

- **Claiborne County (TN) Progress**

Nell Quesenbery Report

June 10, 1982

J.B. BEWLEY, ESQUIRE

By Nell Quesenbery

“Death so called, is a thing that makes men weep,

and yet a third of life is passed in sleep.” Byron

Catherine Hardin Fannon is a beautiful girl in whose veins flow the bloodlines of those early Clinch River settlers, the Hodges, the Hursts and the Jennings.

Just recently, Catherine gave me a correctly folded, carefully typed and very old letter. The letter was to my great-great grandfather, Royal Sterling (Rial) Jennings from his nephew, J.B. Bewley of Greeneville, Tennessee.

Upon reading the letter, a puzzling piece of old family history fell into place. My grandmother, Bessie Yoakum, often spoke of her cousin, Irene Bewley, that had come from “over the mountain” to visit the Jennings family.

Irene Bewley was an actress that had spoken lines of Shakespeare from many of the great stages of the world.

J.B. and Irene were the children of Rial’s elder sister, Manervia Jennings Bewley.

Mrs. Mary Hansard wrote of Manervia in her book, Old Time Tazewell, pages 199-201:

“Manervia, second daughter of Anderson Jennings, was a beautiful girl. I imagine I can see those sparkling black eyes of hers now.” Manervia married Philip Bewley of Greeneville, Tennessee.

THE LETTER:

Greeneville, Tenn.

November 6, 1911

Mr. R.S. Jennings

Lone Mountain, Tennessee

Dear Uncle,

This is a very stormy day, wind direct from the east and raining right along.

Well, I arrived home the very day I left your home at 5 o'clock p.m. and spent four hours in Knoxville. Is it not strange that we only live a few hours ride apart, and not see each other, only once a year, and sometimes years.

I sit down here to tell you of my trip up to Johnson City, a few days ago. I went up with a friend to take in the Soldier's Home once more. I delight to go there, but for me to describe it, I can't. To know its beauty, grandeur and immensity, you will have to see it.

Up to the present there has been expended near 3 million of dollars. There is about 150 acres in the campus. The grounds are beautifully grassed, adorned with flower plants here and there, in circular form, not a twig or anything on the grounds, all kinds of shade trees and shrubbery of every kind and the grandest roads and walks.

There is about 30 large buildings, all of brick; on one of them is a tower, with four sides. In this is placed a huge clock, the hands are large enough that you can discern the times from most any part of the grounds. They have a P.O., store room, churches, opera house, hospitals, mess halls and so on. There is an electric car line that extends out to the home. A car runs every 30 minutes. The home is situated 2 miles west of the town, on the Southern R.R.

At the present, there are about 16 to 18 hundred old soldiers there (Civil War veterans). It is sad to look at them, to me at least. Of course, they are all old, some with empty sleeves, others on crutches, some with canes hobbling along. You will see some of them sitting out to one side alone, with sadness written on their countenances.

I said to one such, "Comrade, you are comfortably situated here, seemingly, everything to make you comfortable and happy." He said, "Ah? Comrade, happiness does not consist in beautiful grounds and comfortable quarters. I stole out here to think over the past. My wife is dead, my children are scattered all over the world. I have a wayward boy, and am expecting a letter every day telling me of his death, or some misfortune befalling him." I felt so sorry for him, while others are wicked and have no thought of the future.

As I looked upon them, I said, "What a pity," that the old veterans and defenders of their country are so near the crossing. But a short time, and "they will pitch their tents for the last time upon God's eternal Camping Grounds."

I was there at the noon hour, and saw them march to the mess halls to the sound of the bugle to take their meals. They have a certain time allotted to eat. When one set are through, the bugle sounds and they march out, and it sounds for others to come and so on. They have plenty to eat; the waiters are mostly girls and dressed neat as pins and are so pleasant.

You know I always get acquainted with the girls. I told them that they were the most inviting persons I saw there, and, of course, it tickled them.

They have a large herd of thoroughbred jersey cows. About 30, I think. The barn and quarters where they are kept is much neater and cleaner than a great many dwellings I have seen. Each cow knows her stall and her name is written over her stall and she has to go in there.

In fact, there is every convenience to make them comfortable and happy. The hospital is so nicely arranged. Each ward and cot is provided with dressers, combs, towels, books, periodicals, papers and all such, with waiters neat and pleasant, slipping around in white slippers, like shadows, scarcely know they are there.

From the hospital to the dead-house is an underground tunnel or passage. When one dies, the body is lowered to this and conveyed to the dead-house, where it is prepared for burial.

The burying ground is in a circle. Col. Brownlow is buried in the center of the circle. This proves conclusively that no matter how grand and beautiful a place is we are not exempted from that edict: "Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return."

They have a herd of elks, two or three deer, a few wolves, a pet bear, a lake with swans and some fine geese. And the finest band and grandstand, all the inmates are dressed in uniforms like we wore during the war (Civil War). Several colored soldiers are here.

Prof. Ruble is the Chaplain. John P. Smith is the Governor of the home. Ed Milburn, Quartermaster. A Mr. Mickey of Cocke County is the Treasurer. Paul Devine of your county used to hold that position. And several other minor offices. The ones mentioned have their residences furnished, board and everything.

One thing I wish to impress on you, which you may want to avail yourself of: (*In 1911, Rial, a veteran of the 10th Tennessee Cavalry for the Union, was 65 years old. Rial died 18 years later on his birthday, June 20, 1929, at age 83.*) Any soldier who is sick and wishes to be treated has a perfect right to go there and have access to the hospital and receive the very best medical aid, at the expense of the government.

They even pay the expenses of the railroad fare and you do not have to become a member of the home to do this, but when you are treated and well enough, you can go home.

A great many soldiers do not know this, and doctor bills are hard to pay. They have the very best of physicians.

Well, I think I have said about enough this time. I thought this would be of interest to you, and it is raining. I could not do any better thing than to tell you of this.

My wife took a jaunt yesterday. She and a girl staying with her took a notion they would go down to the farm and see the children.

So I caught horse and buggy, they made the trip, being 32 miles, does very well for an old woman.

I have a very good horse and buggy, cost a good deal to keep it here, but it is a great pleasure.

I wrote cousin Ella Jennings and gave her a description of the home similar to this.

My very best love to your entire family, and bushels for yourself. I remain yours affectionately,

J.B. Bewley

(Written Memorial Day, 1982, in memory of ones that are asleep.)