

TRADITIONS - AT BAKER SCHOOL

Photos and information as given to Lisa K. Gendron by: **Tara Cope**
Monday, December 24, 2012

Over the river and through the woods, to Old Baker School we go!



For a little over 10 years, my family has traveled from far & wide to celebrate Christmas in a very unique way...at a historic schoolhouse tucked away in the hills of Jefferson County, Missouri.



My grandfather, Clarence Willard Curtis (aka "Papa Bill") & his brother-in-law, John Thomas Hillis (aka "Jay") purchased land on October 6, 1964 from members of the Koch family, which also happened to be home to this old abandoned schoolhouse. Soon after they purchased the land, Jay passed away, and his wife, Velma, sold their half to Papa Bill.



Here is a photo of the Hillis Family. The young woman on the far right is my grandmother, Venita Hillis. The young man in the middle of the front row who is looking down is her brother Jay, who purchased the land with his wife, Velma, & Venita & Papa Bill.

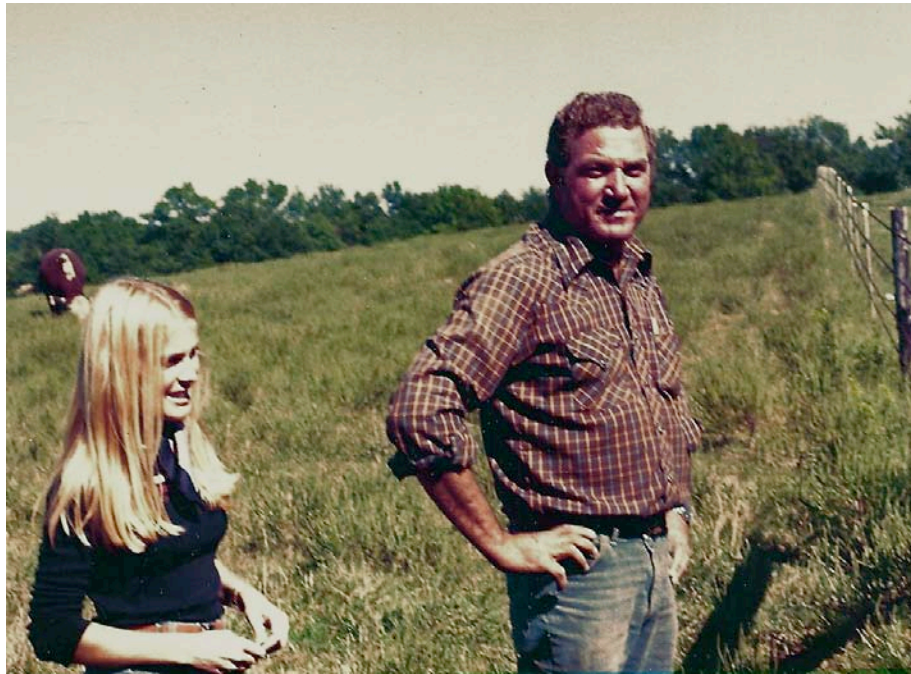
We are not sure who the man on the far left is (wearing black hat). Next to him with the lighter coat is Almeda (she married a Hillis who is not in the photo), then Ervin Hillis is the tall man in back with tan hat & his wife Zonie with the white scarf. Ervin & Zonie are Venita's & Jay's parents, my great-grandparents. The little girl in the middle is Alice Hillis (she later became Alice Bearden). In the front row is Jerry Hillis on the far left & Franklin Hillis on the right.



Papa Bill and his wife Venita

In 1972, Papa Bill started building a home on the 80 acres, & the family would often camp out in the school while the house was being built. They moved to their new home in Hillsboro in 1973, but shortly thereafter, my grandmother, Venita Hillis Curtis, passed away. After she died, Papa started paying all the bills. He overlooked paying the real estate tax on the one acre the schoolhouse sits on, but paid on the other 80. The schoolhouse acre went up for auction and another man bought it!! Papa was so distressed over the whole thing. He was able to buy the schoolhouse back from this man and pay all the back taxes.

Papa Bill was a plumber & from what I recall as a young girl, he stored his plumbing supplies in the schoolhouse. Papa continued to live in the home until he passed away in 1995.



My mother, Commella Jane Curtis Brother and her father "Papa Bill" in the 1970s, taken on the other 80 acres of the property



The little boy hiding in the cattle feeder is Will Curtis.....named after Papa Bill. I've been told that Papa Bill used some old wood that was in a small horse barn next to the schoolhouse to build the cattle feeders on his 80 acres. The old tractor has been on the 80 acres for as long as anyone can remember.

The farm/house is now owned by my mother, Commella Jane Curtis Brother, & the school house is owned by her sister & brother-in-law - Rita & Pat Gilliam.

We're not certain when the school house was built, but we know it was in existence in 1896 & was used until the 1930s when all of the rural county schools consolidated into a new public school system.

The following photo was taken on the front steps of the school and was given to my Aunt Rita by Bernice Kidd. I believe she is the girl pictured on the right.



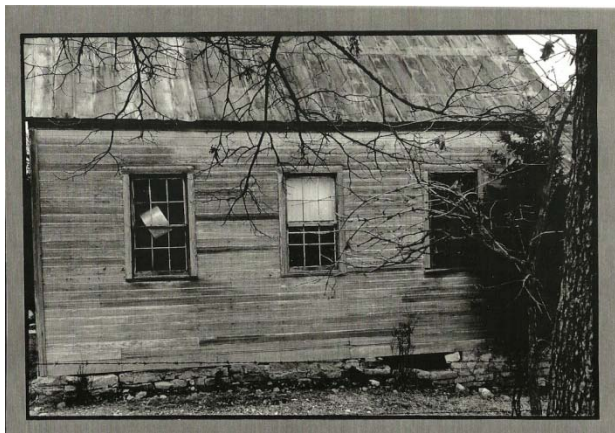
The source of these other old pictures of the school is unknown, but you can see how much the surrounding land has changed over the years.



In the late 1990s, some of my relatives decided to renovate the schoolhouse so we could still gather together at the farm in memory of Papa Bill. The old outhouse was still standing near the schoolhouse around 1981 but it was leaning over quite a bit. It eventually toppled over, and was later replaced when we started meeting there for our family Christmas celebrations.



These photos show before and during the renovations.



The front gate to the property had a sign for "The Ponderosa Farm," when Papa Bill bought it in 1964.



Christmas at the schoolhouse is definitely a one-of-a-kind experience. There is no cable TV, no internet, no telephone. We have electricity for lights & a refrigerator. Uncle Pat is usually in charge of arriving early to fire up the wood stove. By the time we all arrive, he has the place nice & toasty.



We bring dinner, desserts & of course lots of silly gifts. It basically turns into a whole evening of “white elephant” gift exchanging, game playing & story telling. Many of the strange gifts get put to immediate use...



Why all the Halloween related gifts? Well, the farm was also where we had many haunted hayrides each Fall when I was a little girl. The spooky gifts remind us of those good times & allow for great photo opportunities.

Onward we will go to the old schoolhouse to celebrate Christmas a few days later than most of you will, but what a way to ring in the new year! I'm looking forward to taking our baby girl for her first schoolhouse visit. I hope we can continue this family tradition for years to come.



Tara Cope - December 2012

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