

Time in a Bottle

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I had originally planned to follow the route of Lee's retreat from Petersburg to Appomattax in the spring of 1965, exactly 100 years after the final events of the Civil War. As it turned out, I was more than a couple of years late when I set out in the fall of 1967 to trace several days of the route on a Saturday afternoon.

It was getting late in the day and starting to rain when I pulled off the road to read a state marker relating to the retreat. It was a somewhat isolated part of Amelia County and I had about decided to call it a day after this stop. When I got back in the car, however, my old Mercury flooded on me and wouldn't start. This had happened before and a short wait was all that was usually necessary for it to go again.

I decided to get out and see if there was a phone nearby to call my wife and tell her that I would be a bit late. There was a little path going off from the road and I could smell wood smoke, so I wandered that way to see if there was someone with a phone.

About a hundred yards from the road was a small cabin, rustic but nicely kept up. Beside the cabin was an elderly black man hoeing weeds in a small garden. As I got closer, my hopes for calling home faded, as I could see no utility lines of any type coming into the clearing. The closest thing to transportation was an old mule in a lean-to on the edge of the clearing. I would have just returned to my car to wait, but the man had already seen me and was waiting for me to approach.

I introduced myself and passed the time of day for a few minutes since the car usually took a half-hour before it would start again. When asked how long he had lived there,

he responded that he and his wife had been there "since the end of the war." From his age, I judged that he was referring to World War II, but I didn't inquire further. The weather and crops were about our only common ground for conversation, but we were enjoying each other's company when his wife came to the door and told the old man to invite "the company" inside out of the mist and cold.

I went inside into a crowded but inviting room and was quickly seated in front of the fireplace with a hot cup of tea in my hand. I couldn't help but notice that one wall of the cabin was covered in shelves holding a wide assortment of crocks, bottles and other containers filled with what appeared to be dried plants of some sort. The man explained that his wife was known in the area as being knowledgeable with her home grown herbs and natural remedies. I was told that "even some of the soldiers came to my wife on the sly because they didn't trust the army doctors." It was probably the change of temperature from outside to inside that set off my allergies with a sneezing fit for several minutes. The old lady immediately started mixing a pinch from a couple of jars into a bit of hot water. She put a couple of drops in the last of my tea and told me to drink it up.

Thinking that a couple of drops could do no harm and not wanting to offend my hosts, I did as I was told. I was amazed as I immediately felt relief. Beaming with pleasure, the woman poured the rest of the tea into a small bottle and told me to take two drops in tea whenever I had an attack. Offers of payment were politely refused, and I left for my car, thanking them again for

their hospitality. I turned to wave as I reached the edge of the clearing and could barely make out the couple in the doorway through the mist and failing light.

The car started immediately and I returned home, not thinking of the couple until my next allergy attack a few days later. I put a couple of drops in some tea and sure enough, got the same immediate relief. I hoarded the little bit of liquid very carefully after that.

About six months later, after using up all of the bottle's contents, I returned to the spot to see if I could get some more. I was determined that they would take some sort of payment this time. When I got to the clearing, there was nothing there!

I searched around and found a few heavily weathered hearth stones where the fireplace had been. I drove to the Amelia courthouse and did see some research that a black woman who was well-known for her medicinal abilities had lived with her husband in that spot for a few years immediately after the Civil War.

Looking at land records, no one had lived on those acres since then.

So, what really happened? I don't know. It could have been a dream, I guess. I might have dozed off in the car waiting for it to start, but I don't think so. Besides, how do I explain the little pontiled medicine bottle, now empty, that sits on my desk?

If you liked this tale, perhaps I can put into words my sighting of the mounted Confederate Calvaryman in full uniform, and THAT actually happened!