

Revolution, Reaction and Reform: Transformation of the Community of Wheat, by Sarah Littleton, part 2

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on August 19, 2013)

I have changed the title of this series to reflect the title Sarah used in her National History Day paper. As you saw by reading her thoughts in the last *Historically Speaking* column, she has enjoyed a most rewarding experience. Now, for insight into the National History Day competition process as perceived by Mark Littleton, Sarah's dad.

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I have walked the peaceful cemetery at Wheat, Tennessee, and the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima. I have rung both the Hiroshima and the Oak Ridge peace bells. I have listened to the story of an American WWII veteran in Japan whose Japanese wife's father was killed when Hiroshima was bombed.

Their post-war marriage lasted decades, but even in old age her family would not allow him to visit with them during annual treks to Japan. I have seen the gold stars on the quilt at George Jones Memorial Baptist Church, showing names of friends and loved ones we cannot visit because they never returned from war.

I have stood on the USS Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor and observed oil still clearly seeping from the hull. I have listened to clear memories of a hard life in a tranquil place still seeping from Wheat natives. What a treasure that I can see in my daughter some facet of these jewels of human experience being passed to a new generation.

Our youngest child, Sarah, in the eighth grade at the time, announced one evening in the fall of 2011 that she would be in a year-long school history project called National History Day. It would culminate in a research paper competition the next spring.

My first thought was, "Wow. Better you than me." It brought memories of my two most dreaded experiences in school: writing papers and anything related to history. I was the eternal procrastinator on long projects and although I made good grades in other topics, my worst-ever grade in school came from a history class.

I became more intrigued when Sarah expressed an interest in writing about World War II. She said that her broad topic was "Revolution, Reaction and Reform." I casually mentioned that she was in the shadow of one of the most revolutionary and fascinating aspects of that war, the creation of Oak Ridge, TN.

I explained how it had a direct impact on our family via my dad and that she might investigate the reaction in East Tennessee. Little did I imagine where that brief conversation would take her, nor how her paper would become a once in a lifetime experience for our whole family.

I have heard Wheat community stories for as long as I can remember. My granddad, Martin Littleton, was the oldest of ten siblings. One died as a boy, but I knew or at least met the other nine. They all lived in Wheat in their childhood as did most of their spouses. Family gatherings would often find someone reflecting on the area.

Our Littleton ancestors lived in east Roane County around the Cave Creek community from the late 1790's through the early 1900's. My granddad and a few siblings even attended school at New Midway. Their clan's patriarch, George, owned a portable sawmill and would buy timber rights or tracts of land. It is presumed that this livelihood caused the move to Wheat.

George died in 1939 leaving his widow, Della, raising the children who were not already married. Some of the brothers and brothers-in-law served in World War II. Della and remaining children moved to Knoxville in the

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summer of 1942. Martin, married with two children, had taken up the sawmill business and continued to live in Wheat, near Poplar Creek, until displaced by the Manhattan Project.

Sarah had never heard of Wheat nor attended a Wheat Homecoming. The reunion has occurred on the first Sunday in October since 1932, interrupted only by World War II. I knew that if Sarah could see the community and meet former residents, it would give a tangible connection to her topic.

Sunday, October 2, 2011, was a crisp, autumn day as we drove to George Jones Memorial Baptist Church, the only Wheat structure now extant. We arrived to find a smaller gathering than I expected, but familiar Wheat family names like Magill, Irwin, Watson and Arnold, among others, on hand. I pondered the irony. When I was a boy we did not often go to the Homecoming. Even the few times we did, I was not keen on wandering an old church house and cemetery, listening to elders talk about what was and used to be. Yet, now I was prompting Sarah to attend and wishing that I had recordings of all those faded conversations.

Sarah had already interviewed her Papa (my dad), James Littleton, who was aged nine when he left Wheat. We video recorded that interview and the other personal interviews, capturing timeless footage along the way, as two of Sarah's primary sources later died in 2012.

One of those was Don Watson, who told us a new story about our family. Don and one of my granddad's brothers, Billy, hit head-on in a ball game at Wheat. The trauma to both of their skulls was severe. Don survived, but Billy later died. Billy was the only one of his ten siblings that I never met and I had never known why he died as a boy.

The other interviewee who died was my great-uncle Boyd Ed Littleton, who along with his remaining sister Hazel Simmons met with Sarah in November of 2011. His testimony spanned boyhood at Wheat, landing on the beach at Normandy, fighting through France to build a bridge into Germany and returning to briefly work for the Clinton Engineer Works (CEW) in what had been his home community. He showed Sarah and her sister his CEW pin and gave the girls some cautionary advice about boys, behavior and teen-age attire before we parted for the evening, our last time to ever visit with him.

Sarah's interviews revealed a theme consistent with my memories of persons from Wheat. She uncovered no anger. Historians have recorded tenuous incidents of owner reaction to the loss of private property for Oak Ridge, which is understandable.

Sarah, however, was never met with a harsh response to her stock question, "How did you feel when you had to move?" What she did find were samples of nearly every other emotion; sadness, disbelief, resignation and shock.

As I watched and heard these discussions, it was the absence of anger that made the other emotions all the more poignant. These people were citizens who were convinced that individual suffering could be and would be for a greater cause.

Sarah had a 2,500 word limit for her paper which initially sounded generous, but packaging all she had learned about Wheat soon became quite a chore. Her teacher, her mom and I all variously critiqued her drafts in the quest to stay under the word count. I even called National History Day headquarters to understand how firmly the limit was enforced (reasonable discretion applies, as it occurs.)

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Her final paper and her first draft, however, were remarkably similar, showing that she got the essence of her message correct on first attempt. In her eight years of school work, she had never attempted anything on such a scale and her mom and I were duly impressed.

On April 23, 2012, our ride home from Nashville was quiet. Sarah had moved beyond her region to compete at the State level, but her real goal was National History Day in June at the University of Maryland. Whether her motivation was solely for the competition or to also negotiate a visit to Georgetown Cupcakes in Washington, D.C., still remains a closely guarded secret!

The State National History Day judges were intrigued by her work, but ultimately Sarah was only chosen as an alternate. One of her classmates (competing in a different category) did continue, which was a bittersweet cap to the event. Her mom and I were thrilled that Sarah made it to State level, but we quietly shared her disappointment.

I was disappointed enough that just days later, when we learned that someone had dropped out and Sarah could go to nationals, that it was not just a two day event but four, that hotel prices in DC are outrageous, that we would have to drive because we could not find cheap airplane tickets, and that DC parking limitations mandated that we ride the train everywhere we went...I didn't complain one bit.

Not even when I discovered that the trains go nowhere near Georgetown Cupcakes and I would personally have to navigate Georgetown traffic for the privilege of buying their overstuffed confections. That's what Dads do.

Mark E. Littleton

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Now for Sarah's paper on Wheat...the next installment will introduce that excellent piece of work to you.



Mark and daughter, Sarah Littleton
National History Day competition brought lasting results to them and their family