

# History, Gossip and Lies

By Sandy Lee Wilson Martin 2-16-2018

Our cousin JD called my grandfather “a character.” Another family member, upon hearing one of the many stories about him, breathed, “He was a *cad!*” Grandma called him “Richard,” “RG,” or “Old Cuss.” Mama really does live by her own advice that if you don’t have something nice to say, don’t say anything at all – and she says there really was some good in him.

She said Grandpa was thrilled when she brought my brother Jym to meet him for the first time. Jym was Sweet Baby James then, of course, and Grandpa boasted over and over, “This is my *first grandson.*” Which of course he was; if you remember, our Aunt Marie was Wade Burleson’s daughter, so Flora Belle “Sama” Bibich (Marie’s daughter) and Charles “Buddy” Daniels (her son) were not technically Richard’s grandchildren. James was Number One. He rode on the tractor with Grandpa, and into town in the big blue truck to buy feed for the animals. Maybe that’s why he remembers Grandpa so fondly – he saw him at his proudest and best.



Mama also said that when Grandpa was in the service, every other weekend he’d come home and the family would have a big picnic. This actually seems like more of a reflection on Grandma than on him, as I never saw Grandpa bake the first biscuit. But I’ll give him the credit if Mama says so.

There is a bit of mystery about Grandpa’s name. He was born at home in 1906 to Jonah Lee Burleson and Telitha Elizabeth Lambert Burleson in Mission, North Carolina, and as far as we can tell he had no birth certificate. He started out, however, as either Richard Gomelion Burleson or Richard Grover Burleson, and he wound up as RG Harleson.

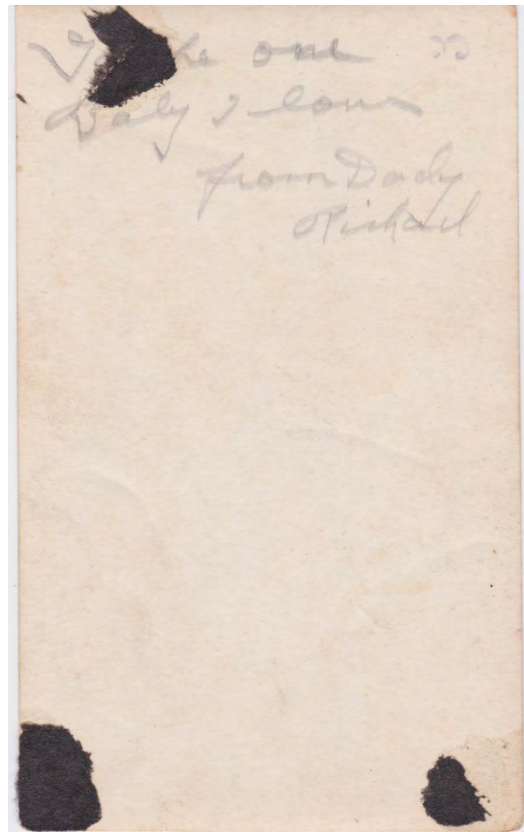
As far as his middle name, he always said Gomelion, and he and Grandma named Uncle Dick “Richard Gomelion” after him. That’s a pretty unusual name, so I went looking to see if it was from the Bible or something. I found a Silas Gomelion born around 1886 who lived in Edgefield, South Carolina, but that seemed to lead me down a bunch of rabbit trails I wasn’t ready to follow. Maybe Gomelion was just a trendy name around the turn of the century.

On the other hand, once Mama had to go to Cumberland County to get a replacement birth certificate for herself after her purse was stolen, and they put his name down as “Richard Grover.” Richard’s older brother Sim’s given name was Grover Simeon Burleson; surely Jonah and Telitha wouldn’t give their next son in line the same name less than 15 months later. Maybe nobody at the courthouse wanted to try to spell “Gomelion.”

His last name was another story. He seems to be the first Harleson ever. My Uncle Terry once asked Grandma how Grandpa’s name got changed; I’m beginning to think you have to be a little bit of a troublemaker to want to get into these old stories. She told Terry to ask his Daddy, and then Grandpa told him to ask his Mama, so Terry never did find out.

From out of somewhere came the rumor – *and it is only a rumor* – that when Richard was young and wild, he stole a car – and the judge told him he could either go to jail or go into the Army. He opted for the latter, and from that time forward, he was Richard Harleson. Social Security numbers weren't issued until many years later, so it seems one might have been able slip a name change in before that date with relative ease – especially if somebody's pen skipped just a little, making a "B" into an "H," and the top of their "u" was closed just enough to make it look like an "a." We might never know whether Richard changed it himself, or the judge or the Army recruiter decided this boy could use a fresh start, or it was just a mistake that Richard accepted as a little bit of grace. The Lord does work in mysterious ways.

Richard was stationed at Fort Bragg early in their marriage. They rented a little house, which Flora managed while he was away.



This photo and the writing on the back give a little insight as to their relationship. Richard is sitting casually in the window of the barracks. He's written:

"To the one  
Baby I love  
from Dady  
Richard"

Excuse me? He signed it "Richard" – this was not addressed to his firstborn, or some other favorite child. He was calling Flora "Baby" and himself "Dady." Whoa.

Unfortunately, Flora being *the one baby he loved* was not enough to tame Richard. The next story goes that while they were in that little house, they decided to buy it. Flora trustingly gave her husband

money her father had given to her; he was to take it to the landlord to make the purchase. He returned several days later with no money and no deed.

Flora's father passed away about a year before WWII broke out, and in his will he left her a second chance to become a homeowner: 12 acres of land back in Stanly County along with a little bit of money. As soon as Richard was sent to Italy to fight, Flora packed up the children and brought them to her mother's house. She paid a man five hundred dollars to build her a little four-room house with a living room and a bedroom in the front and a kitchen and another bedroom in the back.

Richard evidently performed fairly well in the military, serving during World War II and achieving to the rank of Technical Sergeant. According to Flora, however, he returned home a changed man. He would disappear for days at a time, sometimes sleeping in the snow because that was what he'd done in Germany. Uncle Terry once went out in his truck looking for his father and found him asleep in a ditch; he beeped the horn twice and called out, "Taxi!" and Richard jumped up and hopped in before realizing the driver was his son.

Flora put up with his eccentricities. They worked their small farm with the help of their children; she cooked and cleaned; and she eventually built an addition onto the back of the house that included a third bedroom, a kitchen and an indoor bathroom (both with plumbing), and a den we referred to as "Grandpa's room." In his later years, he spent much of his time in there, except when Flora told one of us to "go tell Old Cuss it's time for dinner."



## Doug and Sandra Wilson Holcomb

We want to Thank Sandy for all her help with  
this Article about her grandparents (Richard and Flora)