

## Aylesworth / Feagins

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Mary Jane Shafer was born in Scott County, Virginia Oct. 12, 1864. She had a daughter, Nellie Gray, born Dec. 2, 1885. In the 1890's Mary had moved to Big Stone Gap, Va., where she worked as the cook at the Jerome Duff Academy. Part of her payment for doing this was that her daughter got to attend the Academy. There was a Morris girl from Keokee ( her first name is variously remembered as either Rebecca or as Elizabeth) who was attending there at the same time. In her old age, Nellie recalled Morris spitting down the stair well on her.

In 1908 John Fox, Jr. published The Trail of the Lonesome Pine. Both the Duff Academy and Morris became immortalized in that novel, with Morris being recast as the heroine, June Tolliver. Jerome Street in Big Stone Gap is named after Duff.

There were two other ladies who lived in Appalachia that were known to have been students at the Duff Academy. They were Margaret (Maggie) Thomas Guntner (Mrs. John), whose brother was Gregory Thomas, the Indian Motorcycle, Reo Truck, Plymouth, and DeSoto car dealer in Appalachia; and Nannie Robinson who spent her life teaching the third grade in Appalachia. She lived at the corner of King and Carroll Streets, and retired in either 1947 or 1948.

John Aylesworth was born in Chenauyo County, New York August 3, 1841. During the Civil War he served in Company E 203 PA Volunteer Infantry, known as Birney's Zouaves. Somehow he had found his way to Big Stone Gap, where he worked as a carpenter and laborer during the "Boom". He took the unusual step of divorcing his first wife, and Sept. 24, 1896 he married Mary Shafer, and Nellie became his step daughter. John was 23 years older than Mary. This may reflect the difficulties a single mother with daughter and a divorced man had in finding willing new spouses in those days.

John built a house for his new family in Appalachia in the first residential development after the boom started. The home stands today as the first house on Norton Road, situated on the left on the hill across from the original Virginia Wholesale Building. John was delinquent for taxes of \$1.66 in 1908.

Appalachia was a raw boom town. One day Mary was sitting on her front porch catching an evening breeze, when she saw a collection of drunks working their way up the path on the other side of the road, on their ways home. Without warning a knife flashed, and one of their number rolled down the bank just past the present site of the original Wholesale building. Mary had become the only uninvolved sober witness to one of Appalachia's more celebrated murders.

Nellie married J. D. (Jake) Feagins Dec. 21, 1904. Jake was a very prolific photographer, and took countless photographs of early Appalachia. Only a few survive. One notable exception is a photograph of a water mill on Clear Creek, which belonged to either Aylesworth or Feagins, and which is printed in histories of the town. In her old age his widow burned boxes after boxes of his historic photographs, which she considered to have been “junk”. Jake died decades before Nellie.

John died in Appalachia January 12, 1917. An issue arose on where to bury John. Their next door neighbors were John and Catherine Lewis, and Catherine’s mother, Mary “Polly” Kilbourne. Mary was the widow of Peter Kilbourne, and was owner of the ancient Kilbourne Cemetery at Kelly View. It was arranged that John would be buried there. However, there was a complication. Peter Kilbourne was buried there, and he had been a Confederate Veteran. It was unacceptable to plant a Union Veteran in the same cemetery. Therefore, John was buried outside the fence of the cemetery, in the midst of a laurel thicket. He was supplied with a government issue tombstone. It would be half a century before the government would extend this service to Confederate veterans. He lies there today. The fence is gone. Someone has broken off the bottom half of his tombstone, and has replanted the top half. This situation suggests scant regard of John by Mary.

About World War I the Aylesworths moved to a new house that John built, at 224 Spruce Street. While this home was being built, they lived in the house next door down the street toward Big Stone Gap. As widows both Mary and Nellie lived out the last decades of their lives here. Nellie worked as a nannie to the sons of Laz and Cybil Manous, who lived a block up on King Street. Laz was president of the Appalachia National Bank. In her last years Nellie was dependent upon the neighbors, who brought her food, and even went to the liquor store to buy her a supply of Kessler’s Whisky, which she used to make her daily toddies. Mary died July 22, 1951 and Nellie July 12, 1982.

They are buried together in Glencoe Cemetery, Big Stone Gap. Nellie said that she wanted to be buried near the Manouses. Their graves are about seventy five yards apart. Jerome Duff is now buried there also. The grave of Jake Feagins has not been located. It is rumored that he was buried in a borrowed grave in Legion Memorial Cemetery, and that later he had to be moved somewhere because the owner wanted the grave back.

Sources:

Philip Kilbourne

Imogene Sharrett

The author, from his own memory and the stories told by his mother.

