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Edward S. Nicholson

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Edward S. Nicholson, Sr

Stephens City, Va.

Interviewed April 19, 1977

by: Dorothy Noble Smith  
Robin Mintner

Who was your daddy, Mr. Nicholson?

"He was Ephriam Nicholson."

Was he any kin to Aaron?

"They were a little distant cousin. Did you know him and his sons? My home was down the hollow, do you know where Feathers Hill was? Well, the home was 3½ miles from Hughes river. "

From the picture he showed, the house was number R 57 in Park files.

Were there any stories handed down from your grandfather as to where the family came from?

"I have a book here that could tell you, but it would take a month of Sundays to look it up. We came from England over here in 1715, I think. The first settlers set along the foot of the mountain. You take now Aaron Nicholson, he had three boys, Gus, Russ and Howell. Now Aaron when he settled he settled up there in the mountains further than all. My daddy bought and my grandfather bought when he came from West Virginia. And Aaron owned from the top of the mountain as far as your eye could see. And you've heard about Pollock, the man who did all that with Stony Man, well he bought up all of Aaron's rights that he had and he bought up all around the place. It was called the Big Survey. As far as your eye could see, I was just a kid so I don't know how much Aaron owned, but it was all down the hollow there and all across the mountains, I reckon it was all of two or three hundred acres what he owned, and when Pollock he came in there and wanted to buy that land, why he sent three of the boys down that creek and caught the big fish, that was the big trout. Oh, they are hard to beat."

How many acres did your family own?

"About 119 acres. We boys farmed it some. My father was a stone mason."

What crops did you raise?

"Corn, rye, oats, buck wheat, millet and cane. Some was raised for the cattle and some to eat too. We ate corn, beans and apples, cherries, peaches and pears. The ground was good, we didn't use no fertilizer. "

What sort of cattle did you have?

"Oh mostly milk cows, they were mixed Holstein, guernsey and some Jersey. We had hogs and chickens. We raised almost anything you want to put in your mouth. When you got money you knew how to take care of it. When

some of them now, there was a feller lived somewhere near there, guess he still does, and they made moonshine. A whole lot of them made moonshine and when they'd get a dollar or two out of that he'd look at it and put it back in his pocket and smile."

How many children were normal for a family?

"Anywhere from 6 to 10 to 16. There were 13 in our family, I think."

Did all of the babies live?

"Oh we didn't loose so many babies, you take now they didn't die from what you call diseases, but more from typhoid fever. My sister had ~~two~~ children they got typhoid fever but they got over it, and they all had some pox once in a while they'd have something like that diptheria or small pox. There was one small girl that was married, a small William girl, she got this scarlet fever."

What cures did they have?

"Herbs. Well a whole lot of stuff that I've forgotten, my mother used. For a high fever she used wild bone seed. Bone set tea, that grows something like a hollyhock flower, real high and it had a long leaf and you'd take the leaves. She used Birch and sassafras tea and horsemint tea."

These were used for fever?

"No. Do you know what coon root is?, now they call it blood root. Well, you can break it, make a tea out of that and gargle with it for a sore throat. Snake root was used for stomach disorders. Then you take the bark from a persimmon tree and make a tea out of that, it's the best thing in the world for tonsilitis. Just make a good scum tea out of it."

"Hore Hound was used for colds too. Penny royal, grind it up and throw it on the bed every evening to keep the fleas away. Ginseng tea was used for the stomach disorders. I found a whole lot of that, it can be used for most anything. We kept some in the house always."

"Did you ever hear about rabbit oil? Take the fat off the rabbit and boil it down, take the grease off that and put it in a bottle. Then when you had an ear ache, just put a couple of drops in the ear and that was better than anything."

How was your house built?

"Out of logs. My daddy, Ephriam built it. My grandfather was Himer. We also had a stable and chicken houses."

HIRAM

Did you make your own furniture?

"We had core-beds. Then the rest of the furniture was bought from Charles Williams Co."

Did you sell crops to make money?

"Father worked as a stone mason for Pollock, then we sold dry beans to Lee Judd. We would pick over to separate white beans from the others. We want to Judds by horse, it was seven miles up and seven miles back.

"Nicholson hauled wood, he used horses 'cause you couldn't get a wagon up there. A salesman came through there one time selling Singer Sewing machines, right up in front of this boy's grandfather's house and the wagon fell all across the road and one horse broke his leg.

"My brother was coming home from Luray one day and a black rattlesnake bit his horse. But he made a snake weed poultice and put it on the horse's leg, it was alright."

How did you make poultices?

Take corn meal and a few onions, stir it up and make it real good and thick, put it on a cloth on your chest and put the poultice over it. I'm telling you it fixed you right up when you had a cold."

Baking

"My mother was a good cook. She had a good size stove. She had a barrel of flour and a barrel of pickled things."

How about friends?

"Oh my, people would stop by almost every night and we would sing with my mother and father. There was a lot more visiting than there is now. When anyone was sick you would see the women baking and cooking; when there was a new baby too. You knew what neighbors were then."

How about courting? (Mrs. Nicholson answered)

"I saw him when I was 11, if anyone had told me I'd end up marrying that man I'd have smacked him in the mouth. He wore knee pants like they did in those days and one was lower than the other. I can see him whirling us with dust as we came along, I was with three other girls. He'd visit about three times a year. You see, he lived in Madison County and I lived in Culpepper. My father was George Ernest Didson, they called him Ernest."

What was the wedding like?

"We got a man to take us up to the Piedmont Church, that was my home church in Rappahanock. Then he had to walk clear over to Millers School house to find the preacher, Rev. James E. Brown. He walked about three miles there and came back the three miles leading the preacher on his mule. We waited there while he walked the six miles. I wouldn't agree to anyone else for he had married my mother and father and his mother and father. The only ones at the wedding were my sister and the friend that

brought us up.

The reception was at my house, just the immediate family. A colored woman, Annie Clark, cooked the dinner, it was lovely. There were too many children to invite other people, just 13 in my family alone."

What about music, was there good music? (Mr. Micholson answered:)

"Yes, indeed. I used to play the fiddle. My mother played the Jews Harp. My brother and I could pick the banjo. We went to two dances, I didn't like to dance. One dance we sat and watched, the other dance I walked on her feet.

What about funerals?

"A fellow at Nathers Mill made good coffins, they were custom made. They were made of a soft wood, usually poplar, then varnished. Camphor and turpentine was put into it and then rubbed with a cloth real good."

Did you all tell ghost stories when you sat around of an evening?

"Oh, people always have a mouthful of something to say. Girls didn't like ghost stories."

What about chaperoning?

"One of the older girls or a woman had to be with the couple all the time before they were married. They were afraid a fellow might kiss the girl. We were chaperoned even going to church.

"We went to horse races in Culpepper on the 4th of July. Then we would go to Fairs like at Culpepper and Rappahanock."

What was Christmas like?

"We lit roman candles and firecrackers, the older people got drunk. Sometimes we exchanged gifts, a little something. They didn't have much to give at Christmas. No, we didn't celebrate Thanksgiving."

How about hunting?

"There was nothing much to hunt, polecats I saw a few. There were squirrels and rabbits, we hunted them. There were no wildcats or deer.

There were plenty of fish, you'd go out and get all you wanted. To kill a school of fish you'd take a quart or 1/2 gallon can and fill it 2/3 rds full of rock lime and pour water on it and screw the top on it -- that would dynamite a hole. One time we blew all the water and sand out and never caught a dern fish.

"I believe I like this day and time better than when I growed up. When I was a boy we were satisfied where we were. Nowadays people want to go all around to be satisfied. There we had to be satisfied, the only way you could go anywhere was on a horse or mule. We heard no news, had no radio or nothing.

During the war my daddy took the Richmond Times, then after the war we had no more paper. I remember one time I was going home, about six miles from home and this man was listening on earphones to a radio. I thought he was a fool.

"Once a month we had the preacher come to the church right down the hollow. The school was down there too. My youngest brother went through 8th grade, I went through 4th grade. The main thing was they had to hire someone, the school was for two months in the summer and that was right at the time the crops and everything needed to be taken care of. Later they hired someone to be there in the winter, that's why my younger sisters and brothers went through 8th grade. There was a regular school about 5 miles from where I lived, it was too far to walk.

"The taxman came around once a year and stayed overnight. He was able to see everything 'cause he was right there in the house, so he taxed it all. He was given meals and we fed his horse too. He was only doing his job."

How did you like George Pollock?

"He was a great man, he did an awful lot of good for our people. There were some he didn't do anything for. My daddy worked for him all the time, pretty much all that stone work up there was done by my daddy. Charles Sisk was a stone mason who worked with my daddy, he was his brother-in-law. Pollock was a big help, a fine man. The last work my daddy did, Pollock didn't pay him; he didn't have the money.

"I attended the parties there all one summer. The parties were for what he called his guests from Washington and New York, they came to spend the summer. You'd see everybody sitting on the porches. I was there with another fellow one time and had had some whiskey, it was dark and I didn't like going seven miles home with all those rattlesnakes. The moon was down, so we decided to stay all night. The place he gave us there wasn't a darn thing in there but a bed and mattress. I said I can't sleep this way, so I slept under the mattress on the springs and he slept on top of the mattress."

How about games?

"We didn't have time for games, it was always work. The only time time you stopped work was when you went on a visit. If you stayed around on a Sunday there was always something to do.

"I wouldn't go back if anyone gave me land there. There were two cemeteries right where I was born and raised. There are 100 in one. The stones for markers were real nice stones, one at the head and one at the foot, they weren't inscribed. My uncle's foot stone was about 6 inches square on top and 10 inches at the bottom, the head stone was 12 inches wide and about 6 inches on the bottom.

"My mother was a little bit of woman and always had a headache. Too much work and worry, she died about 69 years of age. My daddy lived to be 84.

So you played no games?

"We pitched horseshoes, marbles, and we'd pitch flat rocks. That was about all. Sometimes visitors, if they saw people chucking corn or picking beans, why everyone went out and helped."

What about washing and ironing?

"We used an old timey iron that you put on the stove. Think of the shirts for the boys she had to iron. It'd kill a woman today. To wash the clothes she used a wash board and boiled water in a big pot then washed. Them blue shirts and blue overalls were hard to wash, specially those chambray shirts. But all the sheets and pillowcases had to be spotless."

What was your general diet, did you eat beef?

"We ate no beef, we ate hog, squirrels, coon, rabbit, fowl. Coon tastes good like you put a little sugar on them. We ate sun perch and other fish. Fish was cooked by frying in corn meal.

"Home made hominy is good. You make it in big iron pots. My mother would take the hickory oak ash and boil the corn in that until all the husks were gone, then clear that out and bring it to a boil and pour that out and then put it in clear water and let it cook down. It can't be beat. We had it like grits, sometimes with gravy over it, and with corn bread why you had a good meal.

"We made apple butter, pumpkin butter and peach butter.

"We raised about  $\frac{1}{2}$  an acre of cane and made sorgum. You take the cane, cut the head off and strip it and then run it through to get the drip and then boil that. Some people didn't skim it enough so it was dark and on the strong side. The men helped with jobs like that. You could make about 5 gallons an hour, if you had a hot fire."