use for actual currency was to pay taxes. Each year as the taxes fell due provision must be made for them. It was no easy task to get together the requisite amount. Occasionally a promising colt was parted with, or an extra milk cow sacrificed for this purpose. But usually by some means or other, the full sum was ready before any penalty accrued.

**I**N SUCH AN ATMOSPHERE the man of our story grew up. His education so far as books are concerned was limited, but his knowledge of farming and good husbandry was rapidly acquired through day-by-day experience in the fields. This is the more remarkable because of the fact that his father was not what would be today called a good farmer, nor a man to learn much from others. He had been accustomed to farm as his own father before him had farmed, and that was really a poor way. He had no farm machinery. It is hardly fair to hold that against him, because very little farm machinery had in that day been invented. He plowed very shallow. His horses were not heavy nor powerful enough to draw a plow set deeply in the ground. He used no fertilizer. As a matter of fact chemical fertilizers were as yet not on the market. He did not rotate his crops, nor sow grass seed to improve the soil. Shallow plowing and no cover crops

permitted much of his soil to wash away in rainy seasons. So his yield from the land grew less year by year, until his average total crop of wheat was not more than sixty bushels.

When the man of this recital inherited the land he had poor land, poorly fenced with ancient zig-zag rail fences. Some fields were badly eroded. His plain log house through age was needing much repair. His chief capital lay in his ability and his willingness to work. He had youth and strength. He was a Rockbridge farmer by inheritance and by experience as well. He knew his own land.

The wife whom he presently brought to his home was likewise a worker: a woman of energy and determination, who was as capable in her house as was her husband in the fields of their farm. They lived in the log house for many years. It was comfortable, and it sufficed for their needs. Not only did she take care of the house itself, but she also milked the cows, churned the butter, tended the poultry, and fed calves and pigs, so that when their livestock went to market, the proceeds brought back were as much hers as his. He recognized fully his wife's part in their livelihood, and always shared equitably with her, to her perfect satisfaction; she never lacked for anything she desired and which she regarded as consistent with their earnings.

So they lived full and profitable years. The family increased in size as one after another of their children were born, and their cares and responsibilities increased. They met these as parents should, and brought up their children in a proper way, admonishing them and training them all through the years of childhood in assuming their rightful part in the family life. The boys, as they came to adolescence, learned to take care of the livestock, and were given small tasks to do. They learned to feed the pigs and calves and poultry, to ride the work horses to water, and to carry into the house firewood for cooking and for warming the house. They unconsciously absorbed knowledge from their father, from the conversations which took place around the fireside, or from neighbors who came to discuss farming matters. As they became older they gradually took on more and more of their share of the labor building fences, chopping firewood, or planting and reaping the crops. The girls were in no degree behind their brothers in learning. The mother taught them not only by word

of mouth but by example the various household tasks. They gradually came to assume the larger share of this burden, and the mother assigned to one or the other of her half-dozen daughters much of the work which she had carried through so many years. But she was not one to sit down and merely direct her daughters. Her abundant energy drove her on. Her small, wiry body never seemed to tire.

By frugality and hard work they forged ahead financially. When money was needed to improve the place, they did not hesitate to spend what was wise. No money went for fanciful things which they could do without for the time being. Year by year the fund laid by for the rainy day grew in size. None of them ever heard of Dickens' pronouncement which he puts into the mouth of Micawber in *David Copperfield*: "Annual income 20 pounds, annual expenditure, 19 pounds 6 shillings, result: happiness. Annual income 20 pounds, annual expenditure, 20 pounds 6 pence, result: misery." Nevertheless, this was their basic economic theory, which stood them in good stead.

This man and his wife are God-fearing, church-going folk. They have ever been mindful of spiritual laws, and strive to live their lives in accordance with Biblical injunction. They have been all their years members of the church. Though some may consider them narrow-minded and sectarian, their philosophy of life has much to commend it. Their example of being law-abiding and self-respecting members of society is one which their fellow men might well follow. They have all their lives worked long hours during the week but scrupulously refrained from all but purely necessary work (such as feeding and caring for livestock) on Sundays. The temptation



to do otherwise is sometimes almost irresistible, as for instance when circumstances of weather threaten to ruin a crop which represents many months of care and labor if left over till Monday. When one sees on every hand practically no observance of the Sabbath by businesses, who assert that the labor of their employees on Sundays is necessary, and when one is surrounded by those who look upon Sunday merely as a holiday in which to "have fun," to work as hard in the effort "to have a good time" as they ordinarily work during the week, the tendency to criticize the rural folk diminishes. This man and his family have abided strictly by the scriptural injunction: "Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work, and rest the seventh day." Who can say that they have lost by so doing?

As the years slipped away the farm came to look better, as in truth it became better. Taking away rail fences may have robbed it of some picturesqueness; but to a farmer straight fence rows, with the undergrowth abolished and the land cultivated up close to the fence, is a far lovelier sight than is the other. Where once had been erosion, and gullies to wash away the soil, were now good cover crops. Needful ditches were kept open, and the banks of them kept free of outlaw growth. Instead of the log house there is now a neat, well-painted frame house, with porches and basement. The other buildings have been re-roofed with more durable material than the old wooden shingles. A telephone connects the family with their neighbors and a radio brings messages and news from distant cities. Electricity from a rural electrification system lights the house. A car sits in the garage. They enjoy some of the luxuries of life, and much of life's happiness has been theirs all through the unfolding years.



Yet they have not been without deep sorrow. The oldest of their three sons had a strong desire to acquire a higher education. He was sent to college. Here he studied for three years, doing well and making a good record for himself. In his senior year tragedy befell: he was stricken with typhoid fever, and lost his life. It was a grievous blow to his parents

and the family. They overcame their grief as best they could, and continued to carry on. None of the other children desired education beyond grammar school or high school. At any rate, the others did not attend any school of higher learning.

The daughters married. Not all the marriages proved successful. If a daughter found the man of her choice unbearable she simply came back, found her old niche in the family circle, taking up her life as much as possible where she had left off when she stood with a man and heard the minister pronounce them husband and wife. So far as any outside the family circle knew, or could judge by what they saw of the family, no difference was ever made as between those who had constantly remained beneath the parental roof, and those who returned to it after an interval away. And there was sometimes an extra child when the daughter, its mother, came back home.



UMMING UP what this man has accomplished in a little more than half a century of living, we find that he started out with a small acreage of poor land, and no farm machinery. His “book learning” was only nominal; the buildings were in need of repair, and the old log house outmoded. As the family increased in size, it was entirely outgrown. His father’s average wheat crop had been only about sixty bushels per year. With no additional acreage he has increased his total yield of wheat to six hundred bushels per year. He has fed and clothed and, so far as they desired, educated his children. He has now good and adequate buildings. His farm is in excellent state of cultivation, and is free of undesirable plant growth. He is a respected citizen of his community, an officer in his church, and a director in a

small neighborhood bank. Also he is looked upon as one of the most expert tobacco growers in Rockbridge county, and nearly always receives top prices on the tobacco market. His tobacco crops are the chief source of his financial independence, and he holds the record for the highest price ever paid for a crop on the Lynchburg dark tobacco market.

This is the story of one of the plain, every-day families of Rockbridge County. Little in it would attract the journalist or historian. In phase with the natural laws of their earth and the spiritual laws of their God, the folks we have described live a good life. Henry Thoreau once accused many of his fellow Americans of “living mean and petty lives, lives of quiet desperation.” The accusations would not apply to the careers we have sketched. They were, instead, lives of quiet fulfillment.

From *Rockbridge County, Virginia: An Informal History*, by Edmund Pendleton Tompkins, M.D. (Marshall William Fishwick, editor). Richmond, 1952., pp. 176–87. The illustrations, not part of Tompkins’s original story, have been added fancifully.

#### FANCIFUL ILLUSTRATIONS

Page 1: Fireplace, Stone House, Rockbridge County, built for Zachariah Johnston, 1797. Photo from the Library of Congress.

Page 2: Spinning wheel, exhibited in “Rockbridge Weavers,” Rockbridge Historical Society, 2024. Photo by Liz Trubeck for “Rockbridge Report” (W&L journalism project).

Page 3: Potter–Wade Mill, on Buffalo Creek near Collierstown. Painting by Gray Dodson, in the Historic Lexington Foundation exhibition “Rockbridge on Canvas,” 2021.

Page 4: Bethesda Presbyterian Church, Rockbridge Baths. Photograph by Bob Hammen, from the church.

Page 4: Rural utility poles. Place and photographer unknown.