

LILLIAN FRANKLIN THOMASSON (1900-1995)

Jim Casada, December 2020

PART 1

Teacher, playwright, artist, author, entrepreneur, historian, philanthropist—these are just some of the many faces of the wonderfully talented individual who was Lillian Franklin Thomasson. She had a direct impact on the history and people of her beloved homeland, Swain County, in a variety of ways, but in importance none compared to the decades she spent as a teacher and administrator in the county's public schools. Chances are excellent that anyone reading this who attended Swain County schools during the period embracing portions of five decades from the 1920s to the 1960s had classroom experiences involving her tutelage.

Almost all of Thomasson's teaching years were spent at Swain County High School. There, over the course of four full decades and two generations (and in a few cases three), she offered courses in French, civics, U. S. history, and art. Even today, a quarter century after her death, there are almost certainly hundreds if not thousands of individuals who look back fondly to time spent in her classroom.

Lillian Thomasson was the daughter of a noted local lawyer and civic figure, Andrew J. "Jack" Franklin. A pillar of the community, Franklin was a deeply religious man, astute lawyer, and successful businessman. Lillian was the third of five children born to Franklin and his wife, Sallie Keener Franklin, who survived to adulthood. Both of Lillian's parents were teachers at the time they met, although her father soon devoted his energies to more lucrative pursuits in the business and legal worlds. Still, it comes as no surprise that his daughter followed a life's path both parents considered a noble, worthy one.

After a harrowing struggle with diphtheria when she was quite young, Lillian enjoyed what would have been considered a privileged childhood for the time and place. All her youthful years were spent in downtown Bryson City, first on Everett Street and later in a home her parents built on Main Street. The latter house had running water, piped in from a spring on what was then known as Spring Street (today's Veterans Boulevard) and the Thomassons were among the first residents of Swain County to have a telephone. Their phone number was 5, which suggests they were probably the fifth local family to acquire telephone service.

Lillian's parents were fairly affluent, at least prior to the economic ravages of the Depression, thanks in large measure to the abilities and energy of her father. He left the teaching profession shortly after marriage and passed the North Carolina bar the year before Lillian was born. He soon built up a thriving local practice and within a decade of being admitted to the bar also owned a saw mill on nearby Deep Creek and a general store in downtown Bryson City. The building housing the store contained his law office.

Jack and Sallie Franklin gave their offspring every possible opportunity for cultural and educational advancement, and in 1907 the whole family attended the Jamestown Exposition and World's Fair celebrating the first permanent European settlement in America. The Franklins were pillars of First Baptist Church in Bryson City, and it was there their daughter received her religious training. Clearly her early experiences in formal education made a deep impression, because Thomasson devoted her book, *Swain County . . . Early History and Educational Development*, to her parents and "Miss Nell' (Mrs. Nell Shank Leatherwood) my first teacher."

In due course Lillian completed her high school studies (only eleven years in those days), being one of “a class of two” when she completed study at Bryson City High School. The following autumn she enrolled in Meredith College, a small, Baptist-affiliated liberal arts institution for women. There she majored in art and in 1921 earned her undergraduate degree. While at Meredith she was quite active on the extracurricular scene, playing basketball, holding offices in the student athletic association, being elected president of her sophomore class, and serving as art editor of the class annual her senior year. Pictures from that annual show a beautiful young woman of confident, assured demeanor. Clearly gifted with a personality as lovely as her appearance, a note accompanying her class photograph says “her admirers are *legion*.” A three-line poem introducing her biographical entry in the annual was prophetic in affording a short, accurate summation of her entire life.

She is pretty to walk with,
And witty to talk with,
And pleasant, too, to think on.

During the summers of her undergraduate years she also took the opportunity to participate in sessions offered by Asheville Teacher’s College and other schools focusing on a course of study offered by one of the era’s great pedagogical minds, Columbia University’s Dr. William Heard Kilpatrick. Generally considered the key figure in perpetuating the progressive teaching methods of John Dewey, Kilpatrick’s approach greatly intrigued young Lillian. Eventually she would earn a second undergraduate degree, a B. S. in Education, through her summer studies at Asheville Teacher’s College.

Other efforts at advancing her education and enhancing her abilities as a teacher included dedicating summers, along with a one-semester leave of absence, to study at Chapel Hill and completion of an M. A. degree from the University of North Carolina. Add to that additional graduate work in French at the University of California-Berkeley and the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and the end result was training likely unmatched by any teacher in the Swain County school system at the time.

PART 2

Other efforts at advancing Lillian's education and enhancing her abilities as a teacher continued after she had returned to her homeland, married, and begun a long, highly successful career as a teacher. Most of those advanced studies were undertaken in the summer and suggest a degree of foresight rare in someone of her age and era. Clearly, from late teens onwards, she made a concerted effort to be in the vanguard of the latest pedagogical practices. The fact that she then utilized her visionary approach to benefit four decades of Swain County students offers grand testimony to her devotion to and love of the place of her roots.

Although marriage, raising a daughter, looking after a frail husband with steadfast devotion, and running a business would figure prominently in her coming years as an adult, clearly the die directing Thomasson's life had already been cast. She gives tacit acknowledgement of this fact in her preface to the second edition of *Swain County . . . Early History and Educational Development*. There Thomasson writes: "Swain County has been an obsession with me for the greater part of a lifetime; this must be due, to some degree, to an ancestral background of rugged pioneers with economic, religious and educational interests, and a desire for adventure. Education, teaching experience, hobbies, and historical events have played an important role in directing my activities."

Well before completing her studies at Meredith, young Lillian had begun a courtship with Berlin Claud Thomasson. Like her, Berlin came from solid Swain County stock. Lillian and B. C. were married in the home of her parents on November 28, 1923. The marriage had been planned for some time and ostensibly carried significance beyond nuptial joy, for Jack Franklin had promised his children that the first of them to be married would be given a house. Lillian and B. C. had every expectation that they would be the recipients of that bounty. Thus it must have been quite a shock when her brother, Jack, Jr., slipped off and married his sweetheart in a private ceremony held a few days before his sister's scheduled wedding. The senior Franklin handled what could have been a major family crisis with aplomb, telling Lillian, "Don't worry. I'll give you and Berlin a house that is just as nice."

The newlyweds settled into life in Bryson City with all the energy and enthusiasm one might have expected from individuals with their backgrounds and personalities. However, their marriage, while a happy one, found Lillian forced to face problems and grief at a quite early stage. In 1926 their first child, named Franklin, died at birth during a home delivery. Two years later a second child, Doris, would be born. Anxious to avoid any medical complications, her parents saw to it that she was delivered in Asheville's Mission Hospital.

Then, in the 1930s when he was only forty years of age, Dr. B. C. Thomasson developed serious heart problems. As a result he had to give up the bulk of his thriving dental practice. From the closing years of the Depression onward he was limited in how much work he could do. While he would live until 1970, for upwards of three decades Dr. Thomasson was to a considerable degree physically incapacitated. Meanwhile, guided by her inner strength, this engaging woman moved through life with grace and vigor, enthusiasm and endurance. In the classroom Lillian Thomasson was a pure delight. She brought a ready smile to her work, a real knack for getting the best out of not only dedicated students but slackards (sadly I must to some degree confess I speak from first-hand knowledge in this context), and cheerful willingness to go beyond the simple demands of textbook and chalkboard.

Mind you, linguistic purists might suggest she had some shortcomings. Thanks to subsequent years of studying French in college after two years under her guidance, followed by opportunities for some travel in French-speaking countries, I know her accent wasn't exactly what one would encounter on the streets of Paris or Quebec. Her spoken French carried strong overtones of her mountain upbringing. From this writer's perspective that is offered as a compliment, not a condemnation. It indicates that even in linguistic matters she was true to her roots.

She always encouraged her French students to make connections with pen pals in France and to that end, early in each school year, asked everyone in the class to write down the interests or characteristics they would like to have in a pen pal. A former student of hers shared a delightful anecdote which goes right to the heart of Thomasson's classroom presence and sense of humor.

The late Bill Burnett, who spent a career in local law enforcement, mischievously wrote in his statement of what sort of pen pal he wanted that the key consideration was a girl with 38-22-36 measurements. His long-suffering teacher, reading through the stipulations at her desk, came to his, grinned a bit, and then announced to the class: "Mr. Burnett wants a deformed person as a pen pal." That kind of wit and knowing how to deal with students was part of her teaching genius, and next we will turn to her pedagogical prowess in fuller detail.

PART 3

Ever a keen student of the mountain past and local folkways, Lillian Thomasson had an exceptional knack for bringing the verities of regional history and life home to her students. Two striking examples come immediately to mind, although in presenting them I am reminded of the manner in which some classmates still tease me, many decades after graduation from high school, about my proven ability “to get Mrs. Thomasson off track.” Honesty compels me to admit that I was a student rapsallion who always welcomed a bit of diversion or break from normal academic fare, and in those halcyon high-school days I would have agreed wholeheartedly with my classmates in regard to my ability to engineer distraction.

In retrospect though, the truth of the matter is that it was the teacher, not the student, who controlled what seemed meaningless meandering into areas far removed from the subject matter. I rather suspect that Thomasson played me and my classmates like firmly hooked trout. The fact that these anecdotes come readily to mind even as they uplift my spirits is suggestive in that regard. Underlying seemingly innocent “let’s distract the teacher” moments were meaningful life’s lessons far transcending the tedium of textbooks.

Lillian knew well the passion several boys in her classroom had for hunting. Occasionally she would inquire about our outings and success. She once even remarked, clearly taking delight in doing so, that the “club” a group of us had formed, the Rabbit Extinguishers of America, was misnamed. “If you manage to kill rabbits,” she said, “and you claim that is the case, then you need some work on your vocabulary. It should be Rabbit Exterminators of America.”

After enjoying a gentle laugh at the shortcomings of our lexicon, in the finest tradition of high country storytelling she shared a rabbit-hunting tale of her own. In the early years of their marriage, her husband loved hunting small game. One day Dr. Thomasson joined some friends on an all-day cottontail quest. This was evidently during the two-year period she served as principal of the Alarka Elementary School (her other forty years in Swain County were all spent on the Swain County High School faculty), because the event she described took place in that rural community.

“I set off for work right at daylight,” she recalled, “needing to get to school early to take care of some paperwork. As I was driving up to Alarka School a big old ridgerunner ran in front of me and I hit it a glancing blow with the car.” She never explained why she stopped and picked up the rabbit, which was undamaged from the standpoint of potential for human consumption, but one suspects two factors might have been at play. Perhaps the event offered an irresistible opportunity for some innocent mischief at the expense of her spouse along the line of thought: “I’ll show him who’s the family’s real rabbit hunter.” Then, too, she would have known and appreciated the animal’s culinary qualities. It was a cold winter’s day, so the matter of the meat “keeping” until after school never entered the equation.

Whatever her reason for retrieving the road kill, she came home in late afternoon with a fine cottontail. Her husband, on the other hand, had a barren day with nothing to show for his efforts but briar scratches. “From that time on,” she related, “whenever Berlin mentioned going on a rabbit hunt I would ask him if he needed any female assistance.”

Another story grew out of the Great Depression’s hard times. In Swain County, as was true across the country, the wolf of starvation figuratively howled just outside many folks’ door. During these lean

years Lillian, always civic-minded, devoted considerable energy to helping impoverished local folks. One aspect of her assistance involved delivering surplus foodstuffs the federal government sent in by rail throughout the county. In early December, in sharp contrast to normal goods such as cheese and flour, a large shipment of grapefruit arrived.

Lillian dutifully delivered grapefruit to households on her regular route, only to be shocked the following week when several folks declared the strange citrus fruits inedible. The remarks of one voluble housewife pretty well summarized their general reaction: "They's right purty," the woman commented, "but I biled 'em and I biled 'em. They never did get fit to eat."

Of course, that tale drew a laugh from students, and she shared our mirth before adding a cautionary note: "That was a mistake on my part," she said. "I should have known those needy folks would be unfamiliar with grapefruit, and by failing to tell them how they should be eaten I did a disservice, caused some embarrassment, and, worst of all, wasted perfectly good food in a time of need. It taught me a lesson I've never forgotten about respecting others and giving thought to their knowledge and condition."

She then, without so much as a hint that anyone in the class could possibly be unfamiliar with grapefruit, described how to eat them. The truth of the matter was that at least half of those in her classroom probably had never consumed grapefruit. I don't know that I had ever eaten grapefruit at that point in my life, but rest assured from that day forward I knew all about their nutritional value along with how they were served and consumed. All this took place in a civics class, and if you pause to ponder the matter for a moment, she was giving every student a practical lesson in both the subject matter and human sensibilities. In Part4 we'll look at the later life and many achievements of this remarkable Swain Countian.

PART 4

For all her stellar efforts as a teacher, Lillian Thomasson pursued countless activities outside the classroom. A skilled artist, she loved working with watercolors and other mediums and conveyed her love of art to gifted students throughout her teaching career. She also shared her artistic abilities with the community. Over the years she provided covers for various brochures and local government publications, designed sets for school plays, and created the official seal of Swain County which is still in use.

Deeply religious, she and her husband were involved on that front in a number of ways. She was closely affiliated with the Great Smoky Mountains Bible Conference and its affiliated youth mission, Camp Living Water. The Conference was the brainchild of Rev. W. Herbert Brown, and in time his son, Brevard, married the Thomasson's daughter, Doris. The Thomassons donated the land, part of Lillian's inheritance from her parents, where Hillside Baptist Church is today located.

By the time of the Smoky Mountain Bible Conference's founding, the Thomassons owned and operators of Rhododendron Motor Court, which was built on land where Lillian had grown up. Predating Rhododendron Motor Court were the Smoky Mountain Cabins, constructed in the late 1930s. The cabins were possibly the first tourist establishment, outside of boarding houses, to serve visitors to the area. These and other successful business ventures, coinciding closely with the establishment of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, indicated shrewd business sense.

Through good times and bad and as one decade of dedicated teaching followed another, the thread of continuity holding together the cloth of Lillian's life was interest in local history. One of this writer's fondest memories of her is that she always seemed to have a book handy for a few minutes of reading when students were working on exams, writing papers, or gathering in home room.

Her efforts in researching and celebrating Swain's history took many forms. As early as 1937 she wrote and directed a pageant celebrating a century of public education in North Carolina and focusing attention on educational advances in Swain County. Almost three decades later, in 1965, the first edition of *Swain County . . . Early History and Educational Development* appeared. A second edition, with a useful new Author's Preface, was published in 1977. It was and remains the most carefully researched source for the history of Swain County available in print. The book has some problems, particularly when it delves into local history outside the author's specialty of education. Still, it has long been the standard source for Swain County's past and will unquestionably form a key starting point for any fuller, more carefully researched work which might appear in the future.

Her home county reached its hundredth year of existence in 1971, and recently retired, she was intimately involved in many aspects of the centennial celebrations. She was a member of the committee which oversaw celebratory observances, and many events drew heavily on information found in her book. With Swain's centennial observances behind her, she next turned to active participation in an initiative known as the Governor's Award Program. In 1974, at the request of Mayor Perby Bennett, she accepted the chairmanship of a group appointed to create a brochure demonstrating the potential for industrial development in the area. In her words, "I compiled the information gathered by the committee and designed the cover for the brochure, *Bryson City, Capitol of a Unique County*." It resulted in an award, with North Carolina Governor James Holshouser making the presentation at an August 29, 1975 luncheon held at the historic Fryemont Inn.

Her successful efforts in garnering this recognition likely explain why the Swain County Board of Commissioners then appointed her to lead a committee of twelve local citizens who were to plan the local role in celebrating America's bicentennial. To that end she recommended two major projects—a complete “renovation and beautification” of the town square, fondly known as Loafers Glory, and a “face-lifting of Bryson City’s historic cemetery.”

Sadly, neither recommendation was initially followed to the extent one might wish. Today though meaningful efforts by Friends of the Bryson City Cemetery it has become a place of beauty and justifiable source of local pride, while local tourism development leaders have made major efforts at improving the small town’s overall appearance. Thomasson showed rare vision and an almost predictable dedication to heralding Swain’s past as a means to brighten its future. And while some of her efforts took decades to flower and flourish, in a more immediate sense the work of Lillian and her committee met with at least a modicum of success. Both Bryson City and Swain County received official national recognition as Bicentennial Communities.

Her last major literary effort came with the second edition of her book. It is actually unchanged from the original publication except for a new photograph of the author, a very brief foreword by local writer George Ellison, and three pages of material in which Thomasson provides an overview of her endeavors in the twelve years separating the two editions.

Until the final years of her life Thomasson continued to be active in religious and community affairs as a churchgoer at Hillside Baptist, a longtime member of the American Association of University Women, and a leader in the Bryson City Woman’s Club. She delighted in contact with former students and surely, in moments which found her in a reflective mood, must have looked back with warm satisfaction on those she mentored.

Most of all though, she was an individual who exemplified the best in that deeply rooted, indescribable, yet immensely important affection which those born in the bosom of the mountains hold for their motherland. Today she rests for the ages beside her husband and their stillborn son, in a gravesite in Bryson City Cemetery, portions of which once belonged to her family. The cemetery looks out over the little town and scenic Smokies’ vistas which meant so much to her, and the graves of her parents, siblings, and son-in-law are nearby. Fittingly, her gravesite in Bryson City Cemetery is no more than a long stone’s throw away from her home as a child and adult, and the church she was so influential in founding, Hillside Baptist, is even closer at hand. She was a woman whose career embodied the essence of what author Emma Bell Miles called, in the title of one of her books, “The Spirit of the Mountains.”