

The following recollections were written about 1930 by 90 year old Jesse R. Lay born 1841, the son of William, a grandson of Jesse Duncan and Susanna Lay. It is a letter written to his son Howard Lay of Russell, Kansas. In 1987, the original letter was in the possession of the daughter of Jesse R. Lay, Mrs. Jane Harris of Highland, California.
---Editor's notes in brackets

Dear Son,

All I know about my great-great-grandfather was: my grandfather [*Jesse Duncan*] told me he was a Frenchman from Canada and that he was in the Revolutionary War under Washington. You know the French settled Canada and Virginia and had no western border. The French did not like the English, and my great-great grandfather came down to Virginia to help Washington whip the English. This was paternal grandfather and was, of course, a Lay. There was nothing to go by in any of this but tradition. Do not know when they came to Canada, but of course were among the early settlers of Canada. *I have a dim memory of my grandfather telling me that he and his father were of the same name [Jesse].* My father said he was of the same name as his grandfather, so maybe he was Jesse William [*probably William named for his Douglas grandfather as there is no evidence of a second name for Jesse*]

Then I must conclude that the Lay that came from Canada to help whip the English was my great-great grandfather. My grandfather told me [*that his father*] was an officer, but I was so small that I cannot remember what it was.

I had an opportunity to find out a lot from him [*Jesse Duncan*]. I was named for him, Jesse and he often would sit for hours and help me with my little studies. I remember very plain asking him how old my great grandfather was when the Revolution ended and he told me fifteen. So that gives me the clue, you see, and when you go to the history books you can figure out he was born in 1774. He was born in Virginia because, you see, it was everything west of Jamestown, so far as was known.

I am telling you the tradition about my great-grandpa. He was born in 1774. He, of course, had the pioneer spirit and went West into Tennessee. I don't know when, but you look up the history of when Daniel Boone came into Tennessee through the Cumberland Gap and you will find when he [*Jesse*] got there with his father. A. Lincoln's grandfather came through at the same time. Lincoln's grandfather was killed by the Indians. A. Lincoln was born about fifty miles of where I was up in Kentucky at Hodgenville, KY 1809.

Great-grandpa was one of the Tennessee and Kentucky Riflemen who went with old General Andrew Jackson in the War of 1812. They whipped the English in great shape in New Orleans. You can find the account of the battle in any history. How those deer hunters whipped the finest English soldiers and had never fought, only Indian wars. BUT, they could shoot.

Great grandpa was going south with Jackson, and they got in to an earthquake in NW Arkansas in 1811. The same year my grandpa was born. That is your great-grandpa, now remember, I am on the paternal side, and he [*Jesse Duncan*] was born in 1811. I do not know much about the maternal side until I get down to grandpa. He told me his mother was Dutch and great-grandpa was her second husband. The first husband's

name was Baird and her maiden name was Duncan *[no other source agrees with this, but perhaps her mother's family name was Duncan]* which is why my grandpa was named Jesse Duncan.

Grandpa *[Jesse Duncan]* was half Irish, and Grandma was a little quarter Cherokee Indian girl *[Susanna Douglas]*. The white blood was English. She died about the time I was born in 1873. Grandpa and her had moved to Arkansas where she died. She and Grandpa lie in two lonely graves near a little water fall in the South part of Marion County, Arkansas. It was her request to be buried there. It was the last place she visited before she died. Grandpa died soon after you were born in 1897.

Your Grandma and Grandpa *[William and Jane Parsons Lay]* were married in 1866. Your grandmas was born in 1840 and your grandpa in 1839. Your grandma had been married before, but I guess you know as much about that as I do.

My grandpa on my mother's side was named John Parsons. Was born, I think in 1817. My mother was the oldest child. He Scotch-Irish, a school teacher. Grandmother *[Parsons]* was full blooded Holland Dutch. They lived in a Dutch settlement and when Grandpa Lucas got killed, Grandma was eight years old. When great-grandma married an Englishman, after great grandpa died, my great grandma, you see, took my step great-grandpa and moved away from the Dutch colony to Rock Bridge County, VA at the Natural Bridge. Here your Grandma Lay *[Jane Parsons]* was born. My step great grandpa's name was Crosley. I do not know much about the Parsons only they were Virginia planters. My grandpa *[John Parsons]* was a school teacher and came to east Tennessee to teach school. He taught school at Tazwell, Tennessee a year before he got his wife and children moved out from Natural Bridge, Virginia. Here your Grandma *[Jane Parsons]* and grandpa *[William M. Lay]* met just after the close of the Civil War in which your Grandpa taken a part in favor of the Union. Was in the Battle of Cumberland Gap and other minor engagements, including Mills Spring. Your grandfather started to his father's *[Jesse Duncan]* in Arkansas in the spring of 1872. I was just three months old when they started on that long trip – with covered wagons. They were three months on the trip. My father *[William]* homesteaded *[near Tomahawk]* in the spring of 1873 where he lived the rest of his life.

I never told you the name of my Grandma Lay. It was Douglas. And Grandma Parsons told me that her parents came from Holland after the Revolutionary War. The whole colony came over together. I suppose we have quite a bunch of Dutch relations somewhere along the James River as well as French in Canada. Although Grandma *[Susanna]* Lay was past sixty, she died with T.B. All her brothers died with cancer but one. She had several sisters. I do not know them.

Now my Grandpa *[Jesse Duncan]* Lay had a great nephew, William H. Murray, Alfalfa Bill, now governor of Oklahoma who was born in Texas. His grandparents, Grandpa's sister *[Lucinda]* and Mr. Murray, went to Texas before the Civil War. They went a foot. I saw the governor when I was in Oklahoma after he was elected Governor.

This is all I know of the principal events which includes some historical facts. You asked me for this once, I wrote some but did not send it. We had an uncle who died in service in the Union Army and Grandpa got a Federal pension on account of him. I remember

Grandpa got a land Warrant for the service of Great Grandpa's service in the War of 1812.

Your Grandpa Lay [\[William M.\]](#) never did get a discharge from the Union Army. He was under Rosecrans, a rebel sympathizer and a Union general. He got all his men [\[illegible\]](#). Your grandpa had to slip out of his Army to evade capture with a Rebel uniform on. When he got home he was blind with sore eyes trouble for over a year. So you see they marked him as a deserter. But he was very patriotic regardless of his mistreatment by his Union Officer. He never did vote for a Democrat.

There is something else I want to speak about. Your Grandma [\[Jane Parsons\]](#) Lay had a little piece of wood she wanted you to have. I guess you still have it. Your ma said she gave it to you. My grandma chopped it off the end of a shovel handle and gave it to you grandma when she started out on that hike to Arkansas. She cut this off to stop up a hole in the top of a tea kettle. That was the last act that her mother ever did for her. She never saw her again. I think it was her request for you to have this little stick. I think the reason she kept it so sacred, it showed the hacks, the marks of the ax. I guess it's almost rotten now, if you still have it. It has been over 60 years ago.

One can't imagine much about that long trip of over 1200 miles. I do not know really how far it was. They had to go up in Missouri to avoid what was known as the sunk land in N.E. Arkansas and S.E. Missouri that was caused by the earthquake mentioned in 1811. When your grandpa [\[William M.\]](#) got to Arkansas he was sick. They had got [\[within\]](#) a few miles of your great-grandpa [\[Jesse Duncan\]](#) who lived in Marion County on Water Creek and a men went and told him about your grandpa and he was speechless for a time when he got to him.

There was plenty of game there then and they had plenty of turkey and venison to eat. The creeks swarmed with fish of all kinds. The land was rich too.

You know all I do now. You can write your Uncle Glen Lay. He is at Marshall, Arkansas. I get a letter very regular from him. I have tried to get them, he and your Aunt, to come out here [\[California\]](#) and take a rest. He can tell you perhaps a lot. He has been back to Tennessee and got a piece of the house where he was born. He went around with hour half uncle and saw a lot. I was there in 1889, but found everything as I expected and as they told me. I looked over my fore parents and Boone on the stomping grounds and Boone wrote on a b.oak "Boone kilt a bar on this tre".

Your father,
J.R. Lay