

Death of a Teenager

by Monette Morgan Young

It was Sunday, May 28, 1911. The Jeff Murphree household stirred as early that morning as they would have on any weekday morning. There were animals to feed, cows to milk, all the usual morning work, except that today no one would go to the fields to hoe or to plow.

The household had once numbered thirteen: Jeff and Tina Murphree and their eleven children; but the daughters Letha, Rubye, and Mae, and the son Walter, had married and had homes of their own. A little daughter Clara had died some years before. The children still at home were Ethel, 30 years old, who had been sick all the week before and still was; Eula, 26; Linder, 15; Leila, 11; Clyde, 8; and Inez, 4.

They lived in the Lloyd community, a small area of farms with one store and one church in Calhoun County, Mississippi. There were no industries. All stores were family owned. There was no employment other than farming except the job of post master in each of the community post offices. Every community usually had a Baptist church, but a few also had a Methodist. Most had a one room schoolhouse. There were only a few preachers in the county. They each usually served four churches a month with service at one church each Sunday.

But there would be no church service at Lloyd this particular day. Almost all social intermingling of the young people revolved around the church, and occasionally the school. On this Sunday, Eula and Linder wanted a little bit of social life with the other young people of the community. Ethel was too sick to go along, and Leila, Clyde, and Inez were too young. So Eula and Linder mounted horses to go to visit the young people in the Ellard family, a large family which lived not too far away. There were several Ellard children who were still at home.

The Ellards lived on the border between the communities of Lloyd and Poplar Springs. They called Poplar Springs their church and were members there and there was going to be a church service at Poplar Springs on this day. When the Ellard girls saw Linder as he and Eula rode up, they shrieked, "Now we have a driver." They were so wanting to go to church but their father and brothers weren't going that day. Most girls could drive a team of mules or horses hitched to a wagon, but in those days a group of unmarried girls didn't go alone anywhere. Fathers or brothers had to go along.

At the Ellard home, Linder put the Murphree horses in the barn lot there, and hitched mules to the Ellard family's wagon and the young people set off in the unusual heat, for that time of the year, to Poplar Springs church about four miles away. I think it was certain that Connie Ellard was along, knowing or hoping she would see Clayton Murphree at the church. Clayton, age 19, was working as a hired hand on Jess Patterson's farm in the Poplar Springs community.

Clayton's mother, Lubie Enochs Murphree, had died and his father, Jim Murphree, had gone away to Texas and had left Clayton and his two other teenaged children in the home of his brother, Ransom Murphree. Ransom lived in the Oldtown community. Jess Patterson was a

bachelor farmer, about thirty years old, considered well-to-do and living on his own farm with a house keeper to do for him in the day time.

Vivian Ellard and Linder sat on “straight” [ladder back] chairs, two of them, in the front of the wagon. They were lightweight and weren’t anchored in any way. There was a “spring seat” behind the chairs, a bench seat with hardware and springs which attached it to the sides of the wagon. Vivian thinks Eula, Connie Ellard, and Lillian Ellard [later Mrs. Howard Murff] were the occupants of the spring seat.

The sermon, probably by Rev. McKibben, was most likely a long one. There weren’t many Sunday schools in those days, just a song service and a long sermon. After church this Sunday, the Ellard-Murphree group was invited to the Jess Patterson home for dinner. It may have been considered a social “feather in the cap” to be invited to Jess’s home for one of his housekeeper’s bountiful Sunday dinners and the fun and fellowship of any young group.

For some reason, however, Linder did not want to go. He may have wanted to go home and rest. He could have thought of the week of hard plowing in the fields that waited for him in the coming days, but anyway, he decided to go along and they all went. They probably didn’t get through eating until after 2 o’clock. They needed to leave soon afterwards to get back home to get the evening chores done. So, after visiting a while, the Ellard and Murphree young people started home.

Clayton decided to ride horseback behind them as far as Uncle John Morgan’s home. Supposedly, Clayton was riding part way home with them because he was so smitten by Connie that he wanted to be close to her as long as he could. The happy little group arrived at the John Morgan house on the way home and Clayton stopped to visit with the Morgans for a few minutes before turning around to ride back to the Patterson farm.

The wagon turned into the smaller road that led to the Ellard home. The road wound down a very steep hill and had been made to follow the contour of the hill causing a sidewise slant to the road as well as the downward steepness.

The wagon passed a small pile of brush and something, a rabbit, lizard, or snake, or something, moved in that brush and frightened the mules. They began to run faster and faster. The downhill push of the heavy rolling wagon increased their speed. Linder grabbed the reins and pulled back hard to no avail. Then he reached for the brake. A wagon brake was a strong pole anchored in a pivoting mechanism on the outside so that it could be moved back and forth but not slide downward. The back and forth movement was to allow it to be pulled or pushed against the wheel to slow or hopefully stop a wagon. The end of the pole touching the wheel would have a soft pad of leather nailed to its end to help grip the iron-rimmed wheel.

There was always a rope tied from the top of the pole to some place at the back of the wagon. The rope needed to be new and strong so that the driver could reach it and pull on it strongly to stop or slow the vehicle. This particular brake rope was a long plow-line and one end of it was

lying loosely in the wagon. As the wagon hurtled down the hill, tilting sidewise, as Linder reached for the rope, he and his chair both fell out of the wagon. Vivian and her chair also fell.

Linder's foot, however, had caught on the loose plow-line as he fell. Instead of falling clear of the wheel as Vivian had done, the rope caused Linder to fall into the path of one of the rear wheels. The wheel struck the back of his head and crushed it and then he was dragged by the ever faster running mules. Eula, my mother, jumped or fell trying to get to him to help him and tore a terrible gash in her leg. Vivian was bruised and hurt but not severely. The Schwalenberg family lived at the foot of the hill and they heard the screams and ran out. Ed Schwalenberg, then about 25 years old, stopped the mules and everyone began trying to help. Clayton was still up at Uncle John Morgan's. He heard the screams and, as he ran toward the accident, met Vivian. She was injured but able to run and was hysterically incoherent.

Clayton and the young Schwalenberg men put the gravely injured Linder on a quilt and carried him up the hill to Uncle John's home. Linder was semi-conscious all the way up the hill and moaned out words, mostly "Clayton, oh, Clayton," and once before he died, "Leila".

At the Morgan home, Linder was placed on a clean soft bed, one of those snowy spotless beds the homemakers of those country communities prided themselves on. Eula had evidently followed the pitiful procession up the hill or had run ahead. She had torn one of her petticoats and had bandaged his crushed bleeding head as best she could after the mules were stopped. Vivian thinks Linder also had chest injuries.

Dr. Steve Coley, the doctor residing in the Reid community, was called on the telephone. Each community had telephone wire stretched through the woods, fastened to trees, and most homes had a big wall-mounted telephone with a long mouth. The signal rings were made by combinations of long and short rings. Each resident knew their own as well as all the other "rings" and everyone usually listened in on all the calls.

On this day when the various people heard Dr. Coley's ring, most responded as usual by going to their phones and picking up the receiver. Linder's sister Ethel was lying down. She still did not feel like sitting up all day. But when she heard the phone she said that she believed that she would see who was calling Dr. Coley. It was by this means that the family learned of the accident.

Linder's father, had ridden down to Shirley Ridge to visit his ailing married daughter Rubye. He had left her house and was on his way back home when the calls began going to every house along his way and he was contacted and began running his horse to get to John Morgan's house some six or eight miles away. Jeff did arrive just minutes before Linder died.

One call reached Uncle Will Spratlin. His home was just over the next hill from the Murphrees. Uncle Will's first wife had been Lois Murphree, sister of Jeff. Uncle Will hurriedly hitched up his wagon and went to get Linder's mother Tina to try to get her to Linder's bedside before he

died, but a call came before they could leave from the Murphree home saying that it was too late.

Linder's sister Mae was married to Otho Brown and was expecting her first child. Her husband had gone for the afternoon and her mother-in-law had come to stay with her. Mae heard the doctor's ring and went to find out who was sick. When she did not return immediately, her mother-in-law went to see about her and found her lying on the floor in a faint.

At Linder's bedside, Eula sat by him as long as he lived. She bathed his face in cool water and soothed him as best she could. He was moaning every breath. Vivian said that the moans were heartbreaking. Dr. Coley arrived as soon as he could. Linder had not spoken for many minutes, but when he heard the doctor's voice he said, "Oh, Dr. Coley."

Linder did not live long after the doctor arrived. Linder's body was carried back home and laid on a bed with a sheet over his face. His mother, Tina, said, "I have to see him," and she pulled the sheet away to love and caress his bruised and battered features.

Early the next morning (the funeral was to be that day), neighbors went to the small new town of Vardaman, not too many miles away. Money had been given to them to buy a casket and a new suit for Linder's body. It may have been his first suit.

Aunt Leila said that Reverend McKibben was waiting at the Gaston Springs church when the funeral procession arrived and he said, "The most doleful sound to the human ear is the sound of the rolling wagon wheels which bear the body of a deceased loved one of the area's families."

The next day, farm work had to go on as usual. Crops must be planted early if there was to be a harvest. Jeff Murphree had to go into the fields the next day and all the next week, plowing over the tracks that Linder had made the week before as he had plowed. Jeff plowed and cried all those days that he was in the fields alone with his loss and his grief.

Clayton came over to stay with Jeff and Tina and to help with the crop that year.

Editor's note: This accounting of an accident which occurred over 100 years ago came about when the author received a letter in May of 1982 from her aunt Leila Murphree Parker. Aunt Leila mentioned that the date of that letter was near the anniversary of Linder's death. Linder was Aunt Leila's brother. She was eleven at the time of his death but still recalled his funeral. Mother wrote back to Aunt Leila for all the particulars she remembered and also called Vivian Landreth, the Vivian Ellard of this story. Aunt Leila called Clayton Murphree, who was in a nursing home and got his recollections of the event. This account is included in Mother's book "The Cherry Hill – Poplar Springs – Reid Community in Calhoun County, Mississippi". I've condensed it slightly for publication here. Jeff [Jefferson "D"] Murphree, Ransom Murphree, and Jim Murphree mentioned here were sons of Charles Elbert Murphree. –James Young, great nephew of Linder Murphree