

A Treatise on the Olden Days on the Oates Farm
in Sampson County, North Carolina

I am John Martin Oates, Jr., more commonly called Jack. Today is June 22, 2000. At the urging of my highly esteemed nephew, Marion Ronald Oates, Jr., I write this paper. Marion comes from my grandfather, Marion Harper Sutton, who died when I was seven years of age. I do not know the origin of Ronald and will not speculate.

Four rooms, dating between 1800 and 1820, of the original house built by John Oates who married Susannah Cogdell, is now part of the house in which the children of John Martin and Blanche (Sutton) Oates were born and raised. Also living with us was our grand-mother, Mary Venetia (Martin) Oates, better known as Mittie.

The four children of Jethro William and Mittie Oates were born and raised in the more originally intact dwelling. Great-grandfather David's second family of three before them.

John and Susannah's house stood on the east edge of the 600 acre grant, to John's father, Jethro Oates, from King George the Second. The grant was entered in 1773 and finalized in 1775. The house location today appears to be just off the east edge of the grant, on land purchased by John in 1818. The home of Uncle Jethro David Oates stands squarely on the grant.

The home of Uncle Edwin Oates and the early home of Aunt Lillie (Oates) McCullen were built on land that became Oates property in 1801. Most of the land mentioned is owned today by descendants of John and Susannah Oates.

Permit me to inform and perhaps, in a limited way, regale you with happenings during the "olden days" on the farm in Sampson county, North Carolina. I write with the mind and memory of one who is now seventy-eight years of age. Ego forces me to believe that both are as clear and far-reaching as the sweet peal of grand-mother Mittie's cast iron plantation bell.

The bell was mounted on a four post wood frame, with a short rope attached for ringing. The bell tower stood beside the "dairy". This building had three levels. It was about ten ft. tall and about eight by twelve feet. Two "rooms" with

open sides on one, which in the olden days would have had shading curtains, kept wet for cooling the milk. There was a half loft for storage. The "crawl space", about three feet high, was enclosed, with an opening where the bird hunting dogs entered to sleep. On the southwest side of the bell tower stood the smokehouse. The three structures were not far from the kitchen door.

Further a field was the two room cotton and fertilizer storage house. To the southwest of the bell tower stood the corn crib, which had a center room with loft and lean-to rooms on either side. The hinges, latches and nails were hand made of wrought iron.

Directly south of the dwelling house, about three hundred yards, stood David's cotton gin building. The gin - Clemons 1850 model- was in the loft with some kind of contraption extending through the floor, where a mule walking in a circle turned the belted wheel and removed the seeds with "fingers" on a shaft. On the ground level, most likely added in more recent years were stalls on either end for mules and milk cows. In my father's time, the large loft was used for storing hay and the space underneath for the wagon, grain drill, plows and other farm implement. Also, a long series of shallow connected boxes for nuts, bolts, other small items, and on occasion a laying hen, was mounted on the wall of the cow stalls. Mama's chicken house was nearby.

The gin building was constructed of heart pine (long leaf). The supporting posts and sills were morticed and pegged. They were made of whole, bark stripped, trees which became "fat lightwood". A lean-to shelter on the mule stable end was used to house the Columbia automobile, when it was in vogue, and Fords later.

The building was "leaned over" so badly by Hurricane Hazel in 1954 that it had to be demolished. None of these ancient buildings now exist.

On to the main event, a brief and very limited personality sketch of the four children of Jethro William and Mittie (Martin) Oates, might be in order at this point. First born, Edwin, a consistent reader of newspapers, as were the others, had a somewhat happy-go-lucky air, which he surely wasn't. He just liked to joke and tease the children, and at times his much beloved Laura. When she thought he had over done it she would say, "Oh! Eddin." He was a member of the Sampson County School Board when I graduated from Piney Grove High School in 1939. He usually left the hunting and fishing to his sons.

Jethro David (Jeath) "Ar-root" as Edwin called him, was somewhat of the same temperament, although more reserved. His sports passion was fox hunting.

Lillie was very pleasant and congenial, except when "talking" politics with John Martin. Almost two peas in a pod. I never could determine whether she was Republican or Democrat. I suspect Republican, at least some of the time. Following the death of her husband, Dewey Hobson McCullen in 1922, she was too busy managing her hotel-boarding house in Faison to have time for or interest in frivolous things.

John Martin Oates, named for his Uncle John Solomon Martin, was a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat, and kept abreast of all things, political and otherwise. He was very successful at fishing, quail and deer hunting and was an avid baseball fan. He also shot a right good game of pool.

When old enough, all of the Oates children worked in the fields. Sister Serena less than the other girls in our family. She kept the house clean, made the beds and sometimes helped mama with the cooking. This is not meant to be disparaging of "sister", but I wonder if keeping the mirror sparkling didn't contribute to her seeming inability to pass one without "primping". May I add, and quickly, she also made the best clabber and lard biscuits of anyone I know or knew. Mama was her teacher.

After his children were old enough to carry the load, John Martin never worked in the fields. He pointed the way, demonstrated the procedure, especially as it related to size and quality of truck (vegetable) crops being prepared for the auction market in Faison, "the honey hole". In those days, the produce market was located on the loading platform of the train station. Early on, Faison was called "Faison's Depot".

When we all worked together chopping or picking, "Biddie" (sister Hilda) was the designated estimator of the time of day for the noon meal break, as no one could afford a watch. Now I'm talking depression days. She turned her back to the sun, and standing straight attempted to step on the shadow cast by her uncovered head. When her toes, or the toe of her shoe, covered the front edge of the shadow it was twelve noon, almost on the dot. "Biddie is it time?" "Not quite" "it's time". Only once did her system fail. We arrived one hour early for dinner, only to be sent back to the field. Her stomach must have growled. Otherwise, she was so accurate that there was no need for mama to leave her cooking and ring the bell. This was only done on cloudy days for the meal break, or in case of

emergency. John Martin usually arrived, from wherever he might have been, at about the same time we field hands reached the house.

One fall day we were picking dried peas, a winter staple, when in mid-afternoon the bell rang. We thought the house was on fire. Brother "Bunk" had taken the several of us to the field in the car. We all dropped our burlap picking bags, which had an attached shoulder strap, except Biddie, who had tied her strap around the waist. In the panic she couldn't get it untied and got in the car with the half filled bag. She feared getting a strap mark on her shoulder which might "show" or some young man might notice when she wore a low back dress.

The water brigade was on the way, Bunk - "Do you see any smoke?" "No." "Do you see any smoke?" "No." We reached the house in short order only to find John Martin, back from the honey hole, pacing impatiently to and fro, appearing to wonder what had taken us so long. He had received an order from a "northern" produce buyer for a quantity of acorn squash which had been picked previously and stored under a shelter. We, with his help, were to quickly wash and pack them in bushel baskets, which was done. Talk about "mad wet hens" and roosters, who didn't dare cackle or crow, scaring us like that.

I will briefly revert to the subject of "laying hens". "Mammy" (grandmother Mittie) had certified pure breed Plymouth Rock Chickens. She sold the eggs to a hatchery in Faison. Mama had Rhode Island Reds, for home consumption of meat and eggs. The two adjacent chicken houses and running yards, enclosed by an eight foot wire fence, was unwitting disaster in the making. One day the hatchery owner came and told Mammy that he had just hatched a batch of her eggs and, to his great dismay, found one pretty red chick standing in the midst of the grey and white speckled. Mammy thought he had inadvertently, or otherwise, put someone else's egg in her batch. No one had ever seen mama's red rooster in the other pen. At any rate, there should have been more than one red chick, and not full of red. Mammy's breed were not selling well at the time. She suspected the man was attempting to void their contract. Her certification was temporarily suspended. Mama moved her chickens to the cotton gin location.

Several of Mammy's "Martin" nieces and their husbands, who lived in Florida, visited relatives in the Calypso and Faison areas on occasion. One Sunday they came "to put their feet under Aunt Mittie's table one more time." I was about twelve. One of the husbands, also named Jack, apparently had a hangover. Standing on the back porch, he requested a raw egg of my father. Daddy, somewhat embarrassed told him that Jack had gotten into the hen's nests

and sucked all of the eggs. Quicker than you could blink an eye I said, "Jack dog, not me." Of course it became a long-lived classic joke. It seemed that daddy always had a quail hunting dog named Jack. I could never decide whether or not to be flattered.

About this same time I was in the side yard, "the Oak grove", in solitude playing with a small cast iron toy, when my brother "Bunk" intruded upon my privacy and began to pester me. I took it for a while. He suddenly, without warning, received a bantam egg size knot on his head. I regretted that I broke my toy.

He also bamboozled me out of a fifty-cent coin that I had found in the grove. I didn't recognize it as being money. When asked what it was he said, "Oh, that's just some of my old mess," and I gave it to him.

Well, eventually he got his, at least a scare. Bunk and Cousin John Edwin Oates played a game they called "hoops". It was played with a wood paddle, of their design, having a flat cross bar about eight inches long and two inches wide, nailed across one end of the handle. As I recall, the paddle was made from a carefully selected tobacco curing stick.

The "Hoop" was an iron collar removed from the hub of a discarded wagon wheel. Start and Finish lines were usually drawn in the public dirt road, with the cross bar placed on the starting line. The objective of the game was to roll the hoop down the slanted handle and with the bar keep it upright and be first over the finish line. A variation was to spin the hoop off one prong of the bar and then keep it upright.

It was a delight for Bunk to see John, his crony, with his handle over his shoulder and hoop dangling from the bar end, fast stepping down their farm lane to its "T" beside the property line drainage ditch, across the foot board, the foot path across daddy's field, along the south wall of the cotton house, in front of the smokehouse, to the side yard, where he gave us a broad, friendly grin and few words in the manner of his much younger brother Bob, today.

Uncle Edwin's children were less talkative than our crowd. A complimentary trait inherited from the Mitchell side, mountain foothills.

One day, Bunk must have been pretending to be -Crown Prince of the Yard- He placed his hoop on his head and suddenly it slipped down around his neck. Of course he went into a near panic and yelled "mama, mama". She came out,

took hold of the hoop and led him towards the pointed gate post. "Well, I've got you now, I am going to hang you over the gate post". After a while of great fun on the part of everyone but the "panicee", mama put either soap suds or lard on the hoop and slipped it off.

In the spring when the huckleberries and "big blues" were ripe, several of us took to the nearby Oates woods. Sometimes Mamma went with us. Cousin Kathleen, oldest daughter of Edwin and Laura (Mitchell) Oates, always picked more than anyone. We all had a bucket with neck strap. I suppose Kathleen was most successful, being more adept at picking with both hands and removing the small amount of trash later.

The Cypress pond, with its polished knees, was about one mile from our house, on the north side of the road, and not far from David's brick hole, where clay was dug for making brick. Berries were picked around the pond.

Another place was in the far back pine woods around the sawdust pile. On the rare occasions when there was snow or sleet, the Oates boys used the pile for sledding on a wide short board. The sawdust mound was on the 371 acres of land that John Oates gave to his oldest son, David C. Oates in 1823. On part of the western end was where David Jethro and Minnie (Martin) Oates lived. Minnie was a niece of Mittie M. Oates.

I suspect that this house, one story with a covered "dog trot" between the main part and the kitchen, was the home of David C. and first wife, Lorohama (Flemming) Oates. The house was burned by an arsonist the day after the burial, in 1938, of Minnie beside her David, in the Oates cemetery, located on the Edwin Oates land.

In recent years, Kathleen told me, "We sometimes envied you all, you had steak for supper, we could hear Aunt Blanche beating it." Imagine hearing, across several hundred yards of fields, mama tenderizing round steak, that probably came from a worn out old milk cow. The most sound toothed yard dog would have had difficulty chewing it without first beating the daylight out of it. Tenderized and smothered in flour gravy, I guess it was to be envied.

I envied them. They had "tomater ketch-up". John E. sometimes mentioned that Aunt Laura had made some. I didn't know what it was, it just sounded so exotic. Uncle Edwin always planted a few rows of peanuts and about one acre of cane. When it was "ripe", it was ground and the juice was squeezed out. He used

a flat rectangular pan, made of galvanized tin, for cooking it over an open fire. To me, the resulting syrup was nectar of the gods.

Occasionally, I just "happened" to be present when Uncle Edwin was drawing a large jar full of syrup, for their table, from the oak barrel stored in an out building. He was well aware of my "drooling" demeanor, and bless his heart, he gave me a pint to take home. Daddy was not pleased that I had, in effect, "begged" anything from Edwin or anyone else. Nevertheless, he seemed to enjoy sopping it with one or two of mama's biscuits. In my mind's eye I can see it today. He in the second position on one side of the long oak table, me in the first on the opposite and mammy second.

The families of Edwin and Laura and John Martin and Blanche Oates had eleven children each. One in each did not survive to adulthood. The across ages of the children closely corresponded. As a consequence, and living in close proximity, I believe, was the primary reason we children were very "close" in our formative years. We are still close, keeping in mind today's hurly burly pace and other factors. "It seems we only see each other at times like this".

Aunt Lillie and Uncle "Duke" McCullen moved from their farm in Sampson County to Faison, before I was born, due to Duke's failing health. We didn't see much of their three children.

Uncle Jethro David and Dorothy Elizabeth (Wolfe) Oates were married much later in life than the others. In our early childhood days, J.D., Jr. born in 1926 was more active with us than were his younger three siblings.

On occasion J.D. would approach my sister, Serena. "Sister, can I have a biscuit?" Of course, he always could. Serena went to the "warming closet" on the "baby blue" cast iron cook stove and gave him one.

To paraphrase one of my mama's favorite sayings, "I need to get my ducks in a row" and bring this to a close.

Although, the land where the plantation bell stood is still Oates owned, it is now mounted on a black iron post some miles away. Preserved, in Oates hands, but sadly out of its element.

Today is July 4, 2000, the date in 1875 when Great Grandfather, David Cogdell Oates, departed this life.



Having declared this treatise completed, with date certain affixed, it occurred to me that I must clarify a statement of fact made in opening remarks, to avoid a "turning over in the grave." Mammy overheard her granddaughter Serena tell a friend, "Mammy lives with us." Mammy said, "I don't live with you, you live with me."