

The PHILLIPS Family in Dogwood

Submitted by: Thomas Phillips

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This realistic account is sometimes imaginative when it comes to the "unknowns." A warning is given that not all details of this account are "official." Many things need further confirmation or maybe even correction and the account is not publishable as unchangeable history "as-is". It is hoped it will be taken in the spirit given—as an honest attempt at truth-telling, but with no claim of finality. If something is found later to need correction that will not greatly surprise me as a researcher, nor will I be slow at revision. Finally, there is no gedcome as yet for this family) tp

Great Grandfather is a bit of a mystery. We don't know much about his parents—not even their names—only that they appear to have come from....Whether he had siblings is an unknown. In fact half his life is unknown; it is as if when he moved to MO he came into relief with shadows trailing. Only then are details more or less definite. As if to say, Only now, only here—this is who I am. Or, sometimes if I let my imagination fly, I wonder if it might be "this is who I choose to be known as." But then, perhaps that's a product of a researcher's frustration.

It is true that sometime (around the time of the move, probably) he changed his name from "Philips" to the—I am sure I am not biased—more symmetrical "Phillips." But that is not all. There are at least two official documents that have him as "Jesse James Phillips", a land grant which we will hear of later, and the Social Security Application form of his eldest son. Certainly, the family thought of him this way: Of the two sons, both my own father of the one line (James Irvin) and a granddaughter of the other (Thomas Milas) refer to him as such.

But if the family are consistent, Jesse himself does not seem to have been. For there are at least two other official documents in which he is referred to as "James J. Phillips", or "James Jesse."

A striking example is the Marriage Certificate (filed with the County) of James and his second wife, Martha.

And then there is the gravestone. To a bemused researcher's heart, it says, simply, "J.J." Rather than the possibility of evasiveness—that he was deliberately "hiding his trail". I conclude that there is an evolution here-- as the man changed so did the preferred name. Of course, maybe Great Grandfather was just devil-may-care about officialdom, the self-importance of its paper trail. Maybe he had a sense of humor.

In any case, probably sometime during the Civil War—at least before 1864, for that is when his daughter Catherine was born and all the children were born in MO—he picked up and moved from TN, a member of the Confederation for Succession and an area of much fighting, to a place somewhat quieter in those violent times, but yet of Southern sympathies: Longprairie Township of Mississippi Co. MO. Specifically to "Sands" (which seems counterintuitive for the rich farming soil) which later changed its name to "Dogwood." It has, if you think of the tree, the suggestion of loveliness—whether this was realistic or idealistic is unknown, probably a bit of both. The land was fertile, for it used to be swampland-- being near the Mississippi River (within twenty miles give or take) and even when I grew up there a hundred years later from the time of Jesse's move it was still jokingly referred to as "Swampeast Missouri." Certainly, there were a lot of mosquitoes.

Whether James fought in the War is speculation at this point. But it's realistic to think, that if so, he would have worn the butternut or grey, and there are several "J.J.'s" and "James J's" from TN on the Confederate roster. However, since we do not even know the county (in TN) from which he came, it has been hard pinning this down. Perhaps he never raised a gun to his fellow man. But to me the place and the timing of his move make for a strong possibility.

As if to get away from war and begin anew he came to a land where he could bring life from the soil. He came to be a farmer with purpose and what must have been hard determination.

Jesse "homesteaded" the land in 1869, already with a wife and two children. This first wife herself is an obscurity, nothing at all is known about her. The children were Alphey Francis (who-- after having married, "ran away with a preacher" and then disappeared from the scene—had her own sad and funny story) and Catherine and later, in the same year that Jesse received the land-grant of 160 acres signed by President Grant, another girl was born: Adaline. It was 1874.

It is interesting and telling, I think, that the very year he began to homestead—1869—he became a Charter Member of the new "Dogwood Methodist Episcopal Church". He also became one of three trustees when the St Louis Iron Mountain and Southern Railroad Company gave some land to the Church "for the consideration of one dollar." According to the little "History" of the Church, he joined with his wife "Mrs James J Phillips", while at the same time a "Martha Sailors" joined. Although it seems to put to rest a family rumour that Jesse's first wife died on a voyage from Wales, this too is yet a bit of puzzle. Because, in the History Martha is referred to as "Mrs." If appropriate then she is too old to be the individual who later becomes J.J.'s second wife, who at this time was only a child of nine. Of course, the honorific may have been a mistake, or used as we sometimes affectionately and with a knowing smile raise children above their rank. But the more likely thing seems to be simply that this "Martha" was the mother of the later wife.

We know nothing about her. And another unknown: intriguingly, a family researcher—without giving further details—stated that James' mother was a Settle, and we find in the membership of the church at that time one "George Settle." George is referred to as "Uncle" by the historian—who wrote years later. Perhaps he was known to the tiny church and community as this, but it naturally suggests to me a relationship to the Phillipses. Not yet known.

A side bar. Farmers have hard employment and serious—if only because their harvest, and therefore their survival is unpredictable and failure is often a live possibility. Serious too (don't send letters) tend to be members of tiny community churches. I had just about worked up an

unambiguous image of Great Grandfather as maybe even stern and inviting no nonsense. He had come from the fog of war with heaviness on his hands. Until I read the church history and found that while their first pastor was called "Rough & Ready" Watts, the second—his brother—was openly known as "Slick & Easy" Watts. They could laugh—or smile—at self-importance (but they could also ostracize the deviant or the "outsider", those who were not—apparently—straight and transparent).

Six years after the land-grant and eleven years after homesteading the land—1880—his first wife having died, he married Martha Christine Sailors, a daughter of his next door neighbor. They had six children: Ora, Florence, Thomas Milas, James Irvin, Winnie and Jessie Karr. He also became legal guardian to two small Davis boys (inexplicably and inevitably "cousins") whose parents had chosen him for the role before they died. We don't know much about his feelings, or his relationship with his children. Probably, like at least one of his sons, he was non-communicative and kept his emotions barricaded. (Sorry, great grandpa, had to find a Source for this family trait!) He would not have been one to sit in the floor and play with them. Probably, like most hard-working fathers, he had little time.

Born in 1836, James Jesse Phillips was 59 when he died in 1895. I like to think that he died quietly at home in his bed, but I don't know. He was buried in the "Homestead" section of Dogwood Cemetery, next to the church. By most standards—and certainly in spirit—he was a pioneer of the area in which he chose to live and farm and die.

Martha lived on, taking care of the children and raising her own brother Moses, and at some point began working in Sikeston a nearby town to help with their needs. Her burial place is unknown (though there are unmarked graves in the Dogwood Cemetery, and it is difficult to contemplate that she might be buried elsewhere. Perhaps she is there anonymously beside James).

Of the children, James Irvin had three: Frank, Lucille and Ardell; but Thomas Milas had thirteen(!): Ellen, Elvin, Mary, Lilly, Naomi, Marion, Billy, Harold, Winnie, James, Betty, Martha and Shirley.

Irvin (of my own line) later moved to St. Louis to try a life different from farming, and served in World War I. Milas remained on the farm, and to this day, one of his sons "Red" James Phillips continues the tradition on the same land. Shirley, Milas' last child, returned with her husband to live in Dogwood.

I too have a close—though different—tie to the Dogwood farm and Community. For, my father Ardell ("Jake"), son of Irvin, moved back to Dogwood when I was a child of two. (The family had always been in touch with each other, and dad recalls many visits to "the country.") While keeping his town job, he enthusiastically took to farming, albeit on only 13 acres! This land was born of the parcelling of land originally owned by my Great Grandmother Crews (whose daughter later married my Grandfather Irvin) While not the Phillips land of Great Grandpa J.J.'s land-grant, I had thought it was. (only recently have I been disabused of this confusion!) But it was my dad's land (and had been his mother's) and he was a Phillips, son of Irvin, son of J.J. and it just all blended together, so to speak. And my home was in Dogwood the home of J.J. So I was back to my roots.

Funny. The way I'm painting it now, all nostalgic-like. I never once heard the name "great grandpa J.J." when I was growing up—by anyone, family or not. Not once was I taken to the gravestone that marked his demise, though a number of times we visited the closer generation graves that were only a little ways distant in the cemetery. And we were only a five-to-ten minute drive away. All those years. Actually, and incredibly, I didn't even know I had a "great" grandfather. But then I was a child and I didn't ask about things, merely accepted them (or not!), as they were.

But attending the Church and the three-roomed-eight-grades school house until the end of the seventh grade, I have many memories of the people, the land and the life. Of Uncle Milas' grapes and chickens and ducks, and of old equipment rusting, and of him driving down the country road nearly blind but determined. Everyone stood carefully away from the road when he drove by. But he would wave and shout "Hi, Tommy!" I remember wandering off alone into the cornfields, and my mother's cooking. Cousins abounding everywhere.

We moved into town when the old school house closed forever. Now it is someone's home. There is a little flavor of Dogwood in an incident that happened on a revisit a number of years ago. On the way back from a brief view of my old childhood house, run-down and empty; the door open, and from the cemetery, I pulled the car over on the far side of the road across from the old school house, now residence. I just stared with nostalgia. Until I noticed someone in the front yard. They had seen me—and a long arm relaxed and unhesitating shot up to wave. "Hi", it said, and the stranger's face smiled. I waved back with some enthusiasm.

Things don't change much in Dogwood, but occasionally, something like this—the closing forever of a school (a thing of Dogwood history) and the move in of a new resident happen. Perhaps that steadiness, that continuity, is a part of what great grandpa wanted and even needed. That, and a community that could give friendly waves to strangers. Again, I don't know. But in that context, I now remember him.

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29 December 2025