



President's Message

Tim Taylor

After the dry and hot summer, I am sure you are looking forward to the Fall season, like I am. Fall brings many enjoyable things and one of them is our ghost walking tours! This year we are working with the Town of Strasburg to provide our tours. They will take place at Hupp's Hill Visitors Center and will be held two evenings! More detailed information is in this newsletter. We will be working with students from Strasburg High School to assist with the ghost tour as we have in the past. It is great to work with the students and share our community's haunted past!

I know Fall just started, but Christmas is around the corner and a great stocking stuffer is membership in the Strasburg Heritage Association! An application to join can be found in this newsletter. Information on what we do along with great historical resources such as archived newsletters, videos, and podcasts can be found on our website! Take the time to learn about our community that is so rich in history!

Have a safe, enjoyable, and relaxing fall season. Sincerely - Tim Taylor - SHA President

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Marvin "Buddy" Johnson

A Little Folk History Johnsons Grocery Store

By
Kathy Kehoe

In the 1960s, there were 3 family owned grocery stores on main street: Bob's on West King, Brill's on East King, and Johnsons in the heart of town. Johnsons Grocery, located right beside the post office, probably did the most business.

I remember as a child, going in with my mother's handwritten list and her carefully counted out dollar bills in an envelope.

She was always specific about the brand: Campbell's Pork and Beans, One loaf of Blue Ribbon bread, One pound of hamburger. Ralph Strosnider at the meat counter in the back, would measure out exactly one pound onto butcher paper, tie it with string, and make a mark on the top so Buddy Johnson would know how much to charge when I got back up front to pay.

Carolyn Keister Baker interviewed Buddy and Ralph on the last day the store was open, for the Northern Virginia Daily newspaper. It was Thursday, February 7, 1991. It was the day Marvin L. "Buddy" Johnson retired and the last of 55 years that Ralph Strosnider worked in the store.

There are a few people still around who remember shopping at Johnson's but nobody could remember when they closed. But Jean Miller Igram saves old newspapers, just like her mother Emma Williams did before her, and when she checked her cardboard box of old NVD's, she found the article about the last day of Johnsons Grocery.

Buddy told the reporter that his parents, Thomas L. and Martha Johnson opened the store in 1931. They started out on the corner of King and Fort in a building that would later (1949) house the *Hometown Restaurant* (and later still the *Hi Neighbor Restaurant*.) (See SHA newsletter Summer 2015).

In 1938, Tom Johnson moved down the street to the brick building beside the brand new post office and Tom, Martha and eleven year old "Buddy" lived in the apartment over the store.

It was June 14th, 1943, remembers John Taylor, when, in the midst of World War II, young Marvin joined the Navy. John was 14 years old and too young to join and so Mr. Johnson hired him to take Buddy's place. John worked after school and on Saturdays. His father had a line of credit at Johnson's and charged all their groceries during the month, paying at the end of the month. John decided to pay the family food bill in full so that his father could then pay cash each time and not owe the store, even for a short time. But his father preferred to do things the way he'd been doing and continued to charge until pay day. So then John saved his pay for the next six months. The family home on the outskirts of town had no electric lights. But just before Christmas of 1943, on December the 23rd, John used the money he earned at Johnsons Grocery and paid \$85.00 to have electricity put in the family home.



Inside the store: Friends William R. and Mary Edmonson Pangle stand in the back next to the Johnson family. Tall Ralph Strosnider stands beside his sister Martha Johnson, who is next to her husband Tom leaning on the counter and their son young Marvin "Buddy".

In the sixties, Johnson had hired teenage boys to deliver groceries to people who didn't own cars or didn't drive. I would call our grocery list into Johnsons on the phone every Saturday morning and before noon, Ralph would pull up out front and the boys would carry paper sacks to the kitchen door. When Kevin Wymer worked there in the 80s in the butcher and meat part of the store, he rode with Ralph to the county dump at least once a week using the truck that Kevin described as "like a rusted 1950s model that seemed like it wasn't going to make it where we were going." The NVD mentioned how Johnsons used to deliver to "35 to 40 customers a day" until it was phased out as it wasn't cost effective.

"My grandmother would order from there and Ralph would deliver at lunch or on his way home. He lived on the next block," said Sheryl Pangle Pifer, who lived on West King Street. "I also remember going there and Buddy would cut the meat straight off the cow while you waited." Others remember Ralph would cut meat while holding a cigarette in his mouth, which in those days, was the norm. There was an ashtray on every store countertop, every restaurant table, and every doctor waiting room in those days. At the front checkout, Buddy stood surrounded by rows of cigarette packs of every brand, one always in his front shirt pocket.

Jimmy Ferguson remembers that Ralph would also butcher wild game in the back. One day when Jimmy was a teenager, he was having fun carrying a realistic 6 foot rubber snake around town to tease people. When he went into Johnsons, he walked straight to the back and laid the snake on the counter in front of Ralph. As any good butcher would do, Ralph took his meat cleaver and chopped that snake into six pieces. He handed it back to Jimmy with a straight face.

John Painter remembers that Buddy also had a good sense of humor when he described how: "My family did all the grocery shopping there. I have early memories of the place. Bud would delight in finding a way to lightly tease me. Evidently he always had the scoop on whatever mischief I had been into the previous week." Small town neighborhood grocery stores were the best places to find out the latest gossip. Then you could repeat it when you ran the rest of your errands.

Sharon Bly Ferguson remembers how one day she was in the store with her mother when a well known town resident came into the store. The woman was wearing sandals and socks, which was considered by teenagers to be a big fashion no-no. Buddy noticed and asked the woman, "where'd you get those shoes?" She said, "I got 'em at the Getting' Store and when they wear out, I'll git more." When Kathy Coffelt heard that story, she said "That is so funny as I haven't heard the expression 'the getting place' for a very long time." Back then it was considered a witty comeback for nosy questions as to whether you got your shoes at the Silco or an expensive department store. It was Buddy's usual jovial teasing and the woman matched his sense of humor. "I loved going in that store," said Sharon, "always fresh produce and fresh meats and lots of laughter."



Butcher Ralph Strosnider working in the meat department.

We were the biggest little supermarket you ever did see," Marvin "Buddy" Johnson told the NVD in 1991. "You name it, we have it."

The reporter interviewed several town residents, including Marie Williams, who was 83 years old at the time, and had been very active in the community. "I'm sick because it's closing. We used to come here when his dad had it." She went on to say that "Their accommodation is just out of this world. You could not match it anywhere.....and...you couldn't get any better meats." Mrs. Maynard Artz, who was described as "another long-time customer" said that she liked a "little family store where you can feel at home." Many town citizens did their weekly grocery shopping at Johnsons. "I would go there with my parents each week to get groceries.", said Jane Rhodes. James Hershey said, "I used to go in there as a kid and Buddy would give me a free slice of honey ham while mom shopped. He was a truly kind and wonderful person."

Cindy Robinson Parker said, "I remember going in there and my aunt Lucille really liked that store and the folks that worked there." Karen Bailey Wisecarver shared: "I remember going there for lunch meat and other items on occasion. And I remember Mr. Johnson himself was very friendly. I would make short grocery runs there for my mom. They had the best bologne. It always seemed cool in there too, no matter how hot it was outside. There were several stores that we older kids would just go in and window shop to get out of the heat."

Icelee Jamerson Nelson lived next door and remembers it cost six cents to get a coke out of the coke machine in front of Johnsons, which they'd use when the store was closed. Icelee said she "lived there for years next door and grew up with Johnson's grocery." Her mother, Jean Jamerson, worked in Johnsons: she always insisted that Buddy check them out when she got groceries for the family so as to avoid gossip. Bill Funkhouser was another employee of the store. "I worked there for both TL Johnson and his wife, and later his son "Buddy" Johnson. I can still remember the layout of the store and have lots of memories from there."

Ralph Strosnider, Buddy's uncle, was 75 years old when the store closed. He had started working there when he was in high school, according to the NVD, to "help out his brother-in-law while he was in the hospital." Ralph was a brother to Martha Johnson and Uncle to Buddy. He "headed the meat department", for "more than 55 years." Ralph told the reporter that they "tried to accommodate people" and "would sell one slice of lunch meat to customers who couldn't afford more."

Buddy and Ralph were well known and respected in our small town where they lived and worked all their lives. The store was family owned and managed from 1931 to 1991. The Johnsons and Ralph Strosnider were loved and appreciated by their Strasburg family who were more than customers, they were the fabric of the community.

Buddy ended the newspaper story with Carolyn Keister Baker with: "Don't know of any place I'd rather live. I've really enjoyed it. I don't have anything to say about Strasburg citizens except good things." Customers told him, "they will miss me and I said I will miss them. And I will." And our small town still miss them. They live on in our memories.



T.L. "Tom" Johnson stands outside the store with local business woman Ellen Crawford Hatmaker.

To Our Readers: If you have memories to add to folk histories, please contact Kathy Kehoe by emailing strasburgheritage@gmail.com, calling 540-465-4185 or contacting any SHA Board Member.

A Little Bit of Folk History

The Folklore Corner

By

Larry Vance

Folklore is a part of our heritage. As has been noted many times, many a legend is born at the Thanksgiving Day dinner table and the village tavern. Quite often the lore is not written down, but transmitted orally. I'd like to share a bit of folklore told in my family.

There lived in the Posey Hollow/Bethel Church area near Strasburg, a woman named Mary Josephine. Her more common name was simply Josey. She and her husband lived in a very modest house with enough land to support a milk cow, a flock of chickens, a vegetable garden, and a black raspberry patch and they grew strawberries and grapes. The best adjective to describe Josey is quaint. She was slender, slightly bent and always wore a scarf. Her frequent lunch was a slice of bread with milk poured over the bread. She and her husband had no children and would hire neighboring youths to help pick berries. They paid them a nickel a quart, but if caught eating one they were not paid. Some of the local children would visit her and ask her to recite a scary story. One of those children reports running home in a state of fright from hearing some of her stories. Another neighbor did not associate with Josey and her husband, declaring "They were way too scary for me." It was believed by many that Josey had extraordinary powers that were sometimes referred to as a hex. For example, men folk would often tease her or make cat calls when she'd be out working in her garden.

In an area where squirrel pot pie and squirrel gravy was a norm, she'd repeat this chant: "Run squirrels run, here comes (insert name) with a gun." That hunter would come up empty. Another hunter, one who had not teased her, could cover the same area and get his limit.

Another "hex" associated with Josey was directing rats to lodge in someone's barn and out-buildings. During her lifetime, the road by her house was a dirt road and people could track the rats back to someone's property. Why? Because that person had heckled her. People knew of her healing powers for common sickness and using a piece of thread and a ring could predict the gender of the unborn. Josey passed in 1959. Over time, the property was obtained by new owners and eventually the house became vacant. The combination of termites and neglect caused the house to seriously deteriorate. The owner decided to have a controlled burn. The structure was set afire and burned to the ground with the exception of her bedroom. The bedroom did not burn and machinery had to be brought in to finish the job and knock down the remaining part of the structure.

On the evening of the fire, a neighbor to Josey's house was sitting in his recliner watching TV. For no reason, the front door opened. "C'mon in Josey, you can live here now." said the neighbor aloud. The neighbor later moved but in his new house, miles away, there were several unexplainable things that happened. He tells of a "handful" of paper money he put on his dresser with no regard to order. The money disappeared. About two weeks later it was back on his dresser, neatly folded and arranged by denomination. This same former neighbor had a special ring he kept in a dresser drawer. It came up missing. He searched over the house to locate the ring, but to no avail. About a year and a half later he noticed something between the covers of his Bible. The ring was in there. Unfortunately, he did not take note of the book in the Bible nor the chapter where the ring had been. He assured me that no one knew of the ring or the money but him. He lived alone and had no visitors who would have arranged the money or planted the ring. As noted above, Josey passed in 1959. Her husband passed ten years later. Both are buried in a local cemetery. The headstone is simple and the site is seldom visited.

STRASBURG GHOST WALKING TOURS ARE BACK!

HOSTED BY THE TOWN OF STRASBURG AND STRASBURG HERITAGE ASSOCIATION

At the Strasburg Visitor and Information Center at Hupps Hill

33229 Old Valley Pike, Strasburg, VA 22657

OCTOBER 21 & 22, 2023

6:00 TO 8:00 PM

FIRST TOUR 6 PM; LAST TOUR 8 PM

GROUPS LEAVE EVERY 15 MINUTES

FREE-WILL DONATION TO THE STRASBURG HERITAGE ASSOCIATION

FAMILY FRIENDLY EVENT! LEARN ABOUT OUR HAUNTED HISTORY!

GHOSTS IN CAVERNS, GHOSTS IN HOMES, GHOSTS EVERYWHERE!

RAIN OR SHINE EVENT

Shenandoah County Historical Society Program

Join us for our November program meeting,

“Shenandoah County Patriots NOT Named Muhlenberg”

Tuesday, November 14 at 7PM at St. Paul’s Heritage Center 106 N. High St in Edinburg.

Author and historian, Gabe Neville, who is an expert about the Revolutionary War 8th Virginia Regiment, will present this program about the many Shenandoah County residents who served as soldiers and patriots. Often overshadowed by famous Patriot Peter Muhlenberg, there were many local Patriots who served in the 8th VA Regiment.

The public is welcome!

A Little History from 1923 compiled by Barbara Adamson

Thursday, December 20, 1923

On This Day in Shenandoah County History: A Moment from the Past.....

The availability of an adequate water supply has been and will always be an important consideration for any community. Notes taken from the minutes of Strasburg's Town Council in 1921 show that a committee was appointed to investigate the possibility of building a water reservoir in the Little Fort Valley and bringing the water to the town via a tunnel to be built through the Massanutten Mountain.

Tunnel construction began in January 1923 above the farm of Robert Hinkins on Sandy Hook and at the same time on the Little Fort Valley side of the mountain. The tunnel is 334 feet from the top of the mountain and is 1664 feet long. The construction of the tunnel proved to be much more difficult than expected because 1625 feet of the rock of the tunnel is of an unusually hard nature called crystallized quartz. On the hardness scale of minerals, diamonds are a 10, steel a 9, and the Massanutten Mountain crystallized quartz is an 8 and a half.

Consequently, the drills used there consumed a great amount of steel and work proceeded slowly. About one and a half tons of steel were used in the drilling and two railroad cars of dynamite were required for blasting. The tunnel is approximately 5 feet wide by 6 feet high and about 2,500 tons of stone were hauled out. Much of that was used to construct the impounding reservoir dam in Little Fort Valley. The new reservoir was designed to hold 20,000 gallons of water.

The Strasburg News reported on December 20, 1923 that the two crews drilling the tunnels, one from Little Fort Valley, the other on the Strasburg side, broke through the last of the rock and met each other. There had been speculation that the two sets of workmen would miss each other, but the engineering work had been so accurate that the two sections were not as much as one foot out of line.

The event was met with much celebration. A dynamite blast was set off to proclaim the news and people soon filled the streets, fire works lighted the heavens and a general celebration marked the completion of the difficult task.

Today the reservoir and tunnel are no longer used; Strasburg citizens use the Shenandoah River as their water source.

--(This moment from the past was presented by the Shenandoah County Historical Society as part of a series on WSVG 790 AM radio in Mt. Jackson, written by Barbara Adamson)—

Note: It has been 100 years since the big engineering feat that brought water to our town. Reprinted from the Shenandoah County Historical Society and the weekly newspaper called Strasburg News.

From the Strasburg News, our weekly newspaper from 1882 until it was incorporated, along with several other area weeklies, into the Northern Virginia Daily. (Strasburg, Virginia and The Keister Family, by E. E. Keister)

TUNNEL WORKMEN MEET IN THE HEART OF OLD MASSANUTTEN

After Eighteen Month's Battle with Unusually Hard Stone, Workmen Blow Down Last Dividing Wall and Connect Two Sections of Tunnel at 6:15 o'clock Wednesday Evening.

At last the miners working in the two sections of the Strasburg Tunnel through Massanutten mountain have met, and all Strasburg is jubilant. A huge dynamite blast set off near the northern entrance to the tunnel shortly after six o'clock last evening, which caused windows to rattle in many buildings in town, proclaimed the news to the citizens of Strasburg that the last of the obstruction wall separating the two sections of the tunnel had been blown down, and that the enlarged water supply project for the town was virtually completed. For several weeks past the workmen have been expecting to meet almost any hour, and consequently the citizens have been in a tense expectant mood for some time past. Some were predicting that the two sets of workmen would miss

each other and that Strasburg might have two tunnels or at least have difficulty in connecting the two sections; but so accurate were the figures of the engineer, N. Wilson Davis, and so well did the contractors, Brady Brothers, carry on under the mountain that the two sections were not as much as one foot out of line. The side walls leveled up almost perfectly and floor of the tunnel was less than a foot off, the northern side being slightly higher, a defect easily remedied.

Shortly after the news was carried to town by the signal blast, plans were set in motion to fittingly celebrate the completion of the difficult task. The streets were soon filled with people shaking hands and greeting each other, all jolly and happy at the good news. Fire works soon lighted the heavens, guns and dynamite charges boomed, whistles were tied down and there was a rush to the stores for tin horns and noise-makers of all kinds. It was a general celebration that lasted for about an hour. Mayor Heater mounted on the Citizen's Fire Company truck with a huge American flag and the big fire fighting machine went clanging through the streets proclaiming the news to those who did not realize what the big noise was all about.

The completion of the tunnel came after a delay of almost one year. Work was started on the project in August 1922, and it was thought that the work would be completed by Christmas, or certainly by early spring of this year. However, the stone in the mountain was so hard and so much of the tunnel went through solid rock of this kind that much more time was necessary to complete the work than was at first estimated.

Tunnel Gigantic Task

The tunnel floor is exactly 334 feet from the top of the mountain and the tunnel is 1664 feet long, approximately 1625 feet of which is through solid rock of an unusually hard nature. This rock is known as crystalized quartz, and is so hard that both the manufacturers of the Sullivan and Cleveland drills sent specialists here to make an investigation to determine why so many repair parts were needed for their machines. Both companies stated that nowhere in America were their drills being used on stone as hard. Geologists measure the degree of hardness and softness of minerals by points. The diamond is the hardest known substance being given 10 points. Steel comes second with 9 points and the crystalized quartz which is the backbone of old Massanutten mountain, after careful analysis by specialists has been given 8 and a half points, which is almost as hard as steel.

Ordinary limestone is at 4 points, so that it can be easily understood why so much steel was consumed by the drills and why the drilling was so slow and difficult. In the neighborhood of 3000 pounds, or one and a half tons of steel, has been consumed in the process of drilling and sharpening during the eighteen months of operation, and two railroad cars of dynamite, cost approximately \$4000 have been used. The section of the tunnel worked from the south, or Little Fort Valley side, is the longer, being 975 feet, and is so straight that one can stand at the point where the last blast was put off and see daylight at the entrance. The north section is 689 feet long and it was in this section that the hardest stone was encountered. An average steel bit will ordinarily drill about 20 feet in limestone, but in our tunnel each bit drilled an average of but four inches. In much of the stone one bit would do but one inch before it had to be resharpened, and many 18-inch holes required from 15 to 20 pieces of steel. The tunnel is approximately 5 feet wide by 6 feet high, and about 2,500 tons of stone were hauled out of the tunnel, much of which was used in building the impounding reservoir dam in Little Fort Valley. This in addition to 9,000 yards of dirt removed from the basin of the huge reservoir. When one considers that the tunnel is about as long as the distance between the depot in East Strasburg to the Peoples National Bank (note: The depot is now the Strasburg Museum and Peoples National Bank was the first name used by First Bank in 1907), that the actual work was limited to two men in each section at a time and these men working under the worst conditions, poor air, poor lights, in mud and dust, and worst of all dealing with stone which tested the drills manufactured by some of the best manufacturers in America, we begin to realize the magnitude of the task, especially since the operations were conducted in an isolated mountain section, into which all materials had to be hauled over almost impassable roads. This stone is not only hard but is also very tough and can hardly be broken with a sledge hammer. It will cut glass and has some of the properties of flint in that fire flies at the slightest stroke of steel, although it is not brittle like flint. Now that the tunnel is completed, it will be best for the town that the stone is hard for there is no need to for bracing anywhere and there will never have to be any expense for that purpose.

Charles Johnson and William Walters Win Bonus

Brady Brothers, the contractors, had offered a bonus of \$10 to the men who broke through the obstructing partition, Charles Johnson of the Fort and William Walters of Front Royal won this bonus. They were working in the north section, and were drilling a hole for a shot when suddenly their drill punched through and they thought at first that the bit had broken. The previous shot had left only a thin wall of only about one foot in the center, and when this shot was fired it did not shake down a single piece of stone on the opposite side nor was there any unusual indication that the wall was so thin. For weeks past the drills could be heard from one side or the other, even when the dividing wall was 180 feet thick, so solid was the partition. During a large part of the time four shifts were worked, a night and day shift on each side of the mountain. Counting the blacksmith and muckers, a force of from fifteen to twenty men were at work most of the time, not counting the extra men who were working on the reservoir.

Already 12,000 Gallons Water in New Reservoir

The reservoir is now completed and will hold something over 20,999,000 gallons. There is now a supply of approximately, 12,000,000 gallons in the reservoir which would last Strasburg about three months, if all sources of supplies were cut off. Then there is now from 25,000 to 30,000 gallons of water running out of the tunnel daily, which can also be run into the system, if need be. The tunnel will be cleaned out and completed by this time tomorrow when the men, who are practically worn out from long hours during the past several weeks of expectancy, will be given a holiday until after the Christmas season. The pipe through the tunnel will then be laid and the new system connected with the old. This can be done in about a week after the first of the year, and then all industries and water users, including the railroad companies, will be allowed to use all the water they want. This will greatly increase the financial income for the town in the course of a few months, and the new system should then automatically pay for itself. The exact cost of the new project is not at this time definitely known, but the Finance Committee of the Town Council will shortly make a report giving an itemized statement of all expenses. The tunnel and new reservoir will probably cost between \$50,000 and \$60,000 and at such a low figure will be cheap as dirt to the town. The tunnel will be open for inspection during the holidays and the citizens of the town, who in reality own the property, are invited to go over the mountain and inspect the entire project.

Planning for Real Celebration

Mayor Heater is now planning a real celebration as soon as the work is entirely completed. This celebration will likely include fire works, a parade, and public speaking by a number of invited guests. Representatives of the State Health Department, the newly organized Shenandoah Valley boosters organization, delegations from Winchester, Harrisonburg, and other Valley towns will be invited to take part in the program, and the celebration will be one of the biggest, if not the biggest, events of its kind ever put off in Strasburg. (Note: 1923)

Have a Right to be Proud

Every citizen of Strasburg and community has a just right to be proud of the achievement, as it undoubtedly marks a turning point in the history of the town. No town can grow to any great extent without plenty of water and electric power. Strasburg, since the advent of the Northern Virginia Power Company and the completion of our new water system, will have both and there will now be inducements aplenty to offer outside interests to locate here. We are just in time to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the movement to advertise and boost the Valley, and every good citizen should pull together to this end. Hurrah for Strasburg! (Note: *The Great Depression was about to start, in 1929, and wouldn't officially be declared over until 1941.*)

(Note: Ironically, now a hundred years later, the town population has grown to more than 7000. The tunnel is no longer used and the town's water comes from the Shenandoah River. With this summer's drought, the town residents were restricted from watering lawns or washing cars in order to save water.)



PO Box 525
Strasburg, VA 22657

Strasburg Heritage Association

Strasburgheritage@gmail.com
www.strasburgvaheritage.org

Annual dues are due in February; if you are not sure if you have paid your dues, please email us.

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