

Peeples' Progress

The Rollicking Tale of *Bluffton Boy's* Rebel and Yankee Forebears

by Andrew Peeples

Anyone who writes a story about himself should tell where his ancestors came from. People in Bluffton know that two of mine were chased out of the Garden of Eden. But I can't go back that far, because it would take too long. I think I'll begin with the one who was murdered in a churchyard in St. Peter's Parish about a century ago. That was my Great Grandfather Peeples.

He's the best one in the family to start with anyway, because he owned a plantation and rode in a carriage-and-four, and his friends thought so much of him that they elected him to represent his parish in the South Carolina General Assembly.

But, like all great men, he also had a few enemies, and one of them knifed him to death in the churchyard where he now lies buried. The inscription chiseled on his tomb records that his last and only dying words were: "Lay me down, A—— M—— has cut and stabbed me to pieces." Which proves, among other things, that my forebears who had the chiseling done didn't bury their hate as well as their dead.

Great Grandfather Peeples' sons were still fighting mad about that dastardly murder when the Civil War broke out. One of them became a captain in the Confederate Cavalry and lopped off every Yankee's head he could lay his sword to. After the war, he returned to his plantation home and spent the rest of his life fighting scalawags and carpetbaggers while raising nine children. His eldest child, Jesse Davidore Peeples, was my father.

On the other side of the family, Great Grandfather Guilford lived in Portland, Maine. He owned a fleet of seagoing schooners and had money enough to last the family until I was dead and buried. But he lost his temper with one of his sons who became my Grandpa Guilford and cut him off with a dollar bill, which did nobody any good, because Grandpa gave it to Grandma and she framed it and

hung it on her bedroom wall. As long as she could see it there, she said, she'd always know that she had something in the house for a rainy day.

Grandad Guilford joined the Union Army while he was too young to know his way around. One night he got cut off from his regiment up in North Carolina and wound up hiding in a mountain cave. If Grandpa Peeples had been up there he would have found Grandpa Guilford and lopped his head off, and put an end to me, too, long before I was born.

But, fortunately, a pretty apple-cheeked mountain girl, who didn't know a Yankee from a Rebel, found Grandpa Guilford hiding in the cave and took care of him until the war was over. Then Grandpa Guilford came out of the cave and caught the first boat to England. Over there, he found another pretty apple-cheeked girl and married her and caught a boat back to this country. He couldn't darken his father's door again, so he and his bride traveled around from Maine to Florida until the last of eight children was born, and then they settled down in Bluffton. The fourth child, Maud Estella Guilford Peeples, was my mother.

Grandpa Guilford built a house in Bluffton for Grandma and the children. He built a little house out back which he called an office, for himself. He slept and ate his meals and entertained his friends in the big house, but the rest of the time he sat at his desk in the little house. When he wasn't busy with his duties as the mayor of Bluffton, he was smoking his pipe, or reading a Bible or writing a story about that pretty mountain girl who saved his life. Once a month he had to draw a pension for capturing that mountain cave in North Carolina and holding it until the war was over. He held back a few dollars for tobacco and church, and gave the rest to Grandma, because she was too busy riding

around the countryside in a buggy delivering babies and curing colics and other pains with concoctions of her own making that would draw anything except the swelling out of somebody's carbuncle.

The very first time my father came to Bluffton he saw that Maud Estella Guilford was the prettiest blue-eyed dark-haired girl in all the world. She was busy teaching school, and he had to wait until school was out. Then he married her and took her to his home in Hampton County, which used to be a part of St. Peter's Parish,

They stayed up there until the last of my six oldest brothers was born, and then, at the turn of the century, they moved to Bluffton, where I and my four youngest brothers and three sisters were born.

Nine of us boys arrived in the family ahead of the first girl, ten ahead of the second, and all eleven of us ahead of the third, who was the fourteenth and last child. The girls were named Jennie, Estella and Mildred. We boys were named Mark, James, Paul, Peter, Philip, Thomas, Andrew, Luke, Nathaniel, Matthew and John.¹

Papa bought a large, tree-shaded lot on the main street of Bluffton, and there he built his house and store. He was an astute business man, and it wasn't long before he had both money drawers in the store running over. People from miles around came to the store to buy goods and borrow money. Papa put several of his oldest boys behind the counters to take in the cash. He sat at a roll-top desk in the office and let out the credit. The many customers who borrowed from Papa and paid him back said that he was a solid citizen and a God-fearing man. But the few who wouldn't pay and circled the block until Papa threatened to possess a mortgaged mule or cotton crop, thought he was a hot-tempered son of Satan with a bill-of-sale in one hand and a court order in the other.

Born and raised during Reconstruction days, when it was "root, hog, or die," Papa had no respect for people who wouldn't work and save. His credo was simple. "Fear the Lord, work

hard, and save." He lived by it and expected his family and everybody else to do the same.

Being a practical man, Papa built his store in a corner of the front yard. It saved him and the boys who worked in the store a lot of time getting to and from the dining-room table. It also saved Lydia, our colored cook, a lot of time. If Lydia was cooking dinner and needed something like salt or sugar she could wash her hands and dry them on her apron by the time she reached the store, then get what she wanted and return to the kitchen before the tea kettle whistled or the coffee pot blew its top.

Papa located his office in the rear of the store, in full view of the yard. It enabled him to run both his business and his children without moving from his swivel chair. One of the children could escape his eye in the house, or the barn, or the scuppernong vines down in the cove, but one never escaped his voice.

If one of the boys working in the store dawdled in the dining room instead of returning to his job behind the counters, Papa brought him on the double simply by sticking his head out the office window and calling the dawdler's name. There was a certain quality of distress, or urgency, in Papa's voice that had the same startling effect on a dawdler that the sudden sounding of an alarm gong has on a sleeping fireman.

When Papa called a two-syllable dawdler, like Peter, he stretched it out into a "Peeeeeeeeeter!" that crashed through the dining room walls like a clap of thunder, jolting Peter out of his chair and chasing him through the kitchen and down the back steps hell-bent for the store and crying, "Suhhhhhhh! I'm coming!" A one-syllable dawdler, like Paul, was prefixed with the same electrifying effect into "OhhhhhhhhhPaul!" And once his name exploded from the office window, not even Lydia's hot waffles smeared with melted butter and floated in new Georgia syrup could detain a dawdler.

The proximity of the office to the house had its advantages for Lydia, too. If a brawl broke out in the vicinity of the kitchen, Lydia got the effect of a cease-fire order without even taking her hands out of the dish pan. "Y'all chillun do

¹ Read Andrew's story, *Bluffton Boy Grows Up*, about John.

dat one time 'gain I gwine to de office an' tell your papa," were magic words that stopped many a biscuit battle before a single casualty occurred.

Once, while Mama was entertaining company in the parlor, an emergency situation prompted Lydia to undress me and put me in the tub in the bathroom on the back porch. Before scrubbing me, she went to the kitchen for a hasty look at a boiling pot. When she returned, I was astride the back porch banister watching a hop scotch game under the fig tree. Lydia took me back to the tub and returned to the kitchen for another quick look at the boiling pot. When she came back that time and again found me playing Lady Godiva on the banister, she jackknifed me across her aproned knee and blistered my nakedness with her bare hand. I screamed bloody murder and threatened to tell Mama. "Yeah," retorted Lydia, "you run to de palor an' tell your mama while I run to de office an' tell your papa." Without another word, I climbed back into the tub and let Lydia finish the job.

I guess Papa had to be firm with his children, because Mama was just the opposite. When we raised our voices in merriment, she smiled and dreamed that we were God's little angels flying around the house. With all that racket going on, Papa couldn't even rest, much less dream, and when he came home at mealtime and in the evening after the store closed, we folded our wings and remained as quiet as cemetery children. At mealtime, we took our place at the

revolving round table in the dining room, sitting up as straight as old maids at a bachelors' party, and vice versa. In the evening after the store was closed, we crept silently away to our rooms to study lessons and read books, or play quiet games, parcheesi, checkers and dominoes. Sometimes we got reckless and took a chance with pinch and tickle.

Pinch was played while undressing for bed. You just pinched someone and dared him to holler enough for Papa to hear him. We could hold a pinch until blood oozed out, but all you ever got in the way of a sound was a muffled squeek in the back of a mouth shut as tight as a miser's wallet

Tickle was more exciting than pinch. It was played in the beds after the lights were out and Papa had gone to sleep. The rules were the same for pinch, except that you tickled instead of pinched, and dared your bedfellow to laugh loud enough to wake Papa up.

Sometimes one of us got tickled so hard that he couldn't help laughing out loud. Then all four of us in two double beds got the giggles, and the harder we tickled, the louder we laughed, and pretty soon we couldn't stop laughing — until Papa woke and came back to our room in his nightshirt and delauged us with his razor strap. And while he was at it he delauged us for the rest of night, so that he wouldn't have to disturb us a second time. Papa was not one to repeat himself.