

E.L. McKee¹ to W.D. Sylva, October 27, 1924

Sylva Tanning Company

Tanners
and
Extract Manufacturers
Sylva, N.C.

Oct 27th 24

Mr. W.D. Sylva,
Cleburne, Tex.

Dear Will:

I call you Will as I have always knew [known?] will Sylva and as you will remember that the Cannon and Hampton families and my family were intimate. There is so much could tell you about Sylva dont know where to begin and will only speak of few things. I know all about the history of Sylva that you speak of and that it was named after you. Some say it was named Sylva meaning Sylvan (woods) However, I knew that suggestion of the name came from your name as you were at Hamptons at the time

I am the baby of the our family and was born in 71 and am 53 years old now but feel about sixteen.² Father died in 1890,³ mother is alive and is [9]³⁴

¹ Ernest Lyndon McKee (September 11, 1871 – October 6, 1952) was the son of Robert and Matilda McKee and was born in Webster. (source: *Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. I, p. 335; *Cemeteries of Jackson County*, p. 204). The 1920 census lists Ernest L. McKee, age 48, in Sylva, occupation given as Superintendent, Tannery. He is married to Gertrude D., age 34; son William D., age 5; son Ernest L., Jr., age [4 1/12 ?].

² According to *The History of Jackson County*, McKee was “second in entrepreneurial prominence” only to C.J. Harris. McKee was the “son of a Webster merchant who got his start though industry and native ability.” After studying telegraphy and working as a bookkeeper, “about 1900 he and Oscar J. Coward formed a mercantile partnership in Sylva. This business became the Sylva Supply Company when C.J. Harris bought out Coward in 1902.” The *History* continues by noting other of McKee’s achievements (these are the ones listed prior to the 1924 date of the letter):

“McKee’s association with C.J. Harris opened additional opportunities. In 1906 the two men helped found the Jackson County Bank and Harris also named McKee superintendent of the C.J. Harris Tanning Company in Sylva. When Armour Leather Company bought the tannery in 1915, McKee became president of the local operation. Later McKee was named president of the Parsons Tanning Company which included the Sylva operation plus two plants near Parsons, West Virginia.” (source: *History of Jackson County*, p. 188).

years old and very spry for her age. Sister Hattie,⁵ brother Henry⁶ and brother Jim are all dead.⁷ Genl. Hampton, Mrs. Hampton, and Maie all dead.

It would be easier to give you the names of the ones still living that were here when you were here than to name the dead. Wish had the time to tell you them all and their children and will try to do so some time.

Sylva has about 1500 population and is a very busy town.⁸ The principal part of the business is on South side of the railroad and main street begins at old mill and runs between Hampton house and mountain. The town is scattered over two miles square. We have a graded school with about four hundred pupils and a beautiful High School building (Consolidated School[⁹]) many brick stores and buildings, A large tannery and chestnut extract works owned by Armour

³ Robert F. McKee was born December 18, 1830 and, as the letter indicates, died June 2, 1890). (source: *Cemeteries of Jackson County*, p. 394).

⁴ Matilda Wells McKee was born February 23, 1932 and, as the letter indicates, was living in 1924. She died July 20, 1928. (source: *Cemeteries of Jackson County*, p. 394).

⁵ Hattie Virginia McKee was born August 30, 1858. She married Joseph Collins and the couple lived at Clyde, N.C. (source: *Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. I, p. 335).

⁶ Henry Cummings McKee was born November 9, 1863. He married Mattie McLain. He was employed by Armour Leather Company, which had purchased the Harris Tannery in 1915. (source *Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. I, p. 335).

⁷ The 1880 census lists Lyndon, age 8, of Webster living in the household of his father, Robt. F. McKee, age 49, and whose occupation was retail sales. Also listed are his mother, Margh M., age 47; brother Henry C., age 16; sister Hannah M., age 14; brother James W., age 10; and two others in household that appear to be servants but the page is damaged.

⁸ Sylva had an enumerated population in 1920 of 863, and which would grow to 1,340 by 1930. McKee's figure of 1,500 may either be a guess reflecting the town's growth, a reference to the township rather than the town, or to the combined population of Sylva and Dillsboro (which was 528 in 1920). (source: *History of Jackson County*, p. 127; *North Carolina Manual*, 1923, pp. 423, 428); *North Carolina Manual*, p. 135). Growth of the town was reflected in the *Jackson County Journal*, April 25, 1924, "Much Building Activity in Sylva," which stated:

"There is a great deal of building activity beginning to manifest itself in Sylva, and the prospects are that new buildings erected, this year will equal the phenomenal number of last year. . . .

"Last year approximately half a million dollars was invested in new buildings in the thriving town of Sylva, 57 new residences and a number of handsome business buildings being erected, and indications are that the record of last year may be eclipsed in 1924."

⁹ Sylva Central High School "opened for its first term September 12, 1924" (source: *Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. I, p. 512).

Co¹⁰ and I am president of the company and it is known as The Sylva Tanning Co,¹¹ and is located as [at?] what you knew as the Love bottom just East of Sylva. In fact our property runs down to the old mill dam.

We have about 350 employees and use about six thousand dollars worth of hides each day, and grind 14 cars chestnut wood per day and use about two cars of bark per day. We use part of the chestnut extract here and the balance is shipped to our Northern tanneries.¹²

We have two banks one of which I am Vice President of and I am also interested in Builders Supply Co, (Lumber) Sylva Supply Co, general merchandise, both of these companies I organized. Also in whole sale grocery business.

We have two nice churches¹³ and the Baptist have a very good boarding school here.¹⁴ Thee [sic] is a railroad runs out from Sylva up Tuckase gee [sic]

¹⁰ McKee “was connected with C.J. Harris in the tanning Company from 1910 until they sold to Armour Leather Company in 1915. He was also a partner with Harris in the Sylva Supply Company.” (source: *Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. I, p. 335).

¹¹ The *Jackson County Journal*, August 11, 1922, “Magazine Supplement,” p. 4, featured a panoramic view of the Sylva Tanning Company, subtitled “The Armour Plant At Sylva And the Majestic Ranges of Mountains Surrounding It. Mr. E.L. McKee, a Native Jacsonian, and Citizen of Sylva, is President of the Company.”

¹² The *Jackson County Journal*, March 3, 1933, p. 1, “Railroad Opens Rich Territory,” appears to confirm McKee’s comments on the size of the tannery operation:

“One of the important indstrious [sic] in Jackson county, and the leading one in Sylva, the county seat, is the Sylva Tanning company, established in 1902 by Charles J. Harris, of Dillsboro and purchased by the Armour interests of Chicago in 1915. In the following year, at the investigation of President McKee, the extract plant was built to supply the chain of 14 other tanneries operated throughout the country by the Armour Leather company.

“The tannery has a capacity of 300 hides a day, the combined plant requiring the services of 350 men in normal times. Packer hides are used exclusively and converted into first grade belting leather. The extract department has a capacity of 200 barrels daily, or as expressed in pounds, 100,000 daily, making a total of 30,000,000 pounds annually. The plant requires 45,000 cords of chestnut wook [sic, wood] a year.

“Along industrial lines, the Builders Supply and Lumber company, plans additional growth with the installation in the near future of a railroad siding to serve a proposed planing mill that will turn out all types of dimension stock and building material.”

¹³ The First Baptist Church of Sylva was “constituted on Saturday, November 26, 1887” as Sylva Baptist Church and “in 1908 a concrete block building was erected on the east side of Walnut Street” (source: *Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. I, p. 518). The First United Methodist

river principally for the lumber.¹⁵ There is a great band mill at East La Porte.¹⁶ There is a big state school at Cullowhee.¹⁷

We have fine highway to Asheville, gravel to Waynesville and hardsurface [sic] balance of the way.¹⁸ We have fine highways all over N.C. now and the old

Church was “organized on December 12, 1888” and “in 1917 . . . a brick church building replaced the white frame church” (source: *Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. I, p. 9).

¹⁴ Sylva Collegiate Institute operated from 1899 – 1932 (source: *Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. I, p. 513)

¹⁵ Blackwood Lumber Company’s Tuckaseegee & Southeastern rail line. See the following footnote for additional information.

¹⁶ The sizes of Blackwood Lumber Company was mentioned in the *Jackson County Journal*, January 14, 1922, p. 5, “Blackwood Lbr. Co. Begins Operations.”

“The big band mill of the Blackwood Lumber Company at East Laporte began operations Tuesday, and was ready for full operation Wednesday morning, and is now running full time with a capacity of 40,000 feet of lumber daily, which can be and soon will be increased to 75,000 feet a day. . . .

“The company now has in its employ upwards of 300 men, 125 being at work at the mill, about 100 in the woods, 30 to 35 carpenters and the like, working on the erection of buildings at East Laporte and the rest on the railroad and other jobs.

“The Blackwood Lumber Company about two years ago purchased the large speculation boundary of hardwood and chestnut timber from the Jackson County Lumber Company, and immediately began the construction of a railroad known as the Tuckaseegee and Southeastern Railway Company, from Sylva by the enterprising little town of Cullowhee, to East Laporte, and thence up Caney Fork to the timber.”

A second article in the *Jackson County Journal*, July 21, 1922, p. 1, “Jackson County’s Newest Industry – Blackwood Lumber Company Manufacturing Lumber on Large Scale,” commented on the scale of the operation:

“Owing to the low price of lumber which prevailed up to the opening of the war, it was not feasible [sic] to place this timber on the market, because of it’s inaccessibility, and to the fact that it’s [sic] successful operation required the construction of 20 miles of railway, requiring a large amount of capital.

“In 1920 The Blackwood Lumber Company became the purchaser of the tract, in fee, and immediately began operations on a large scale, constructing a railway from Sylva, the junction point with the Southern Railway, to East La Porte 12½ miles distant, and up Caney Fork to the woods. During 1921 the railway was completed to East La Porte and the construction of a town, saw mill and general plant site was begun. The double band mill, stores, offices, employee houses, and water system were completed early this year, and the mill has been in continuous operation ever since, sawing a large quantity of excellent hardwoods”

¹⁷ This was known as Cullowhee Normal & Industrial School in 1924.

state is about the best in the union and the worls [sic] is sitting up and taking notice of us. We go to Asheville in motor cars in hour and forty five minutes (52 miles highway)

This is the county seat now and will send you a postal of the new courthouse¹⁹ [sic] which I built and will try pick up some other views around the town. Dillsboro and Sylva is connected by concrete road 1½ miles between towns. I married one of W_____ [A.] Dills²⁰ daughters²¹ of Dillsboro the last time, and we have one boy [ten ?] and other _____ I have one boy 26 years old by my first marriage to a Miss Moody.²²

You speak of not telling people much about yourself. Were you running from the sheriff (!) ?²³

Sorry to learn of your troubles and hope you will soon be recovered

¹⁸ Improvements in roads designed for automobile travel were commented upon in the *Jackson County Journal*, March 3, 1922, p. 1, "Big Improvement in Store for Jackson Co."

"New highways, new school buildings, a new fraternal temple and plans for new hotels in Sylva and Jackson county are proposed, under way, or listed for development in the near future. . . .

"One of the paramount projects contemplated is a link of the Asheville – Murphy – Atlanta highway connecting Sylva with Dillsboro, a distance of two miles. This it is proposed to hard surface, thus encouraging all year round travel between the two towns to such an extent that many predict the eventual growth of Sylva toward Dillsboro and the latter toward the neighboring town until it will appear as if the two were one."

Jackson County Journal, October 20, 1922, p. 1, "Begin Laying Concrete on Sylva Street"

"Laying of paving on the Main street of Sylva was started"

¹⁹ McKee actively participated in the construction of a new county courthouse in Sylva after the vote in May 1913 to remove the county seat from Webster. He was on the "special committee to select, locate, and purchase the site," he was one of the individuals to act as sureties for C.J. Harris proposal to build the courthouse for a fixed amount, and was chairman of the building committee. (source: *History of Jackson County*, pp. 125 – 126)

²⁰ William Allen Dills, founder of Dillsboro.

²¹ Gertrude Dills (July 8, 1885 – November 27, 1948) married McKee on August 19, 1913. They had two sons, William Dills McKee and E.L. McKee, Jr. (August 31, 1915 – April 9, 1961) (Source: *Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. I, p. 335; *Cemeteries of Jackson County*, p. 204).

²² McKee's first marriage was to Mattie Moody. They had one son. (source: *Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. I, p. 335).

²³ There are a series of dashes at this point which appears to be meant as an underline emphasizing McKee's inquiry as to if Sylva/Selvey was "running from the sheriff."

You will excuse this letter as am writing it myself rather than dictating to my stenographer as felt rather write you myself.

Yours very truly

[signature]

E.L. McKee

Hope you can visit Sylva.

If anybody in particular you should wish to hear about let me know. Every old citizen of Webster is dead. Mr. L.C. Hall²⁴ married sister Hannah²⁵ has been dead years but she is alive and he [her] two grown sons are interested in the Sylva Supply Co and Mercantile Supply Co.

Here are a few that are alive. Marcellus Buchanan²⁶ who lives here, Neal Buchanan,²⁷ lives in Washington state. Mary Long who married Hanly [Morris] Hanly is dead.²⁸ Lee Leatherwood²⁹ lives in Sylva and married B_____ [Potts].

²⁴ Lucius Coleman Hall (June 11, 1847 – July 19, 1892) and Hannah McKee Hall (April 12, 1866 – January 31, 1962) are buried in Webster Cemetery ((source: *Cemeteries of Jackson County*, p. 394). As McKee notes, L.C. Hall had been dead 32 years by 1924, but Hannah was still living.

²⁵ Hannah Margaret McKee was born April 12, 1866, and married Lucius Coleman Hall. Their son, James Wells, was born August 4, 1869, and operated the Sylva Supply Company. (source: *Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. I, p. 335).

²⁶ Marcellus Buchanan (June 19, 1862 – January 14, 1943) “was married to Laura Belle Leatherwood, daughter of Felix and Annie Carter Leatherwood of Webster. He resided in Webster and Sylva until his death on January 14, 1943.” (source: *Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. I, p. 122). Parents – Joseph Depus and Eva Buchanan; he was the eldest child.

²⁷ Probably Cornelius Buchanan, born April 20, 1868 (source: online). He is the brother of Marcellus Buchanan. The 1910 census has a Cornelius Buchanan, age 42, born in North Carolina living in Oregon, Lane County, Florence Precinct, married to Katie; all family born in North Carolina. The 1920 census has Cornelius O. Buchanan, age 52, born in North Carolina, in Oregon, Lane County, Florence Pct., married to Katie.

²⁸ Mary J. Long, age 20, married M.H. Morris, age 27, on January 1, 1890 (source: *Marriage Bonds of Haywood and Jackson Counties, North Carolina*, p. 103). Manos Hanley Morris and Mary Jane Long operated the Commercial Hotel in Sylva, but T.H. Hastings owned the hotel when it burned April 6, 1923. (*Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. II, pp. 3 – 4, 245). “Manos Hanley, born in 1860, married Mary Long of Jackson County and they had two sons, John Hanley and William Jackson.” Manos and Mary are buried in Webster Cemetery (source: *Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. I, p. 359). Both M.H. Morris (March 15, 1862 – April 6, 1923) and Mary Long Morris (May 23, 1869 – June 22, 1954) are buried in the Webster Cemetery (source: *Cemeteries of Jackson County*, p. 394).

Cant think of any others that you would remember. Alf Parker lives in Oklahoma or Arkansas,³⁰ can get you his add ress. Suppose Henry Brendle³¹ is dead as he left the country soon after you did.

[signature]

The railroad crossed the creek just below old dam and depot about five hundred feet West of crossing. Do you remember “Old Boss” the horse Judge Cannon drove? Bet you rode behind him to Sylva. I remember the old judge’s wheezing, and his old horse which was so gentle with him but would run away with young man. Think he had been an old race horse.

Could not find the recent pictures around Sylva.

Postcard 01

“This is the court house taken about eight years ago. Since that time the grounds have been improved. This is on the hill ~~at the end of Main St~~ at West end of main street. Memorial fountain stands at the bottom of steps and end of street.

Memorial fountain to World War Veterans. Sylva formed one company volunteers”

Postcard 02

“The old mill dam that you knew. It has been gone a number of years.”

Postcard 03

²⁹ An obituary for Felix Leatherwood notes he had a daughter, “(Lee) Mrs. R.P. Potts.” Lillian Lee Leatherwood was born Feb. 13, 1872 (source: *Jackson County Heritage*, Vol. I, p. 317). An online Ancestry resource says Lillian Lee Leatherwood (1872 - ?), daughter of Felix Harrison and Annie Lavenia Carter Leatherwood, married R.P. Potts. The Find a Grave web site has her as February 13, 1872 – June 12, 1960, buried in Green Hills Cemetery, Asheville. The spouse is listed as Rufus Penland Potts (1854 – 1937). Note that Marcellus Buchanan is married to a sister of Lee Leatherwood.

³⁰ The 1920 census lists an Alfred M. Parker, age 66, born in North Carolina, then residing in Polk County, Arkansas, White Township.

³¹ The 1880 census lists Henry P. Brendle, age 30, living in Webster, with the occupation of sheriff. The 1900 census lists Henry P. Brendle, age 51, of Oklahoma in Cleveland Little River Township. The entire Brendle family was born in North Carolina.

“---tion [Section?] of Sylva taken ten years ago. Everything very much changed now.”