



Origins: An Elliston Memoir

by Guy St. Clair

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If the memoir writer is from a story-telling background (as I am), he makes a very happy discovery when he realizes that much of what he wants to share comes from what he has learned from others. And if the tellers of those stories told their tales from the perspective of earlier times (or if what's being told took place in earlier times), it makes a certain kind of sense to bring those into the memoir. They are, quite literally, part of the author's own memories.

That's what happened here. This memoir was intended to be – and still will be – about one part of Guy's life. I am sharing thoughts about one specific period, but the telling must of necessity include much that took place several generations before my birth and my earliest childhood years. Indeed, as the memoir concludes, it will turn out that there isn't that much about me and my own life. I very naturally recall very little of what happened in my first few years.

Nevertheless, I have a firm belief that what happened in our family before I was born influenced my own life and that of many others I knew and, indeed, might influence the lives of others.

For example, Andrew and I often refer to this memoir as "Elliott's book," since Elliott Gaillard Villani – our great-grandson, the son of my granddaughter Madeline St. Clair Villani and her husband Will – was born in 2019. If the content here is thought of as being written for Elliott (and for any other descendants), he will have, when he is 25 in 2041, information about this side of his family going back nearly 200 years, since the earliest date referred to here is 1846, the birthdate of John R. St. Clair (October 15, 1846-January 10, 1912, my Grandfather Noah's father.

Having said that, much of my purpose then becomes one of providing background and giving attention to some of what took place in our family in earlier times. Later periods of my life will be addressed separately in other accounts if I choose to write them. In this memoir, I wish to focus on the life our family lived during the time before my birth and during the first few years I was with them.

Elliston, Ironto, and Lafayette

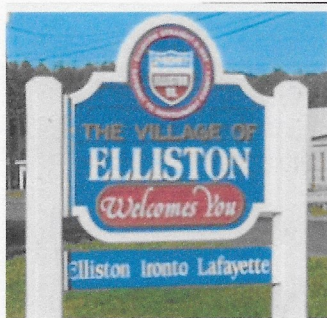
So the subject of this memoir is really about the environs in which Guy was brought up and, to some extent, to his life as a young boy growing up in a small community in the country near Elliston, located in Southwestern Virginia. The story is, notably, enhanced with considerable background stories told to me when I was young.

I did not live through many of them or experience them directly in my early life. Still, with what I was told and, thankfully, with some of the stories illustrated with photographs using several old and battered photographs from family collections (and these even connected with other old photographs published digitally in a family album linked with this memoir), there is a story. It's a story I've been asked to tell, about what it was like for Guy as a young boy to grow up in a small community in rural Virginia.

The community – a group of neighbors living in houses fairly spread out from one another – were all connected by a highway (now called the Old Roanoke Road), with land on either side of the highway, then U.S. Route 11). The road ran between the South Fork of the Roanoke River, about a quarter of a mile to the south and on the other side of the river (where we played as children) was the foot of a small mountain, one of the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

To the north, Route 11 ran vaguely parallel to the Norfolk and Western Railroad, with the tracks built in a deep ravine that was dug to expedite straight tracks for trains – both long freight trains and passenger trains – traveling in both directions, to the east toward Roanoke and to the west toward West Virginia.

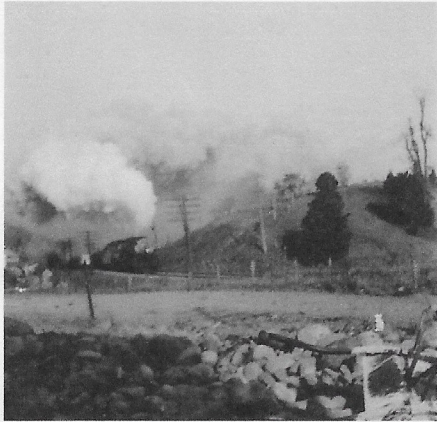
The community, as I've said, was near Elliston, in those days not much more than a village, located about 35 miles southwest of Roanoke. Guy's paternal grandparents seem to have settled in "their" community sometime around the turn of the last century about one mile east of Elliston itself. The couple, Noah Hedrick St. Clair (June 8, 1879 – December 25, 1947) and Bertha Mae Wells St. Clair (March 9, 1877 – January 22, 1954) built their home there at the top of a small hill that rose up to the north of a curve in the road, between the highway and the tracks of the railroad in its deep ravine. When other families later joined them and built homes on neighboring properties, the neighborhood became a community,



As for the little village of Elliston, it is in Montgomery County, Virginia, between the city of Roanoke and the town of Christiansburg (the county seat) in a part of the state known as Southwestern Virginia (not West Virginia, despite what the phrase sounds like when natives say "Southwestern Virginia." They seem to be saying "South West Virginia" but West Virginia is some distance away and our people are always being called on to correct other people when they mishear what is said).

Not surprisingly, the railroad tracks running along my grandparents' community is a strong presence in Elliston, separating the northwestern part of the little town from the rest. Route 11 further divides the town, creating two distinct neighborhoods, "Oldtown," which formed along the Valley Road in the 1850s, and "The Brake," a predominantly African American area developed after the Civil War.

Originally known as Big Spring Depot, Elliston was an important stopping point on the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad (later the Norfolk and Western). The story is told that in the late 1880s investors hoped to create a large industrial and railroad center in Elliston, to be known as Carnegie City. Instead, the railroad chose the Roanoke County town of Big Lick (so named because the salt springs provided large blocks of salt which attracted animals from the countryside). Big Spring Depot was later named for Major William M. Ellis, a local landowner.



Steam train coming into Elliston (about 1935 or so)

Later, Big Lick (which was renamed as the more appealing Roanoke) was chosen as the location for the railroad's main shops, and Elliston never became anything more than a stopping point for trains going through. Nevertheless, I remember the depot well, and even several years later, when I was at "The University" – yes, in those days the University of Virginia was still referred to that way by Virginians – I for some reason had to return to Elliston. I came by train from Charlottesville (I think it was 1959 and I came home for the funeral of Uncle Mike, my father's older brother), getting off the train at Elliston to be picked up by my father at the depot.

No longer talked about, as far as I know, there were two enormous resort hotels in Elliston (both long gone, and I have no idea of what the hotels were named). Being in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the area was nicely cooled in the hot summers, being about 1,200 feet above sea level, and with undeveloped farmland and other properties, the area was full of many large forests with green trees. So the resort hotels obviously attracted 19th century people of means to Elliston.

One of the hotels was very grand, way far out on a road that ran parallel to The Brake. The road, now called Calloway Street, later merged with The Brake (now called Brake Road) and that road went across what might have been the South Fork of the Roanoke River. The resort had been built at the foot (or perhaps farther up – I don't remember) of one of the Blue Ridge Mountain foothills, small rises in the terrain just like those to the south of my grandparents' community farther east. When I was a child, the hotel's derelict remains could be seen across the river when we drove into that area, but there was no bridge across the river, since whatever bridge that had been there had long been neglected and had fallen. Brake Road now turns west at that spot and goes off in a different direction.

The other resort hotel was actually in Elliston, right next to the railroad tracks. When I was growing up some parts of this huge building were still in place, even though the structure was mostly unoccupied. Still, some spaces on the ground floor had businesses, a couple of small stores of one sort or another, including the local barber shop that accommodated the men and boys of our family.

In addition to Elliston, another place to consider is a community – still on the map – called Ironto, about 7.5 miles from Elliston. This place was where my mother was brought up, but as with the young Guy, she grew up in the countryside and not in a town or community called "Ironto" (I do not recall Ironto as a town or village but



Ironto VA (about 1920)

enables the reader to feel that he or she is part of the story being told. And having known Mildred so well, the one thing of which I am sure is that – as she wasn't a pretentious lady – she would probably not be comfortable having her book classified as part of a genre so grand as a *roman à clef*. In consideration of that, I'll take a different route and use slightly different phraseology, to think of what Mildred wrote as what I would call a fictionalized memoir.

Throughout her life, Mildred gave a great deal of thought to many different subjects, so it is not surprising that – as she grew older and became more skilled as a writer – she clearly took a great deal of pleasure in her writing. Her son certainly takes after her in this respect.



Mildred Elizabeth Austin St. Clair

Mildred was an extremely creative person, a wonderful storyteller, and in her writing – her amazingly well-written letters, her poetry, reports and organizational materials for different organizations (she often held volunteer positions in her church, mostly having to do with clerical activities and including a considerable amount of record-keeping), and all the other high-quality written materials she produced – she displayed exceptional talent and awareness. Indeed, most of my references here come from the written family documents she compiled, including a light tan school notebook into which she described her side of the family.

Similarly, and not to be dismissed lightly, are Mildred's many letters. She loved to write letters (as do I), not just to me but to many other people as well, both friends and relations. And it's probably obvious and not worth mentioning, but I'll say it anyway: Mildred's letters to me while I was attending the University of Virginia and after I moved to New York City to build a life here were invaluable. I'm not sure I could have made my way without her carefully composed letters, sharing not only her affection for me as well as her advice.

So it was not a surprise to us, her children, when we learned that in the late 1960s after having moved to Florida to be closer to her two daughters and their families, Mildred became more serious about her writing. Being partially blind, she became active with a local organization for the visually handicapped (The Channel Markers for the Blind, in Clearwater, Florida), learning and then teaching Braille. She also, being only partially blind, could read, and as she loved reading aloud (as we children learned as we grew up), she greatly enjoyed recording listening material for other people who were visually handicapped. Then, when she discovered that some members of The Channel Markers were putting together a class for writing, she couldn't resist. She attended classes for several years, often taking along a talented pre-teen granddaughter who also ("like Nana") wanted to learn how to be a good writer.

With *And Life Went On: A Virginia Tale*, it seems to me that she found herself able to tell a story she had wanted to tell, and to tell it in a way that would make it more satisfactory to herself and to her readers. She tells the story and describes the people, and the tale that emerges

probably comes out the way she would have liked it to have happened. Or perhaps she simply wanted to tell the story but change the background and the personalities of people being written about and it was, as she recorded her thoughts, true to what really went on amongst the characters in her book, her fictionalized memoir.

It was an exceptional effort, and she did it for a very real reason, stated explicitly on the first page of *And Life Went On: A Virginia Tale*.

This book is dedicated to the memory of a way of life-long past, but which is representative of traditional values set forth by those who worked so hard to make them take root and grow in this great country of ours. We cannot call back this way of life, but we can ever treasure these values and the memory of those who lived by them.

A Slightly Different Beginning

My Elliston memoir begins with a fact I am fairly confident doesn't start any other memoir: I was born in a garage.

No, not the typical garage standing next to a family home, or even an attached garage in more modern one-floor house with a 1950s-type "breezeway" between the house and the garage. This garage was a business, located as I said in a community just a mile or so east of Elliston. Our family's move to the garage (well, to be more precise, to rooms above the garage) came about from the effect of several different situations.



Guy standing at his birthplace in undated photograph (probably about 2005 or so).

If they are tied together, they probably make up something of a "plot" for this memoir, for I do not really have that kind of story (that is, a tale with a "plot") to tell. I'm not sure there is really a story here, a telling in which there is a plan, scheme, or otherwise literary or dramatic "direction" to unfold for the reader. Nevertheless, because Guy's early life and the ideas attached to growing up in Southwestern Virginia for a fellow who has lived fifty-three years in New York seems to be of interest to (and has been kindly requested by) some friends, colleagues, and relatives, perhaps simply the unfolding of the facts as I know (or recall) them is enough of a storyline or plot.

We moved into the garage, as I say, as part of a situation in which our family found itself. Mildred's background and family (told in more detail in the captions of the photographs in the family album at <https://adobe.ly/3k6EL01>) were humble but, at the same time, rather comfortable (at least as we often think about such things, when we are speaking about "working people"). I don't know if her mother, Alma Belle Hall Austin (December 13, 1886-February 28, 1912) had ever aspired to any career or line of work or if, like many young

women of her day, she would simply have waited until she met the right man and would live her life with him and, of course, be supported by him.

The Austin Family



Alma Belle Hall

As it turned out, it was a sad story, for Alma died very young. She married Stafford Rowe Austin (December 16, 1883-August 23, 1921) about 1909 (the exact date is unknown), when she was 23. He was three years older than she. Interestingly, although they were three years apart in age, their birthdays were close together, with Alma Belle's being December 13 and Stafford Rowe's being December 16. Another interesting family connection is that Alma was a sister of Pearl Hall Reese Austin, the wife of Stafford's younger brother, Frank E. Austin.

According to the 1910 census Alma and Stafford Rowe were living with his parents as of May 13, 1910, slightly less than three months after Mildred Elizabeth Austin had been born. How long they remained with his parents isn't known. At the time Stafford Rowe was earning his living as a timekeeper for the railroad.

At 25, Alma died of tuberculosis (TB), just ten days after Mildred's second birthday. At some point, possibly even before Alma's death since TB was such a contagious disease, Mildred was taken to live with her maternal grandparents, Nancy Mary Walthall Hall (October 25, 1855-January 23, 1937) and John Ballard Hall (July 2, 1859-December 6, 1931).

Mildred called these grandparents "Ma Hall" and "Pa Hall" and they lived nearby in the Ironto area of Montgomery County. John worked as a well-regarded tenant farmer who was several times during his life offered better terms and living conditions by large landowners. As a result, they found themselves moving house from time to time, with their young granddaughter growing up with them. If it was, in fact, a disruption (if it can be called that – Mildred would probably have called each move an "adventure"), the disruption obviously never bothered her, as she often remarked and later wrote about how each time they moved, the life she had with Ma Hall and Pa Hall was better than it had been in their previous home.



Stafford Rowe Austin

After Alma died in 1912, Stafford Rowe was still living with his parents, William Austin (January 8, 1856-July 26, 1933) and Nancy "Nannie" Dent Bradbury Austin (June 2, 1848-October 25, 1931). Or perhaps he was there again, if he and Alma had lived elsewhere before Alma became ill and died. As the story is told in Mildred's *And Life Went On: A Virginia Tale*, Stafford Rowe had also taken on the role of foster father to a small child (an infant of four and one-half months) just two years younger than Mildred.

With his own parents to help (and possibly with some help from his three living siblings, although some of them were probably busy with families of their own), he could be in some way a father to the little girl. She had been orphaned when her parents were tragically killed in a horrific train accident. Her parents were Frank E. Austin (March 3, 1887-July 30, 1912) and Pearl Hall Reese Austin (birthdate unknown). And, as mentioned above, Frank was Stafford Rowe's younger brother and Pearl was Alma's sister.

The child – Frances Virginia Austin – and Mildred became close friends, and being together whenever possible, they were devoted to one another for the rest of their lives. In fact, Mildred once wrote about the little girl that “she was as near to a sister that I ever had.”

Most of us in the family remember her as “Aunt Virginia.” Although we never saw her, as she had moved west sometime in the 1930s (or perhaps during the war years), she lived out her life in Long Beach, California. Her name was Frances Virginia Austin, and before she went west, Virginia (as she was known) had married Paul Bess. But that marriage had not worked out. In long Beach, she married again, and that marriage did not last either. She continued her life as Virginia Lehman, so I presume she continued to use her second husband's surname. She and Mildred kept up a close correspondence for the rest of their lives, writing one another several times a year and even sending packages of clothing back and forth to one another, things which each of them had lost interest in or no longer needed.

Stafford Rowe had apparently left the railroad and had gone to Salem (a small town about 15-20 miles away, just a few miles west of Roanoke), to be in Salem during the week. The Roanoke Business School was there, and he boarded during the week as he studied to become a bookkeeper or some type of business manager.

Stafford Rowe apparently became successful (although we don't know the name of any employers for whom he worked), for he built up his resources and over the years he was able to purchase two large land holdings not far from where the two sets of parents – his and his deceased wife's – lived. As it turned out, the records note that the property excluded the land on which a local church, Hall's Church and its cemetery, were located, although it was close by. It



Hall's Church, Ironto, VA (about 1930)

included some land adjacent to the church's property, and some years later a large tract of that land was donated by Mildred to the church (and accepted with the understanding that any of Mildred's descendants could be buried at Hall's Church).



View from Hall's Church (not our house in the distance – this house was where Aunt Mary Moses lived and raised her family)

A portion of Stafford Rowe's estate was left to Virginia, and it appears that later in her life she sold it to Mildred, who had inherited the rest of Stafford Rowe's estate. So Mildred ended up with some 356 acres. Part of the property was farmland, presumably rented out to other farmers or worked by tenant farmers like Pa Hall, with whom Mildred lived. The property also included much timber, which would prove profitable during the Great Depression. Mildred often spoke about how grateful she was that the family had had the timber to fall back on.

Curiously, as we were growing up, the inherited properties were hardly ever discussed, although county records show that some of them were sold from time to time. There was sometimes "talk" about Mildred's properties having been "lost in the Great Depression," but that does not seem to have been the case – even though some of her land was sold – since there were occasions when we grew as a family that expenses were required and the money was found, probably from Mildred's side of the family. But that, of course, is only speculation.

Even so, Stafford Rowe, too, sadly did not live a long life and Mildred lost him when she was only eleven years old. He became ill in the great epidemic, but he recovered from the so-called "Spanish flu." But his recovery was not complete, for he then developed tuberculosis and was occasionally required to go away to live for a while in a sanatorium, as TB recovery hospitals were referred to in those days. He died when he was just shy of 38 years of age, leaving Mildred in the care of her maternal grandparents and, as she often described in her own book, a close relationship, including many visits, with her paternal grandparents in their home.

The St. Clair Family



Frank Lee St. Clair

My father Frank, too, had come from a long line of hard-working people. He was the son of Oscar Hedrick St. Clair (June 8, 1879-December 25, 1947) and Bertha Mae Wells St. Clair (March 9, 1877-January 22, 1954). I have little about the family background, but we know that, in the late days of the 19th century and the early days of the last century, many of the men in the family worked for the railroad, probably the N&W, and the connection with railroad work was an important influence in the St. Clair family. Frank loved anything having to do with the railroads, and he and Uncle Mike (and "Big Uncle Mike," Bertha's brother whose career had been in the railroad business) would spend hours talking about the railroads.

Frank had five siblings, born between 1901 and 1916: Bessie, Oscar Hedrick (known as “Mike”), Pearl (who lived only 11 months), Mabel, and Leonard. As I mentioned early, U.S. Route 11, at that time a small two-lane paved road, veered slightly to the right on leaving Elliston and went on for a way, curving back to the left as it approached the bridge crossing the railroad. At the curve – at the bottom of the little hill where Frank’s parents built their house – the highway then moved toward a bridge built over the railroad. That bridge, removed sometime after Interstate 81 was built in the mid-twentieth century, later made the road a dead end, and the homes located there can now only be approached from the Elliston turn-off at the eastern entrance to Elliston.



Daddy's Family: From left
Front: Frank, Mabel, and Leonard.
Back: Noah, Bertha, Bessie, and Oscar

In later years, on increasingly separated Virginia visits, I seem to have heard the community referred to as “St. Clair Hill,” since there were for many years several St. Clair families and relatives there. To be honest, I do not remember the community ever being called that when I was a child.

About 100 feet (a guess) before the bridge, was the little hill on which Noah and Bertha built their house, up a low rise turning to the left from the highway, with a steep drive going up to their house. After Uncle Mike and his wife Ola married, they built a house that came close to the railroad bridge, with the railroad running behind their house, as it did behind Noah and Bertha’s house. There was a small field, about half an acre, between their house and Noah and Bertha’s house, just as there was on the other side of their house, as the hill dropped off in the direction of Elliston.



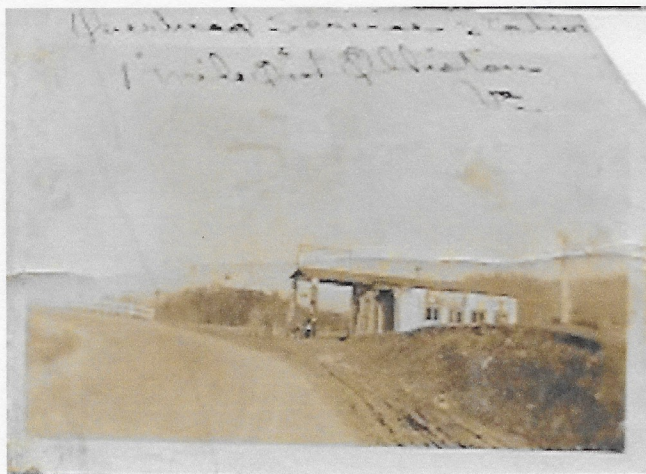
“The house that Daddy built” nearing completion. It was down the hill from Granddad Noah and Grandma Bertha’s house. The ESSO sign of the service station can be seen in the distance, on the other side of the road in the right background.

It was below this second field that Mildred and Frank built their home, starting sometime in the 1930s I believe. Both the house my grandparents built and the one Uncle Mike and Aunt Ola built had – strongly imbedded in my memory – very large grape arbors, many fruit trees and other trees, all providing splendid shade on warm summer days. Indeed, I

have another big memory, this one probably weird, I suppose: as a youngster I loved to climb a particularly easy-to-climb big tree at Grandma Bertha’s house and position myself in the branches with a book, to read all by myself, without anyone being able to find me.

And there was another related family in the community. Aunt Mabel and her husband, Wallace Hall, lived on a big piece of land across the highway from Uncle Mike and Aunt Ola, and as he was in the fuel oil and gasoline business, the great field on the back part of their land held enormous tanks, wonderful for my cousin Danny (their son) and me to play amongst, and all destined to be implanted deep in the ground when customers required having them installed.

The Overhead Service Station (“the filling station”)



Overhead Service Station, near Elliston, VA (about 1920 or so)

Sometime around 1920, Granddad Noah went into business for himself (he had earlier been with the railroad, I believe). He purchased a large piece of land across the road from his and Grandma Bertha’s house. There he opened a gas station, one which, at one point in its existence, was an ESSO station (the early name for Standard Oil Company retail businesses), as shown in one of the old family photographs we have (above). From the condition of this photo (left), this is a very early picture of the service station.

In those days these gas stations were, I believe, simply called “filling stations,” but I’m not sure about that usage. I remember that it was the term used to describe such businesses when I was growing up, and in fact Granddad’s business (which also included a sort of small grocery store selling all sorts of items) was called the “Overhead Service Station,” so named because it stood at the top of a hill along Route 11, but everyone always just referred to it as the “filling station.”

The filling station was a building spread out on the site, for for there was an addition to the actual business part where the gas pumps and the shop were located. The remainder of the one-floor building had a large group of rooms to the side and back of the filling station (shown in this later photo from when the property was no longer a filling station). Presumably these rooms were put in as workshops or storage areas but other rooms, especially in the back of the station, were arranged so they could be lived in, probably added simply as a convenience or in anticipation of being used as rental apartments if the need ever came up.

For Frank and Mildred these rooms turned out to be a fine example that fate was on their side, for in the summer of 1935 they suffered a disastrous fire that destroyed their house (over in the Ironto area, near Hall’s Church). The fire happened on a Sunday, while Mildred and Frank and



Filling station with add-on rooms

Baby Frankie were attending a Sunday School picnic at Dixie Caverns, a popular park and picnic area farther down Route 11 between Elliston and Salem). Frankie is my older sister Frankie Leigh (named for our father), and she had just been born in 1934. After the picnic, they were returning home when, as they drove down a hill about a mile from where they lived, they could see off in the distance that their house was on fire.

Luckily, Nancy Mary Walthall Hall, Mother's maternal grandmother – who had brought Mildred up – was not at the house. Pa Hall had died some years earlier, and Ma Hall, being an invalid, was mostly bedridden. After Pa Hall's death, she moved in with Frank and Mildred, so she could be cared for.

On the day of the picnic, Ma Hall had been taken to a neighbor's house for the day. Other neighbors discovered the fire and tried to rescue the house, but it was not possible. Because Ma Hall was bed-ridden, the house's front parlor had been made into a bedroom for her, and the machine-carved American Victorian bedroom furniture from that room had been saved, but one of the marble tops of the large dresser had broken into two pieces when thrown from the front porch of the house to save it. Still, the three pieces of beautiful walnut bedroom furniture were saved, and they are now with my son Guy Gaillard ("Gil") and his family in Trinity, Florida.

From the back of the house, the neighbors fighting the fire were able to save a marble-topped "pie safe" that had been in the dining room (or more likely in the eat-in kitchen) plus a small drop-leaf table and three wooden chairs. More interestingly, the people trying to save the house were also able to carry out a hand-made school-master's desk with a lift-up top, made during the time of the Civil War by Aleck Wasky, Ma Hall's uncle. Frank and Mildred had purchased the desk in 1930 from Ralph Thomas, Wasky's grandson (or great-grandson), and the desk and the dining-room (or kitchen) furniture is now with my other son, George Austin St. Clair and his family in Mobile, Alabama.

After the fire, Frank and Mildred had nowhere to go, but they were fortunate that the rooms at the back of Granddad Noah's filling station could be used as a place to live, and Granddad Noah offered the rooms to Frank and Mildred. Despite the pressures of the Depression, his business was doing well, and from what we know about the family in those days, Frank and Uncle Mike and (possibly) Uncle Leonard were all working with Granddad at the Overhead Service Station. So Frank, Mildred, Frankie, and Ma Hall took up housekeeping behind the filling station, bringing with them the few pieces of family furniture that survived and "making do" with what else they could find.

The St. Clair Brothers Garage

With the success of the filling station, Granddad, Frank, Uncle Mike, and, as I say, perhaps Uncle Leonard found they were doing very well, and they realized they could open a related business, repairing (or re-building) wrecked automobiles. In those days, there were many automobile accidents and these men – perhaps consciously or simply as smart businessmen – realized that there was work for them if they applied themselves and made use of their mechanical skills.



St Clair Brothers Garage in the background of this photo of Guy's pretty cousin Peggy Jane Hundley (Aunt Bessie's daughter) on her bicycle, probably about 1942 or so.

Why there were so many automobile accidents has been a subject of much research, and while there were many people driving, the overall population was not anything in numbers like it is today (in 1940 Virginia had a population of 2,678,000 and today it is 8,631,000), so the reason for so many accidents couldn't have been solely that there were too many people on the road. But highway engineering was not nearly as sophisticated as it is today and as described by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum

of American History's Automotive Safety section, the automobile was, in fact, "a revolutionary technology" in the early decades of the 20th century. The results were not only increased personal mobility but dramatic new risks, including "a soaring rate of traffic deaths and injuries, [and] driver behavior, automobile design, highway engineering, and traffic hazards all were blamed."

Like their unstoppable conversations about railroads, other favorite topics of conversation for Frank, Uncle Mike, and Granddad Noah were automobiles and the building of highways. It was exciting, just like the railroads, and these people simply could not learn enough to satisfy their curiosity about either railroads or highways (and the automobile).

So sometime in the early 1930s (we don't know the exact date), the Overhead Service Station had a neighbor. The St. Clair Brothers (and I can only presume that Granddad was involved as well, since it was his filling station to begin with!) went into the automobile repair business.

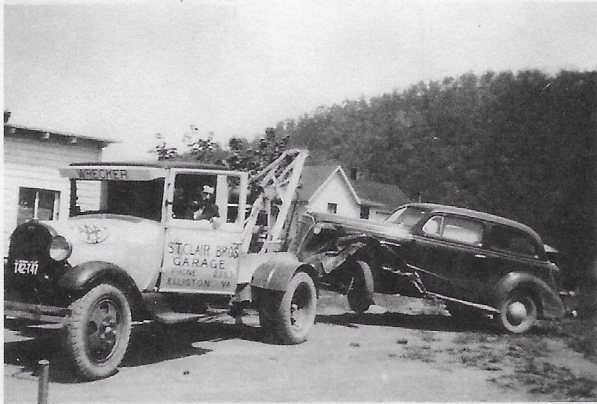
It was a very large garage, built specifically for their repair work, and there was space in the field behind the garage for all the wrecked automobiles and trucks that came into their possession.

Much of the brothers' work seems to have been picking up wrecked cars when they had been abandoned, or, perhaps, simply offering to "take them off your hands" to people who owned damaged automobiles.

And aside from the business of offering an automobile repair service, there were other benefits, and I have a favorite example: my sons now have four elegant cut-glass water glasses that had been found in one wrecked automobile, in perfect condition and with not a single crack, they had been so well-packed and wrapped.



St. Clair Brothers Garage (later photograph, with sign painted over). Guy was born in the second-floor apartment. The building has since been demolished.



St Clair Brothers Garage wrecker hauling a pick-up car (early 1930s or so)

And the brothers didn't build their garage half-heartedly. We don't know what their thinking was, but for some reason they decided to have a second floor, high above the workspace on the first floor. There must have been a reason why the garage was planned to be so big, or why it would have a second floor. Of course it's possible that the reason could have been, as with the rooms behind the filling station, simply an investment in case it was ever needed as a rental or an extra living space (as my parents discovered).

The entrance to the second-floor apartment was on the west side of the garage, with its own entrance porch and a long flight of stairs up to the upstairs space. It was a big apartment, so I've been told, with three bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen with a built-in eating space, and a bath.

As for our family, we know that we were living in the garage apartment in 1940. On July 20th, Dr. E.W. Senter from Salem drove to be with Mildred for the delivery of her next child and climbed those stairs to the second floor of the garage. Before long, he realized that he was there for the night, for I was born on July 21st at 2.10am.

I heard later (and often, not from my mother but from other relatives) that it was not an easy birth, for I weighed in at 13 ³/₄ pounds. So I suppose it's a wonder my mother ever spoke to me again! I was horribly ugly, all wrinkled with long, black hair, and older sister Frankie, not yet six years old, hated to look at me. One family story has it that Mildred discovered Frankie at one point trying to lift me out of my crib and asked what she was doing. Frankie replied quite simply: "I'm going to throw him out the window. He is too ugly!" Whether big sister was aware of the dangers of a living space so high up above the ground is unknown, but – so I was often told – she was pretty serious.



Mildred dressed up to go somewhere, with the garage in the background (damaged photo).

The Great Depression

Yet despite the success of their gas station, grocery shop, and the body repair shop for wrecked automobiles, it was all happening in the middle of the Great Depression, and there was much pain all around. Bartering was the usual way for payment for almost anything a family needed, and for many families there were even more personal endeavors, with some people demonstrating clearly some of the steps that had to be taken. Not only did Granddad and his three sons have their own families to look after, but there was also still not enough money to

go around. Frank, with his expert ability to “fix anything” took it upon himself to figure out how to feed the people who were his responsibility. In the 1930s, he not only had his wife and Frankie and bed-ridden Ma Hall to support, his parents and other relatives were somewhat dependent on him as well. And there were others he knew of, either in the community, from church, or for some other reason. And he wanted to help.

So taking parts from various wrecked automobiles that had come to be stored at the St. Clair Brothers Garage, Frank put together an insulated truck, made it road-worthy, and once it was in shape, he drove it to the ice-plant in Christiansburg. Somehow he got the man who ran the plant to give him ice on credit, and he loaded the huge blocks of ice in the insulated truck bed. Then he took off, driving around the countryside and offering ice for sale. And when some of the farmers did not have any cash to pay him, he would barter with them, taking great cans of milk, eggs, chickens, pork (either cuts that could provide good nutrition on their own or could be made into sausage), or anything else that he could get. And he was able, with some customers, to get small amounts of cash. Not as much as he needed, of course, but it was enough for him to pay the manager at the Christiansburg Ice Plant and still have the products he had traded for his ice. It was a successful effort, in a time when there was little cash, and he was able to support the people he knew needed to be supported in order to eat.

I remembered Frank’s own Depression-era effort later in my own life, when I wrote *SLA at 100: From Putting Knowledge to Work to Building the Knowledge Culture*, the centenary history of the Special Libraries Association (2009). The hundred years of the association were divided into ten chapters, with each of the chapters representing a specific decade. When I researched the Great Depression for the chapter on SLA in the 1930s and learned how the people of America had lived during that time, I became very proud of what my father (and others like him) had done on their own. And, oddly enough, he never told us children about his dealings with the ice plant. Indeed, I had never heard the story until Mildred told my sons and me about it, when we were visiting with my parents decades after the fact.

As it happened, my sons and I and Mildred were sitting on their front porch, with my children asking questions and Mildred delightedly telling stories (often the case with Mildred, as I think I’ve made clear). Frank happened to come out on the porch about then and he asked Mildred, very severely, “Why are you telling them that?” His tone of voice very sincerely indicated that he did not like having the story told, which was a big surprise to us. It was a wonderful example, we tried to explain, of how people did what they had to do when times were tough, but Frank wasn’t very happy that we were told the story. I never learned why. Perhaps he felt some shame in having to take such steps to care for his family, or perhaps, he just saw it as what a provider had to do in those days, and nothing special.

As became clear when I was studying that part of our country’s history (and especially as I was writing the SLA book), it was a time of living under conditions which no one coming after could even imagine. People were forced to deal with what were called “emergency exchanges,” and since there was hardly any cash (or access to cash), economists were advocating the exchange

of goods. People were destitute, and there was not any money with which to buy anything, so “Barter Exchanges” (as they were called) were eventually organized in more than 500 communities throughout America. And these were only the formalized barter activities but, as with what Frank undertook, there’s no way to determine how much “informal” bartering was done. Written articles about the exchange movement became numerous, including a much talked-about “detailed plan for a nation-wide exchange system” but I never became aware of whether anything came of the more formal system, of course, since World War II came along and effectively ended the Great Depression.

World War II



Frank leaving to drive to the powder plant (is Mildred standing in the kitchen door?)

Despite the Great Depression, the filling station and the wrecked car-pickup and repair business did well and continued to grow. Once the war came along, not only was the business doing well, but Frank was also able to cut back on some of his time at the garage and the filling station in order – like so many other men in that part of Virginia, some from around that part of the state and others coming in from all over the country – to work at the Radford Arsenal, about thirty miles away to the west.

Frank drove to Radford to work, taking with him several co-workers who boarded in nearby homes, as was the case with everyone living within a 45-50 mile radius of Radford, since housing for all the workers (some 10,000) needed to be found. To be fair, though (and I was too young to even know, although I never heard it mentioned about us in our house), we probably did not board workers at our house, although I seem to remember learning (perhaps later) that Uncle Mike and Aunt Ola and Aunt Mabel and Uncle

Wallace and even Grandma and Granddad took in boarders. It was all part of the overall citizen participation in the war, though to be sure, there was some welcome income to be had as well.

The U.S. Army Ordnance Corps with the Hercules Powder Company as the Operations Contractor had opened in 1940. And (as guessed at by many people in later years), with the expectation of war even before Pearl Harbor, the powder plant (as it was called) had bought up more than 7,000 acres in Southwestern Virginia. A 1957 pamphlet offered to employee families described the place:

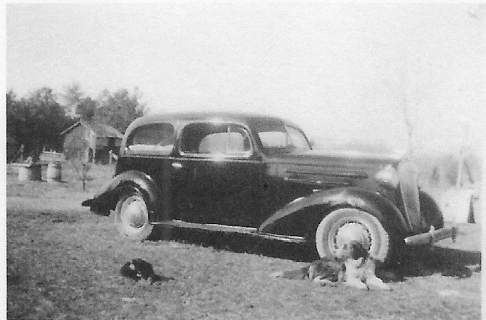
Radford Arsenal, resting in the Blue Ridge foothills where the Cherokees once lived before their westward push, and where Byron McDonald manufactured gunpowder during Revolutionary Days, was built as Hitler’s hordes swept across Europe in 1940. It

was one of a number of United State Ordnance Corps installations springing up across the land as America prepared to face the threat of war.

When war did come, on that bleak December day in 1941, smokeless powder was being produced here in sizeable quantities by Hercules Powder Company under contract with the Ordnance Corps. Production had actually started the previous April. Radford Arsenal (then called Radford Ordnance Works) was the first of various wartime installations to start producing powder.

The 10,000 employees working here during World War II (they represented 46 of the 48 states) compiled outstanding records in all fields of endeavor. Not only was the overall safety record noteworthy, but the plant won the Army-Navy “E” flag (“for general excellence”) five straight times. And on August 14, 1945, with the Nazi war lords imprisoned, and Japan on her knees, this plant had produced the staggering total of 560 million pounds of powder! Yes, Radford Arsenal played no small role in winning the war.

Pearl Harbor was December 7, 1941, and the United States was now at war, and I’ve learned about some of what went on in our house during the war. For example, Frank was too old to go into service (he was 35 when Pearl Harbor was attacked and I suppose, with all his family responsibilities, he was not able to sign up). Still, he did his part. For our local community, for example, and up to Elliston, he was the local “black-out warden” and it was his job to drive around the countryside in his car – using no lights, of course – and if he observed the slightest peek of light in a house or building off the road, he would stop the car and go up to the house, knock on the door, and ask the people inside to turn off the light (whether electric, kerosene lantern, or candles). He also was a strict black-out warden for his immediate family, for one distinct memory I have is that we had heavy black wool blankets – somehow obtained from the U.S. Navy (and called our “navy blankets”) – and in our own home, Frank had rigged up a way they could be attached to the window frame from the inside, with no light shining around the edges (he was always creatively inventive).



The family car, which Frank used during the war when he was the “black-out warden” for the community (traveling with the headlights off, of course)

And when the war was over (but it was probably sometime much later than the actual end of hostilities in 1945, so the troops could get back from where they had been), there was a great celebration in Roanoke, and we all went. We used several cars, and I remember being thrilled to be allowed to ride with Uncle Mike and Aunt Ola in their car. And I do remember something of the celebration, watching the marching soldiers and hearing all the band music. But what I remember most was all the screaming and cheering of the crowds. People were truly happy that the war was over, but I didn’t like all the noise.

“The House that Frank Built”

As for our family, Mildred and Frank had for several years been working on their big project. Knowing my parents as well as I came to know them, and understanding now the way they thought, I imagine planning had been going on since long before the fire at their house in the mid-1930s. It was the way they worked (and quite frankly I think a lot of people in those days took it upon themselves to do their own planning for their future, a way of life made clear several times in Mildred’s book).



“The House that Daddy Built” – Frank and Mildred’s house – which they started working on in the 1930s (original driveway was located differently, behind the house).

What were they planning? Their future home, and it was to be a jewel. As I’ve mentioned, I don’t remember too much of what was going on in those days, but I do remember that for the first six or seven years of my life, we lived in a very nice place. It was across the highway from the filling station and the garage, on a piece of property that Mildred and Frank had bought some years earlier, just down the hill from Grandma Bertha and Granddad Noah’s house. As on the other side of their house, with the large field between them and Uncle Mike and Aunt Ola, there was a similarly

large field leading down the hill from their house and running along the back of the property. And, as with Grandma and Granddad’s house and Uncle Mike and Aunt Ola’s house, the N&W railroad tracks ran long a deep crevice, for trains going both west toward Elliston and points beyond and to Salem and Roanoke to the east.

I grew up hearing the house referred to as “the house that Frank built” or “the house that Daddy built” and as I say, I was too young to know anything about the details of the effort, but its design was unique. As the photograph shows, the upper half of the house was brick, and the bottom was local stone.

And I found myself caught up in a funny situation somewhat later in life because, for some reason (although we had moved across the road into the house shortly after my birth in 1940), I thought I was some kind of genius because I could remember an incident that – in my mind – took place just when we moved, even earlier than my days as just a toddler. It was when the stones making up the bottom part of the house were pointed, with the mortar joints finished. It was just a notion I had that I had been around and remembered – with my extremely strong memory – something that took place at a time most children would not be able to remember. Was I disappointed (and somewhat chagrined) later in life to have someone in the family tell me that the pointing didn’t take place until after the



Mildred reading in the side yard, with the photo showing how the bricks and local stone were used together.

war, so of course I would have been able to remember it. So much for my exceptional memory in my early days! I had just put the incident in the wrong period of my young life!



"The House that Daddy Built" (front view).

The bottom floor of the house was more or less the "family" living area, with a door leading from the kitchen. There was a large room going all the way across, since the house was built "into" the hill coming down from Grandma and Granddad's house. Moving toward the front of the house there were several other rooms, including what we would call today a "great room" or a "family room" where we all tended to gather.

It was in this room that we had family meals were served if we didn't eat in the kitchen (the upstairs dining room was saved for when we had guests for meals, which happened often since Mildred loved to entertain).

It was also an important part of our lives to be able to listen to the radio, which Mildred did often during the day and especially when another lady or a group of ladies was visiting. She had soap operas she enjoyed listening to, and there were occasional musical programs and, indeed (although I can't remember if it started in this house or somewhere else), the Texaco Metropolitan Opera broadcasts were a Saturday "regular" which Mildred enjoyed and often encouraged me to listen to with her. I don't remember much liking the talking at intermissions (Milton Cross was the great hero for leading these discussions). She made a big point of telling me how much I would learn about music if I listened to what was being said by individual speakers or in panel discussions. But for me, I liked listening to the singing.

I don't remember what the other two or three rooms were for. One was probably a sewing room, for Mildred was a very serious seamstress and sewing, for her and her friends, was an important part of her life. I seem to remember other ladies joining her for visits where they would sew together, but I cannot recall any details. Nor can I remember how the other rooms were used, although one was probably a "workshop" or toolroom for Frank, a common feature of most new houses in those days.



"The House that Daddy Built" – Guy's favorite picture (a later photo) even though the big tree at the right front of the house is now gone.

There was a “family” stairway leading up from the kitchen to the long hallway going down the middle of the house on the main floor (and at the front of the house there was a “fancy” staircase leading to the front parlor, where for special occasions the family entertained). Also in the front parlor there was a great ebony-finish upright piano (I don’t remember the brand) and other more “formal” furniture that Mildred and Frank had either acquired or inherited. The next room back was the family parlor, where we often gathered to talk or read or, again, listen to the radio, as we did downstairs. The dining room was behind the family parlor, and on the other side of the hall were the bedrooms (there might have been a bedroom in one of the spaces downstairs – my memory is not clear about that).

Carrie

It was at the piano in our front parlor where I had my earliest music lessons. My teacher was Mrs. Carrie Calloway Charlton, an elegant African American lady who was to become one of my mother’s best friends and one of the finest and most influential people I had in my life. In a later memoir I hope to write about how music became such an important part of my life, but for now I’ll only mention “Miss Carrie” (as we all knew her) here and tell a little about her in terms of our family.

Miss Carrie lived in Elliston, in a very nice house about a half-mile up The Brake, the community of African Americans in the village. On another street, parallel to The Brake, was the First Baptist Church, which was her church, and Miss Carrie is buried in the church cemetery. That street, which I have already mentioned, is now named Calloway Street (it did not have a name when I was growing up, as far as I can recall), named for Miss Carrie’s father and mother, Pompey and Gilla Calloway. She had been born to them on January 21, 1886.

Although I didn’t know anything about it at the time, I was surprised to discover – as I was learning more about Elliston and its history – that there is a historic home located near Elliston that is of interest. It was built about 1910 by Miss Carrie’s father, Pompey Callaway, an ex-slave from Franklin County (in Wikipedia the name is spelled a little differently – “Callaway” instead of “Calloway”). By the time the house was built, as far as I can determine, Miss Carrie, having been born in 1886, would probably already have been into her twenties, so I expect she had already left home to study and get on with her career by the time her father built the house.

Miss Carrie was very talented musically, and after her education at the Virginia Normal and Industrial School (now Virginia State University) in Petersburg, she taught school for a few years. Her obituary (undated but it was sent to me after I had moved from Virginia to New York) stated that she gave up teaching, because “she was forced to give attention to members of her family who were ill.”

There was a little more to the story, if I remember correctly, because with her musical skills she had been chosen to study at a conservatory, and she then went to Pittsburgh for her conservatory education. As she told me often (and I knew Miss Carrie throughout most of my earlier life), she expected to have a career in music or, at the least, in teaching music, but then

she was called back to Elliston to look after her ailing father and her younger brother who was, as was said in those days, “not right” and required supervision.

Happy to find a job teaching music at the nearest African American high school (in Christiansburg), Miss Carrie did that for a while, at the same time serving as the organist and choir mistress at her church. But the “colored” high school in Christiansburg was closed at some point (I never learned why, but it was probably because there were not very many students – our part of Virginia had very few African American citizens), and Carrie lost her job. Having some resources, she was able to live at home, perhaps for a while in her father’s house. She had earlier married Jackson (Jack) Charleton – we don’t know when – but by the time I knew her (obviously sometime after 1940) Mr. Charleton had died and Miss Carrie was a widow, although no reference was made to me about her situation, as far as I know, and I would have been too young to understand anyway. And I assume the lovely house she lived in up The Brake was the house in which she and her husband had lived, but I don’t have any details about that fact.

Having limited resources and with the war going on, Miss Carrie at one point approached my father and asked if she could come “help” my mother with running our home. I have no idea of what kind of deal they struck, but it turned out that Miss Carrie came to us several times a week and she was a great help to Mildred. It was not a mistress/servant relationship of course, for Miss Carrie was an educated professional lady, but she (like all housewives in those days) did whatever had to be done in the house, helping with the cooking and with the housework, helping with the wash and the ironing and, of course, with the sewing. And Miss Carrie became friends with Mildred’s friends who came to visit. As far as I can remember (or having been told), she become part of our family – or as much as she could be with her own responsibilities at her own home – and we all loved Miss Carrie very much.

And I loved going home with her, even to spend the night (or sometimes two) at her house. At that very young age, I was delighted to learn that she had a wonderful and very tall old “pump organ” in her sitting room, and she would let me play with it for hours. And of course she would play it for me, and she taught me songs to sing, even though I was a very small child. She was quite an expert on the music of Carrie Jacobs Bond, and I have heard that I was pretty good at driving people a little crazy with my own rendition of “A Perfect Day” (“When you come to the end of a perfect day and sit alone in your room....”) and those sorts of sentimental songs, so many of them composed by Carrie Jacobs Bond.

And probably needless to say, the church services at her church, with Miss Carrie at the organ and leading the choir, was a very special treat for me. If I would promise to be good, she would let me sit next to her at the organ, and every once in a while, when she was



I do not have a photograph of Miss Carrie, but this picture shows the type of old-fashioned pump organ she had in her own parlor.

playing something soft and her fingers weren't too busy, she would take my hand and put one of my fingers on a key, so I could hear myself "play the organ at Miss Carrie's church." What a treat for a little boy!

The rectory for her church was next door to Miss Carrie's house. The minister, the Rev. Mr. Wright and his wife had a boy about my age, and we became fast friends, and I loved to go to Miss Carrie's house so I could play with Bernard (and vice versa). I knew him for a long time, and we stayed in touch even after I went to the university. Years later he sent the service leaflet for Miss Carrie's funeral to Mildred, sometime in the late 1970s, and asked Mildred to send it to me (by this time I was living in New York, but that's another story).

I have little memory of what was going on outside our home in those early days of my life, but I do have another distinct memory of Miss Carrie. It happened on the day President Franklin Roosevelt died. I was down the road a piece, playing across the road with my little friend Billy McDaniel, who was about my age. We were playing in the front yard of his house, and we could see Miss Carrie coming down the road, obviously to pick me up. She was crying, wiping her eyes with her apron as she walked, and when she got to us, she simply took my hand and said, "You have to come home now, Guy Lewis. President Roosevelt has died." I had no idea what that meant, but of course I took her hand, and I went back to our house with her.

Family

Finally (and in every memoir we must get to the "finally"), there has always been some interest in where our family came from, and all the various St. Clairs and Austins who married into a wide group of other families. As for our family's long-term background, there are various versions. As we look at the photographs we have of our ancestors, at least as far back as the mid-19th century, these look like (as I earlier called them) hard-working farmers, railroad workers, mechanics, factory workers, accountants and business managers, and such. And they do not appear to be especially aristocratic or upper-class people.

And we must remember that we come from a long line of storytellers, so it's hard to figure out just what is real and what might have been "made up." It was all, after all, a form of entertainment, this kind of conversation and telling stories about who we were and where we came from, and if in the telling, some of the "facts" drifted a little away from established fact, it didn't really make any difference. Indeed, in our more modern society, some of us are occasionally accused or "caught up" in our embellishments. When I'm telling stories my listeners (especially my two adult sons) often wonder just how much to believe. It's also along the lines of my friend Evelin Morgenstern's lady friend in Canterbury, who accused her mother of embellishing her stories and the reply from the mother was, "Why ruin a good story by being too precise?"

So of course we have a range of stories, and I remember particularly from Aunt Ola (Uncle Mike's wife and probably the best at it of all the story-telling St. Clairs!) that the St. Clair family in our part of the country came from French stock, Huguenots who arrived in Charleston

sometime in the 17th and 18th centuries and made their way west, eventually settling in what is now Montgomery County. Many of my father's immediate ancestors were native to Montgomery, Franklin, Bedford, and other counties in that part of Virginia (as mentioned earlier). Frank's grandfather was John R. St. Clair, born in Bedford County in 1846 but there is no reference, as far as I know, to Granddad Noah's earlier ancestors.

And Aunt Ola's ideas could have had some basis in fact, since most family names in Europe often started as placenames, and there are any number of places in France with names similar to St. Clair, Sainte-Claire, St-Claire, etc. And even if the family is not of French descent, the name might also be confused with the name St. Clair often found in the upper mid-west of the United States, places named for General Arthur St. Clair, a Scottish American soldier who served in the British Army during the French and Indian War before settling in Pennsylvania. In the American Revolutionary War, he rose to rank of major general in the Continental Army. General St. Clair later served as the President of the Continental Congress, which during his term passed the Northwest Ordinance, after which he was made governor of the Northwest Territory in 1788.

As for Mildred's side of the picture, with respect to Nancy Mary Walthall Hall ("Ma Hall"), there is some speculation that on the Walthall side of her family there is evidence of an early arrival in Virginia, sometime in the early 17th century. At some point Mildred was contacted by an organization that traced such people, and when found they could be considered FFVs ("First Families of Virginia"), that is, descendants of families in Colonial Virginia. When asked, Mildred simply ignored the query, as she was not interested. On the other hand, though, she was very interested in and enjoyed talking about how her grandfather with whom she lived all her life, John Ballard Hall ("Pa Hall") was the son of Gordon Hall, whose wife (whose name Mildred did not know) was one-half Cherokee Indian. Mildred was very proud of that.

Photographs shown here, along with several other photos not used in the text, are in a PowerPoint file at: <https://adobe.ly/3k6EL01>.

At Hall's Church Cemetery

ST CLAIR, Mildred Austin 18 Feb 1910-11 Jul 1983 (Guy's mother)
memorial marker – the grave is in Clearwater Florida

ST CLAIR, Frank Lee 19 May 1907-04 Oct 1986 (Guy's father)
memorial marker – the grave is in Clearwater Florida

AUSTIN, Alma B. 13 Dec 1886-28 Feb 1912 Wife of Stafford Rowe (Mildred's
mother)

AUSTIN, S. Rowe 16 Dec 1883-23 Aug 1921 (Mildred's father Stafford Rowe)

AUSTIN, Nannie D. 28 Jun 1848-25 Oct 1931 (Mildred's grandmother) Nancy Dent
Bradbury

AUSTIN, William T. 08 Jan 1856 (1857?)-26 Jul 1933 (Mildred's grandfather)

AUSTIN, Cordelia F. 17 Jan 1873-06 Nov 1960 (Aunt Deelie)

AUSTIN, William R. 26 Sep 1878-22 Apr 1951 (Uncle Willie – Stafford Rowe's
brother)

AUSTIN, John C. 07 Jan 1908-18 Apr 1967 (unknown, although possibly a son or
grandson of John Creed Austin (06 Feb 1855-10 July 1930),
Stafford Rowe's uncle and William T. Austin's brother

HALL, Nancy Mary Walthall 25 Oct 1855-23 Jan 1937 (Mildred's grandmother)

HALL, John Ballard 02 Jul 1859-06 Dec 1931 (Mildred's grandfather)