

An Interesting Article

In Which Jefferson Davis Palmer Tells Story Of His Boyhood Days In Warrenton

BY JEFF D. PALMER

How would you like to have been born on Friday, June 13, 1913? And how would you like to have been named Jefferson Davis? Well, whether this baby liked it or not he was stuck with it. Before you start saying "Oh! My; what a shame; that poor boy; why, he is bound to have nothing but bad luck! Well, I don't know how he did it but he turned those two so-called drawbacks around to the point that they became assets throughout his life. I don't mean "throughout his life" because that kinder sounds like he ain't living now.

Well, do you know where the old Twitty place is—about a mile south of Warrenton, across the road from Mr. Kenneth Mustian's home, which was then the home of Mr. Elmo H. Parker. His son, Woodrow, became one of my best friends. I understand the old Twitty place and the Parker place were sold to Kenneth Mustian, another friend of mine. Anyhow, I lived at the Twitty home with my Daddy, Jefferson Davis Palmer, Sr., Annie Twitty Palmer, Mother and sister Lallah Fitts Palmer, who had the longest and prettiest hair I ever saw, and I used to love to yank it at every opportunity—there were quite a few opportunities. There are a lot of things I could write about living in that old home, but they can't be covered in one article; except one, the time Lallah threw sand in the face of a snake which was coiled under a tree trunk in the front yard. There were just two blurry streaks running into the house. Father came out and showed me what a big game hunter he was and shot that reptile with along double barrel shot gun from about fifty yards away. In that way you see if he had shot him from too close a range it would have made the big kill too messy and also from that distance, if he missed, he had a head start. Oh, my Pop was a great one. If you don't believe it, just ask me.

When I was about seven we moved into the Mordcael Hall place now owned by Mrs. Annie Lamb in Warrenton which has quite a history. That is when the great day came - my first school day. Lallah and I went to the Misses Lucy and Annie Hawkins' school which was really, to us a popular or unpopular term, segregated, by sex. There was a low mound of red dirt which separated the girls play ground from the boys.

Well, while at Miss Lucy's I got my first whipping by the "mean" one - Miss Annie. I also got in my first fist fight. Let me tell you about those two indelible memories. First, the whipping. Occasionally, Father would hitch up the horse to the buggy (we couldn't afford a surrey) and we would drive about ten miles to visit my mother's sister, Aunt Mary and my Father's brother, Uncle Howard. They lived in Sixpound Township, in the old Horace Palmer home. Aunt Mary and Uncle Howard had four boys, Ollie, Russell, Howard, Jr., and Alston. (As a matter of interest my Mother and Aunt Mary were sisters and my Father and Uncle Howard were brothers - so you can see how close we were or how mixed up we were). But there is more, my mother had two other sisters - Carrie and Harriett. Now Harriett, after seeing what had happened to two of her sweet sisters couldn't stand the thought of marrying another Palmer so she had a Fitts. His name was

Will Fitts. She thought she'd rather have a Fitts than a Palmer. Anyway, Harriett and Uncle Will had three children - Sarah, Annie and Will, Jr. After Uncle Will retired from railroading, he or may be got railroaded, he retired in Warrenton across the street from Junie Drake. They were great people and I loved them very much. Many of you know or knew them well. Uncle Will was one of the greatest story tellers I ever knew. Although he always raised a good garden he seldom went up town to shoot the bull with other retired gentry, and there were quite a few, some of who enjoyed sitting on the confederate monument and chatting about the "good old days." Well, it seems Uncle Will was not much of a church goer. There was in town though a great religious man - Mr. Ed Rooker. I understand one day, Mr. Ed asked Uncle Will wouldn't he like to come to prayer meeting some Wednesday night. Uncle Will, who always knew the right thing to say and in the right tone thanked Mr. Ed for the invitation and remarked that he would like to go to prayer meetings on Wednesday but that he had to turn him down because he didn't believe in running around at night.

Now let me get back to the whipping given me by Miss Annie Hawkins - the stern one. I told Miss Lucy about 10 o'clock one morning that my Mother wanted me to go with her to visit Aunt Mary in Sixpound Township that day. So she said all right and so off I went to play on the bales of cotton in the back of Edmond White's cotton gin. Several days later Miss Lucy saw Mother and inquired about our trip to see Aunt Mary. Mother said, "We didn't go to Sixpound." Miss Lucy said, "You didn't? Why Jeff told me you wanted him to go with you so I let him off from school." Well, that did it. I had been caught. When I got home from school Mother was waiting for me. She asked me about it and my tears gave me away. Anyway she had a branch which looked about six feet long and an inch in diameter and she whalled me good. Well, I thought that was the end. The next day Miss Lucy said Miss Annie wanted to see me over at the "big house" - remember the big house? I knew what that meant - the whole world had fallen in on me. At first she was very nice, asked me to have a seat, that is, what was left of mine after Mother had gotten through. And then the lecture started. From what she told me I might just as well have robbed the Citizens Bank and clubbed Mr. Watson. But oh, no - it didn't stop there. Miss Annie, the "mean" one, said, "Take your pants down." Need I say more. Only one thing more, that is, I have never told another bold lie. Oh, maybe I have told a lot out of politeness and without harmful intent. It so happened I learned my lesson early, quick, severe and lasting about lying.

Oh, now about my first fight at Miss Lucy's. Remember Edward "Somy" Grant? I think I saw in the Warren Record that he was recently in Warrenton. Wish I could have seen him. Anyway, Somy and I and some other boys were playing marbles. Somy had a sore toe and every time he would go to shoot I would "accidentally" step on his sore toe. Well he cautioned me a couple of times but I never paid too much attention to plain ol' cautions. So the next time he went to shoot

I sidled up to him in a shy manner and with caution or no caution I again stepped on his sore toe just as he was getting ready to shoot. I think he was fudging a little bit anyway. All of a sudden I found myself flat on my back with my nose bleeding. I started bawling and ran in to tell Miss Lucy what Somy had done to me. Miss Lucy, being the Chief Judge of the Hawkins School Supreme Court called in witnesses. They all blamed me. Having remembered about the last lie I told, this time I admitted that I had stepped on his sore toe when he got ready to shoot. So Miss Lucy stopped my nose from bleeding, sent me into the school house for the rest of the recess period and Somy went back to shooting marbles. (P.S.) I hope he lost - no, not really).

And then the really great day came when I had to go to school at Warrenton High School. Gosh, was I scared. I was in the fourth grade. My teacher was Miss Daisy Kate Rogers. She was my life saver because I fell in love with her right away. I wasn't a good student but I was about the best all-around teachers helper in them there parts. I was the best black board washer in Warren County, good window washer, good trash picker upper. Before going into school we would stand in line at the bottom of the steps, outside the school. I was always first in line. I always enjoyed Miss Rogers standing at the top of the steps on windy days.

The next few years were probably about average - some good - some bad, or not so bad. My teacher in the fifth grade was Mrs. Virginia Pear-sall. She was very precise and absolute in enforcing the rules. I think I liked her because she had no foolishness in the class and I knew exactly where I stood. I do recall one little episode or incident and as was just my luck I almost got caught again. One day we were to have a spelling test. We were told the day before the page in the spelling book from which the test would be given. Well, the previous night I found other things to do except study for the spelling test. Of course I wouldn't dare tell Mother that we were going to have a spelling test. By that age in life I was learning fast about what to tell Mother and what not to tell Mother. The decision making process was beginning to set in and take hold. I would be the one to decide what was better for her to know and not know. That morning, before school, I thought I would act real studious and zealous and take a quick glance at the test words. After all, I had graduated from the most highly respected privately owned educational institution in the area, was in the fifth grade, was no longer in love with my fourth grade teacher, so this little time consuming period of learning to simply spell a few words was no sweat.

And then it happened! I opened the book, took a look at the spelling page, closed the book nonchalantly and then all of a sudden I found myself shaking as if Sheriff Drake had caught me stealing apples from the "Apple Man are Here." (This old man used to sell apples from the back of a truck parked across the street from where the police station is today and who had a chant singing out "Apple Man are Here".) So what in the world was I going to do? Get sick, skip school, flunk the test, or cheat. It so happened that at that time we kept your books, paper, etc. in an open desk drawer. So it was rather easy for me to slip my book out of the drawer, put it between my legs opened to the right page and take the chicken way out - cheat. It seems as though when one is doing something he knows is wrong that he subconsciously displays an obvious sense of guilt. Just for some unknown reason I had a feeling that my teacher had an idea about what I was doing and that other kids seemed to indicate that they had the same idea. This of course made me nervous and I found myself wondering about what was worse - to cheat and have to live with myself and always keep it a secret or to flunk, and study and take it over. So I slipped my book back into the desk drawer and flunked the test. Now, you know what comes next. You have to tell your mother, knowing she would find out anyway. I told Mother that afternoon about what I had done and she was more proud of me than if I had made an "A" grade. Result: Another good lesson learned by a young boy growing up in a small wonderful town.

Well, I didn't do well at all

in the fifth grade and had to repeat it. The next year when I was in the sixth grade I think my teacher was Miss Wagner or Miss Thompson - maybe both at different times. The two things I remember so vividly about Miss Wagner were the length of her clothes - down to her ankles - and also how pretty she was. At time I wish I had been older, she was so pretty. Miss Thompson had different qualifications - was very stern, relentless, believed in giving lots of home assignments, also had the silly rule about being in your seat on time and keeping your big mouth shut. She was a great one on giving history assignments and making you write theme papers. Shucks, I hardly knew what the word "theme" meant - but under Miss Thompson, I soon found out. I can't briefly let my mind reminisce without recalling at least one amusing incident. It seems Miss Thompson usually had a job for everyone, a school room chore assignment. One of my good buddies, who in later years became one of my best friends, was named of all things - Peter "Doolittle" Jones. His parents must have known what they were doing because the name certainly fit the boy. Well, P. D.'s task was to open the windows in the mornings. They were the type of windows that you pushed out at the bottom and the top half would open into the room. Apparently P. D. was feeling a little irritated about something that beautiful spring school day so he decided to get his job over in a hurry. You know, if you are a little mad about something and want to get whatever it is you have to do over in a hurry you usually foul it up. So, P. D. was going to get these darn windows opened as soon as possible. So he went right to work. The first one he pushed on as rough as he could caused the bottom to fly open and the top to fly in. So there stood Peter "Doolittle" with his head stuck up through one of the panes of glass in the top section of the sash. I laughed so hard its a wonder I didn't have a hernia. So down he went to the Principal's Office to have a few scratches covered with pure iodine. The students laughed so boisterously that its a wonder Miss Thompson didn't suspend the whole class for the day.

Mrs. Scarborough was my seventh grade teacher and she was a real good one. I enjoyed her classes so much. Of course I was getting older (fourteen), the school work was getting harder and the girls seemed to become more interesting and were kinda like magnets to boys. Come to think of it I also got punched in the nose in the seventh grade. Here again, as usual, I deserved it. Pettis Terrell and Gladys Halthcock were sweethearts. One day I saw her slip Pettis a note which he read, put in his coat pocket and hung it in the cloakroom. I couldn't resist the temptation of trying to slip that note and see what it said. Here again I made another mistake. Of all people not to seriously fool around with would be Pettis Terrell. I slipped the note at the same time that Pettis came back into the cloakroom. Well I slowly got off the floor and fortunately he was kinder amused at me and we also became the very best of friends. I was so sorry to hear recently that he was no longer with us.

You know, as I recall my boyhood days in Warrenton it seems as though we always had something to do. Of course, with Mother running a rooming and boarding house at the Old Shiloh Place and trying to make ends meet (my father died in 1926 when I was thirteen) I had plenty to do there, such as replenish the wood and coal in each room each day, feed the chickens, work the garden, cut the grass, go to school, attend Boy Scout meetings (Graham Boyd was scout master), fold Warren Record papers for mailing (boy, that is a story in itself), pack five pound sugar bags at Penders store, go swimming, play at baseball and football, go to Sunday School and Church, "assist" Jimmy Mayfield in the operation of the pool room establishment and then find time to help George Robinson put up new signs advertising coming movie attractions. You see, in this way I could somehow get in free to see Tom Mix, Hoot Gibson, Buck Jones, Wm. S. Hart, Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin, etc., and the Pearl Buck serials on Saturday afternoons and by all means go to the "jack pot" drawings on Wednesdays. So you see I really didn't have much time for study - too many friends and too

many other things to do. I remember each morning going to school I had to pass by Mr. W. A. Miles' Hardware Store. As always he was standing out front twirling the awning cord. He would always greet me with a handshake and he had the strongest grip I ever felt. It was like a steel vise. Each time we shook I'd go down on my knees. You know I used to go by there every day knowing that he was going to put me on my knees but you know the reason I did it was because he liked me and I liked him. We both kinder got fun out of it.

Then it happened. One Sunday afternoon in October 1927 when I was fourteen I was playing with some other boys (I recall Paul Bell, Ben Robinson, Willis Harrison and others) when something happened that changed my life. These boys were all husky, strapping young fellows. All except me. I was the smallest one among them. I was at the age where the opinion of my "gang" was the most important thing in the world. The other boys were running, jumping, boxing, but I couldn't excel in sports. As I watched the boys my eyes fell on an electrical pole supporting half a dozen wires and furnishing electricity for the operation of the ice house run by a relative of mine, J. C. Moore. Those wires carried death and destruction, but I didn't think of that. I suddenly remembered where a workman had left a pair of climbing "spikes". An idea seized me. At least I was light weight anyway. I would show the other boys what I could do. I would strap those spikes on and shin up the pole. Buckling them on I started up. The boys stood at the foot admiringly. I hung on one leg, I waved, I made faces at the boys below. They cheered. I climbed higher and higher.

So high up now that I wasn't watching where I was going. I touched a wire freighted with death - 6000 volts! My hands curled, gripped the wire. It touched my neck. I couldn't let loose! Finally my fingers came free. I thudded to the ground. Nose and shoulder broken.

The boys who had been laughing and cheering me a moment before now ran and told Mr. Moore who made a desperate rush to Maria Parham Hospital in Henderson. I was unconscious upon arrival. I remained unconscious for three weeks, hovering between life and death. After being in four different hospitals, Maria Parham in Henderson, Park View in Rocky Mount where another friend of mine, Tom Holt gave me blood by a blood transfusion so Dr. Newsome Battle could perform a skin graft operation by removing skin from my legs and putting it on the scar on my neck which wouldn't heal. After going home for a while Dr. Frank Hunter thought it would be a good idea for me to have physical therapy treatments. So he and Dr. Battle made arrangements for me to go to the Hospital for Ruptured and Crippled on 42nd Street in New York City. Dr. Battle was doing some special study there so I had a friend in him during my two months stay. Then back at home in Warrenton again - this time with about the worst false damn yankee accent you ever heard. So after another stay in Warrenton, Drs. Hunter and Battle "ganged" up on me again and sent me to the Union Memorial in Baltimore. There the world famous plastic surgeon, Dr. Davis, opened up my right arm to see what could be done to get some use back into my fingers. He found that because all the tendons on the underside had been burned away that there was nothing he could do to restore full or partial use to my right lower arm. So, after about two more months I was back in Warrenton under the care of Mother, Dr. Hunter and many friends. One amus-

ing thing happened one day when Dr. Hunter made his daily visit to change the bandage on my neck. This time Jim Moore came with him to see the changing of the bandage. Dr. Hunter removed the gauze and Jim Moore seeing the raw flesh and blood passed out right as he made it to the hallway. Dr. Hunter had to stop his work and go and revive Jim I got kinder tickled at that happening.

After about two and one-half years the me came for me to go back to school. Boys and girls my age had gone on up in grades and I had to go back to class with kids two and three years younger. I soon found that I had developed an overwhelming inferior complex. At school I sat in the back row

so the teacher wouldn't call on me. I wouldn't ask a girl for a date or dance at first. I hated walking down the street, sometimes actually crossing over to keep from meeting some one I knew. I finally finished high school and attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

After two years at UNC I went to Washington, D. C. to look for work and to try to overcome an inferiority complex. When I joined a public speaking class I dropped into my seat paralyzed with fear after my first speech, which lasted about 60 seconds. After that experience I resolved that I would not let my inferiority complex lick me, so I set about the task of licking it and did. I was fortunate because I personally studied public speaking under the most famous teacher - the late Dale Carnegie. Later became one of his public speaking instructors and taught classes for about twenty years in many cities along the east coast. This training also helped me immeasurably in my position with Department of the Army in the Pentagon from which I retired from Federal Government after about thirty years of service.

I mentioned at the beginning of this article that my name - Jefferson Davis - became an asset for me. This came about as I took on more responsible work with the Department of the Army. My position required me to do quite a lot of travelling to various Army installations throughout the United States. The word soon got around that my name was Jefferson Davis so my business acquaintances always called me or referred to me as Jefferson Davis where ever I went. I would particularly get a kick out of it - when I travelled to such places as New York, Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Cincinnati, etc. When my trips were arranged the installations that I had to visit were notified in advance. This would, in many instances, immediately set off a

roar among my friends at these offices with such quips as, "What do you know, Jefferson Davis is going to make another attack on our left flank," and then when I would enter the conference room they would stand at attention and one would announce, "Order please, the President of the Confederacy has arrived." Something like that would always get the meeting off on a relaxed and humorous tone. The name didn't attract much attention on the west coast in places like San Francisco, Los Angeles, etc. In places like New Orleans or Houston, Texas the name would usually bring a remark like, "It's always good to have Jefferson Davis back with us again." This is what I meant when I said at the beginning that it became an asset in my government career.

This has become much too long. Of course, when I get off reminiscing about days in Warrenton I could take different subjects and write on and on such as the teachings of Miss Mariam Boyd, the best I ever had, the June German Dances, gatherings at Boyd Davis' Ball Room, Cokes at Boyce Drug Company, BYPU meetings, my first train trip to Washington, the time I left home. H. Henderson and Billy Lanier episodes, Dr. Taylor, Bill Rook and Mr. Ed Gillam, Harry Brown, the ice man, Jim Smith, the janitor, football teams and games, editor of high school paper, Noole Stalnback, the time James Polk and P. D. decided to leave the June German and go to Florida, and on and on. Maybe someday some of that old gang can get together and have a reunion and really tell some tales.

Biggall, as I write this I recall your eulogy of President Kennedy which was published in the Warren Record on November 29, 1963 in which you wrote that, "It has been said that a man is part of all whom he has known." I am positive that the people I know and knew

in Warrenton during my boyhood days became a part of me and my knowing them always served me well.

Sgt. Crews Graduates From Academy

FT. BRAGG, N. C. (AHTNC) -Sergeant John E. Crews, 28, son of Elbert Crews, Route 2, Warrenton, was graduated with honors Sept. 4 from the 82nd Airborne Division Non-commissioned Officer Academy at Ft. Bragg, N. C. Sgt. Crews received four weeks of training which included instruction in drill and ceremonies, physical training, leadership, map reading and weapons familiarization. Sgt. Crews, a communications chief in Battery C, 2nd Battalion, 321st Artillery of the 82nd Airborne Division, entered the Army in March, 1968, and was last stationed in Vietnam. He holds the Army Commendation Medal. His wife, Evangeline, lives in Spring Lake.

Blackmon Completes Police Training

FT. GORDON, GA. (AHTNC) -Army Private John E. Blackmon, son of Mrs. Eliza Blackmon, Route 1, Norlina, completed advanced military police training at Ft. Gordon, Ga., August 28. During the eight weeks of training, Pvt. Blackmon received specialized instruction in the technical skills required of a military policeman. Some of the subjects taught are traffic control, communications and unarmed defense methods, civil and military law, and prisoner-of-war control. Pvt. Blackmon entered the Army in April, 1970, and completed basic training at Ft. Bragg. About 400 hours of labor are needed to produce an acre of flue-cured tobacco.

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