Gee, Clell Miller, We Hardly Knew Ya

Eric F. James

Maligned. Misquoted. Misinterpreted. Misunderstood. Except for the deadly hit Clell Miller took in Northfield, Clell’s life always ran amiss. Even in death, Clell’s bones are missing. How did the James gang ever wind up with the likes of Clell Miller?

Imagine my surprise, to learn that I live just two blocks from Clell Miller’s grandparents. Since Henry Logan and Mary Kenley Thurmond died together back in 1866, Clell’s grandparents haven’t gone missing at all. For almost 150 years, they’ve been right here in Danville, Kentucky, in plain sight. And like poor Clell, no one has cared.

Moving here twelve years ago to write my histories of the Jesse James family, I made Danville my home base, because Danville’s the geographic center of the James family’s history in Kentucky, ever since 1782 when Jesse’s grandfather, John M. James, arrived with his Traveling Church. The Youngers, Pence, Scholls, Chinns, Hites, Var德mans, etc. - and now Clell Miller’s family - lived among one another first around Danville, before moving to Clay County in Missouri. These families left an abundance of history in plain sight, still waiting today for the arrival of serious historians.

Often I take a refreshing walk over to Bellevue Cemetery after long hours of writing. Bellevue is an historic, tree-filled place, where Victorians went for Sunday picnics, courting, and family recreational diversions. Since Danville is where Kentucky separated from Virginia in 1792, Bellevue is populated also by countless blue blood figures of the Commonwealth’s frontier. I commune with them, just as I do with those in Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Kearney, Missouri.

Clell’s grandparents were not Kentucky blue blood. Henry Logan Thurmond and Nancy Kenley were just simple, average folk.

Henry’s father, Absalom Thurmond, first lived on Pistol Creek in Bedford County, Virginia, but he died in Wilkes County, Georgia. Two of Henry’s orphaned sisters won land lotteries there. When Henry’s brother, John Thurmond, returned to Georgia from the Cain-tuc, he was known as “Rich John.” His cousin Fielding Thurmond became captain of a Kentucky militia, during separation from Virginia, protecting the incoming flood of migrants, as did Jesse’s grandfather, John M. James. Fielding returned to Georgia, too. The orphaned Henry Miller, though, arrived in Kentucky sometime before 1808 to stay. Near Abraham Lincoln’s boyhood home in Washington County, Henry married Mary Kenley. The couple spent some time in Logan County, at the time called “Rogue’s Harbor,” a place for killers, thieves, and con artists to flee Kentucky’s emerging
new laws and local governments. By 1828, the couple settled more safely in the established, cultured, and Presbyterian community of Danville.

Henry and Mary Thurmond were in the mid-70s in April of 1866 when they both died. The couple had nine children, most gone from home, or dead. Henry and Mary recently suffered through the aftermath from the bloody battle at Perryville, when scores of wounded, maimed, and dying were treated in every quarter Danville could offer. Henry and Mary were here the day Frank James, Bud and Donnie Pence, and the Youngers rode into town with Quantrill, severing telegraph lines, isolating the train depot, and pillaging food and supplies, while Frank casually stole some books from a store. The gang rode off to Harrodsburg where Frank’s cohort Col. Jack Chinn lived. But the Pence brother’s in-law on the Union side, Maj. James Bridgewater, rode up from Stanford in hot pursuit, cornered the gang at Sally Van Arsdale’s house, and killed off a good number of them in the bloody shootout of a snowy winter’s night. Weeks later, Henry read in the news that Quantrill had died in Louisville’s Catholic hospital, and Frank James turned in his guns.

Soldiers were returning to Danville from Charleston, New Orleans, and Mississippi, bringing diseases with them. About half of Danville’s population was black, and most had been freed long before the war. Those newly emancipated were joining the Union Army at nearby Fort Nelson just to be employed, leaving the town without much help. In sunny April of 1866, old and feeble Henry Thurmond died within weeks of his wife Mary, as haplessly as did Clell. Their brains exploded unexpectedly with the excruciatingly painful disease of cerebral-spinal meningitis.

By then, Clell’s parents, Emaline Thurmond and Moses W. Miller, were in Kearney, Missouri. Most of Clell’s uncles and aunts had settled there in Ash Grove. Only Uncle Fielding and Aunt Cettie Thurmond stayed behind to bury Clell’s grandparents. Fielding, who died in 1896 and Cettie in 1909, now rest next to Henry and Mary.

Exactly when Clell’s parents left Kentucky for Missouri is unknown. An early exodus of Baptist missions had begun in the 1830s. The same rebel preachers of Virginia who took Jesse’s grandfather, John M. James, into Kentucky now were sending missions into Missouri. John’s son, Rev. Robert Sallee James, was part of that effort in 1843. Brother William R. Cave laid out his half of Kearney in 1856, using the settlement land of his father, Uriel Cave. William’s great grandson, the late Darrell Cave, was sextant of Mt. Olivet Cemetery almost all his life. He assisted me and Jesse’s great grandson, Judge James R. Ross, when we reinterred Jesse’s twin children at Mt. Olivet, following the twins’ exhumation in Tennessee. The James association with the Cave family reaches back to the American Revolution.
The cholera outbreak of the 1830s in Kentucky also sent other family westward. Alice Lindsay-Cole, Frank and Jesse’s grandmother, married a second time to Robert Thomason. In 1836, the entire Thomason family was uprooting itself from Kentucky and going to Clay County, triggered in no small part by their neighbor Richard Mentor Johnson, who had just married his second slave woman. Johnson, who had claimed to have killed Chief Tecumseh in the War of 1812, was bent upon being elected president of the United States. He also had set up his Choctaw School and was bringing Indians back into the Commonwealth to be educated. Among some, that didn’t sit too well. They fought Indians and spilled blood to settle the land.

When Clell was born on December 15th of 1849, Moses W. and Emaline Thurmond Miller were established residents of Clay County. Clell never knew his grandfather, Jacob Miller, on his father’s side, just as he didn’t know his Thurmond grandparents. But Clell probably learned that his papaw Jacob Miller was one of those tough minded Germans, like the Hite family. They all came from Germany, then to Pennsylvania, then into Kentucky, all ending up in Missouri. Despite what trouble Clell and his brother Ed Miller found themselves in, their father Moses W. Miller was well regarded in Kearney. Moses was a far more respectable citizen than his sons, as evidenced by the expensive obelisk that graces his grave.

Since the Civil War ended, and especially after Jesse was presumed to have killed Clell’s brother Ed, what Clell shared no doubt with the James brothers was a sense of family disaffection. Like the James family with the James boys, Miller family cousins had little, if nothing at all, to do with Clell. Most had moved away, gone to Texas or Oregon. Isolated, Clell Miller never knew his Miller or Thurmond cousins at all. Like the James family, too, Clell’s family spent their days building honest and respectable lives for themselves, for the most part ignoring Clell, or his brother Ed.

Recently when I met Clell’s first cousin from his Miller side, now four generations removed, I asked Darrell Mansur about his family and about Clell. Darrel knew nothing at all about Clell Miller, or Ed. I provided Darrell the genealogy of his Miller-Thurmond family, and explained the murderous history it contained. Darrell then replied, “This is all new and a bit of a shock to me. It probably explains why I wasn’t told anything about that part of the family when I was growing up…”

Gee, Clell Miller, we hardly knew ya. Seems like your own family didn’t, either.

*Eric F. James is the author of “Jesse James Soul Liberty, Vol. I, Behind the Family Wall of Stigma & Silence.” His second volume, “This Bloody Ground”, depicts the early frontier life of Frank & Jesse’s grandfather, John M. James. Volume II will be available this Fall, 2014. The author also writes and publishes the James family’s official website “Stray Leaves,” and its blog “Leaves of Gas.”*
Clelland B. “Clell” Miller 1849-1876

1st Cousin – John Lloyd Thurmond Jr. 1870-1946
1st Cousin – Earnest Clarence Thurmond 1873-1940

1st Cousin – William Paschal Thurmond 1869-1952
Tombstone of Henry Logan Thurmond Sr. 1789-1866

& wife Mary “Polly” Kenley 1790-1866

Bellevue Cemetery, Danville, Kentucky
1st Cousin, 4 times removed – Darrel Mansur