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## Farewell to a Homeplace

LOU PETTUS GATHANY

*A country doctor's house is lost but a granddaughter preserves the family's story.*

I did not know my grandfather Dr. Claude Pettus. He died in 1933, long before I was born. Sadly, my grandmother, Hattie Seay Pettus, was unreachable to me, suffering from what in the 1950s was called “hardening of the arteries.” The beautiful Victorian house that Claude and Hattie built on Jeff Road was my only connection to another time and another way of life.

Constructed in 1903 on a dirt road in rural Madison County, this was a house built for service. It provided shelter for the doctor



*Pettus house, 1903*

and Hattie and the five children they produced. Their massive barn was home to the mules used to pull the buggy that was their transportation. The wellhouse with its huge pump was just beyond the screened porch off the kitchen. The house property also included a small structure called “the office,” where Dr. Pettus sometimes saw patients. There were gardens, for both flowers and vegetables, and all of these were bordered by the wonderfully cold waters of the Nichols Spring Branch and Indian Creek.

Much of the Pettus acreage was plowed and planted each spring with the crops

that sustained the family's diet year round. Hogs and cows would be slaughtered as required, and there were always chickens available for Sunday dinner. This was long before the luxury of air conditioning so potatoes were kept in the cellar under the back porch.

For its time, my grandparents' house was a grand homeplace. Construction of the house was underway over the New Year's holiday, and I was always told that the reason the first floor had a ceiling height of eleven feet was due in part to the "spirits" imbibed by the workers to keep from freezing. Since they had extended the first floor too far, the second floor height was reduced to compensate. As it was the children's floor, its height of eight feet worked out just as well. There were two huge bedrooms up there, a playroom under the front gable, and a "dark room" used for storage under the back gable.



*Pettus house, 2003*

The first floor had a parlor, a "front room," a bedroom and a grand dining room separated from the large kitchen by two swinging doors that, when propped open, as they almost always were, concealed an impressive pantry. There were four fire-places—two placed back-to-back on two stately chimneys. A screened front porch was alive with Jackson vine and provided relief from the summer heat.

Dr. Pettus delivered all five of his children in that house. During his years of medical practice he traveled all over rural Madison County delivering babies and tending the sick, often taking along one of his own children. My father remembers being with him once when the doctor reached a family that had been poisoned by im-



*Dr. Pettus' office*

properly canned turnip greens. Unfortunately, they all perished. It was a time when medicine was often inadequate. There were no antibiotics, such as penicillin, and of course few vaccines. Still, Dr. Pettus was called upon often to do what he could and was sometimes “paid” in promises and produce.

My grandmother Hattie played the piano for Ford’s Chapel Methodist Church and was an artist and a poet. I treasure the handwritten pages of sheet music she composed and the poems she crafted. Hattie hosted and participated in many a quilting session. She was a trained teacher who worked as a private tutor before she married. Photographs of her are characterized by the kindest of smiles, the softest and most gentle of spirits.

Though I did not know my grandparents as others did, I knew and loved the house they built. But as so often happens in families, indecision became the decision. The house was allowed to fall into disrepair and suffered greatly from neglect. The estate was unsettled until the property was sold at auction in 1998. The purchaser was not able to carry out plans for restoration, and so the property was sold again. The present owners concluded that the beautiful old house was beyond saving. In April 2003, Monrovia volunteer firefighters used the property for a controlled burn exercise. Before the burn, members of the Historic Huntsville Foundation removed door and window casings, moldings, baseboard, and the old claw-foot bathtub. Some of the flooring and beams were also salvaged for preservationists to buy from the Harrison Brothers Hardware Store warehouse.

With the remnants of my grandmother’s flowers in



*Bill Munson salvages  
baseboard for the Harrison  
Brothers warehouse*

bloom, and the dogwoods and redbuds bursting with new life, I watched as the old house put up a terrific show of resistance to its fiery end. As the slates from the roof exploded and flames engulfed the house, I held a thick folder of my grandmother's poetry and read, and read again, a poem she titled "April." The last stanza proclaims —



*Monrovia firefighters conduct controlled burn of Pettus house*

*The bird's songs then are gladest  
With love notes sprinkled through,  
The grasses are the tenderest green  
The skies are the bluest blue.  
Oh, who could be sad and gloomy  
When April skies are fair?  
For then the world is born anew  
And hope is in the air.*



*HARRIET SEAY PETTUS*

*Born in 1879, she graduated from the  
Huntsville Female College  
and taught school in Monrovia.  
Harriet died in 1962.*