



ca. summer 1915, family homestead, Sugar Creek Rd., off of Caney Fork, Jackson county, NC. From left to right, FRONT ROW: Bertha 'Berty' (Aiken) Hollifield, Emma (Aiken) Parker, (in her mother's arms), Ada (Rogers) Aiken, Perry R. Aiken, Norman R. Aiken (in his grandmother's arms), Nancy (Coward) Aiken, John H. Aiken, Johnny Aiken, BACK ROW: Jesse Aiken, El Aiken, Cicero Aiken, Flora (Aiken) Cook, Eula Aiken. Note that both Nancy and John each have their respective photographs as young people in front of them.

JOHN AIKEN OF CANEY FORK, JACKSON COUNTY, NC

JOHN H. AIKEN, son of **THOMAS** (1825-ca 1900) and **REBECCA (HOXIT) AIKEN** (1831-1912)¹ was born January 8, 1855 in Cherryfield, Henderson co., NC the fifth of what would be eight children. His father left the family sometime between 1860 and 1870. By 1870 the family was living in Jackson county, NC² where they would live out the rest of their lives on Caney Fork. **NANCY COWARD**, daughter of **BENJAMIN** and **NELLIE (FISHER) COWARD** had caught the fancy of young John, and they were married on September 8, 1880 in Cowarts.³

One factor that made this marriage a little remarkable is that Nancy was already the mother of 2 out-of-wedlock daughters.⁴ **ARZELA** (born in 1873) and

MAGGIE VIOLA 'MEG' (born January 19, 1877)⁵ are attributed by family lore to be the fruit of rapes by 'soldiers.' **WORTH HOOPER**⁶ was sued by Nancy Coward through a bastardy bond in the fall of 1876,⁷ and **TOM HOOPER**⁸ is listed as Meg's father. Both Worth and Tom had served North Carolina in the confederacy.⁹ It is significant that John didn't seem to bat an eye at this added responsibility right from the start, and it couldn't have been easy trying to be a father to two little girls who had never known one. But their family was instant, and began to grow immediately:

BENJAMIN COLEMAN 'COLEY', born in June of 1881

PERRY, born in September of 1883

CICERO LOFTIS, born March 12, 1884

MINNIE, born in January of 1885

FLORENCE, born in June of 1887

FLORA VIOLA, born October 18, 1890

ELLEN, born April 4, 1891

JESSE, born December 8, 1892

EULA HUDSON, born February 8, 1894

MARY, born in January of 1896

SHIRLEY, born in January of 1898

JOHNNY, born February 5, 1900

John Sr., like almost every other Caney Fork man, was quite the 'rounder' in his early life. Caney Fork seems to have been the 'wild west' of western North Carolina where lawlessness prevailed and weak men didn't survive long. Tall and lanky, he was arrested for 'affray' in 1895, a 19th century legal term for fighting.¹⁰ But sometime before 1901, John had an encounter with Jesus Christ that changed his life, and transformed him into a life-long, deeply committed churchman. Several times between 1901 and his tragic death in 1939, he was appointed and sent as a delegate from the Balsam Grove Baptist church to the Tuckaseegee Baptist Association conventions, as well as the frequent 'union' meetings that were celebrated locally.¹¹

Death became a frequent visitor to the Aiken homestead¹²; between 1900 and 1910 four of their daughters died: Florence, Mary, Shirley, and Minnie, who had married **VAUGHN ROGERS**. She died in 1909 at the age of 24, after having lost their only child.¹³

Nancy died July 9, 1929¹⁴, leaving John at borne with spinsters El and Jess, and the youngest, Johnny. For John Sr. the next 10 years were filled with church activities and the never-ending farming that kept food on the table. Son Cole and later daughter Flora, and and son Eula, with their families had moved out to Washington state, and one November Sunday morning as he walked the mile-or-so route to church that was so familiar to him, tragedy struck. His son-in-law's 23 year old nephew came around that tight curve above the church in a

car, and struck him. After struggling for almost a week, John's earthly life came to an end on November 10, 1939¹⁵, and his obituary reads as follows:¹⁶

"Man Killed on Way to Church"

"Funeral services for John Aiken, 80 year old Cowarts resident who died in the CJ Harris community hospital here Friday morning of injuries received last Sunday when struck by an automobile, were held Saturday morning at the Balsam Grove Baptist church near Cowarts. The Rev. Calvin Massingale, assisted by the Rev. Ben Cook, officiated Burial was in the church cemetery. Mr. Aiken was the third victim of an automobile in Jackson county in less than two weeks. He was on his way to church when hit by the ear which was said to have been drive by Ethan Hooper, also of Cowarts. in what witnesses said was an unavoidable accident. Surviving are five sons: Cole of Sedro Woolley, Wash., Perry of Charlotte, Cicero of Cowarts, Enloe [note: Eula of Darrington, Wash., and Johnnie of Cowarts; three daughters, Mrs. Flora Cook of Darrington, Wash., and Ella and Jessie of Cowarts; one brother, Jackson Aiken of Easley, SC and several grandchildren. "

Considering the inter-relatedness of the families involved and the intensity of the emotions and respect so many felt for John, this tragic incident could have easily, escalated into a 'Hatfield/McCoy' type feud to last for generations. However, nothing could be further from the truth, and it is a testimony to the faith, strength, love and convictions of the Aiken family that their grief was quickly overcome with no guilt attributed. In fact, Ethan Hooper, the unfortunate driver of the car involved, and his wife Hazel upon moving to Washington state became very close to John's daughter Flora, visiting her regularly and having her over to spend the night frequently. This close and long lasting relationship continued on up until Flora's death in 1974.¹⁷

FOOTNOTES:

¹ See: Journeys through Jackson, **'The Witch of Caney Fork: Granny Beck Aiken'** vol. XII, no. 1-2, Jan-Feb 2002

²1870 NC Federal census, Jackson county, Caney Fork township, p 224

³Marriage Register (1872-1901), Jackson county Courthouse, Sylva, NC

⁴There is a bit of a question about the date of Cole's birth as well. His delayed birth certificate (with information provided by his father) gives his birth year as 1878, two years before his parents were married. However, he does not appear in the 1880 census in the household of his grandfather Coward, whereas his mother, Arzela and Mag are present. In addition in the 1900 census his birth date is listed as June of 1881, so this author has concluded that the date on his birth record is mistaken.

⁵1880 NC Federal census, Jackson county, Caney Fork township, p 306. Microfilm 341c, reel 20. Ben Coward is listed as head of household, with (among others) daughter Nancy, 24, and granddaughters Arzela, 7, and Maggie V., 3.

⁶It is believed that this was William Worth Hooper.

⁷Docket Book Jackson County Superior Court 1866-1896. compiled by Rick Frizzel, p 24, line 19.

⁸North Carolina State Board of Health Death certificate #42, September 5, 1959: Meg Green. Father: Tom Hooper, mother: Nancy Coward. There were at least two Tom Hoopers on Caney Fork at this time, one being 'Cotton Tom' Hooper; but Meg's father, Thomas Hilman Hooper, accepted the fact that he was her father and apparently never denied it.

⁹See www.jcncgs.com/civilwar/alpha.htm. W.W. Hooper served with Co B, 25th NC Inf and 'Cotton Tom' Hooper served with Co G, 62nd NC Inf. But as yet, no record of Thomas Hilton Hooper's service in the Civil War has been located.

¹⁰*Docket Book Jackson County Superior Court 1866-1896.* compiled by Rick Frizzel, p 97, line 53: "*The State VS. John Aiken et al: Affray: Aiken called and failed, judgement NiSi, Instanter Capias trial verdict guilty, judgement suspended on payment of cost*"

¹¹*Balsam Grove Baptist Church Record minutes* 7 September 1912-31 October 1936; also, Minutes of the Tuckaseegee Baptist Association, WCU, Hunter Library microfilm

¹²located at the end of Sugar Creek Road off of Caney Fork

¹³Gravestone at Lower Coward cemetery; also, personal interview with L.G. Queen, 15 July 2003.

¹⁴North Carolina State Board of Health Death certificate

¹⁵North Carolina State Board of Health Death certificate #38, Vol. 25-27

¹⁶*Jackson County Journal.* 16 November 1939. WCU, Hunter Library microfilm, Cullowhee, NC

¹⁷Personal interview with Hazel Hooper, August, 2002.