

Reflections on my Pawpaw, his Life, and Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus

By Riley Leger

I am writing this paper to construct for myself a fuller and more human understanding of my Pawpaw and his life. To pull together stories and tales about him I have been hearing all my life, as well as my own fuzzy memories, to construct for myself something resembling a comprehensive narrative of his true self. I also wish to convey to the reader the quality of character of the man whom I can only remember vaguely and distantly, but whom I remember so very fondly for his kindness and love. And final I wish to connect this story of my Pawpaw's life to a parable from antiquity which, depending on who the reader is, will either be cliché or totally novel. These are my goals in writing this paper, it is the reader's job to determine if I have succeeded or not, but for now, we must start at the beginning.

On a Saturday, March 15th, 1941, Lee Roy O'Quinn, my Pawpaw, was born in a little three-room house three to four miles outside of Boyce, Louisiana in Rapides Parish. The house was typical of a Louisiana country home—with wooden floors, wooden walls, a front porch, and a tin roof. The whole house was very drafty due to the craftsmanship of the floors and walls and a lack of insulation. When sweeping clean the house one only needed to brush the dirt in between the floorboards as the holes were big enough to allow the dirt to fall below the house, and, due to similar construction in the walls, newspapers, magazines, and any other paper or plaster which could be found were used as wallpaper in the house to help reduce the draft. The house had none of the novel luxuries of the time such as electric lighting or air conditioning. The house was lit with kerosene lamps, and there was no centralized heating, bar the fireplace in the living room

and the wood-burning stove in the kitchen. Half of the family of 6 would sleep in the living room where the fireplace provided warmth during the winter months, and those sleeping in the one bedroom would bundle up with homemade quilt blankets to keep warm. During the winter days, the four brothers living in the house would go outside behind the fireplace and bundle around it to get warm. Pawpaw's dad, my great-grandfather, Flemon O'Quinn (or Paw, as his kids and grandkids knew him) made his living working on a farm nearby along with his brother, Cullen O'Quinn, who also lived next door to Paw. Typical of country folk of the time, they had little money and fewer luxuries, but they always had food on the table and family by their sides. As I talked with my great uncles about their childhoods some 70 years ago, I found that much more than how they lamented their tiny, drafty home, they talked with fondness of the presence of a loving family and a full belly. They as a family had each other, and, at least in hindsight, that seems to have been enough.¹

There wasn't much of interest for my Pawpaw and his brothers to do; like most country people, they were poor and so did not have much in the way of luxuries or entertainment. One story of note that may illuminate a little on my Pawpaw's early childhood and his first home goes as follows: during the second world war, not far from my Pawpaw's home, was a German POW camp, and during the war, the German POWs worked the gravel roads keeping them in check and good order, and one day, in-between Paw and Cullen's houses, the POW's marked out in the ground the shape of a heart while they were working the road. My grand uncle Lamon, retelling me this story, said that this event made him realize that we're all, on a base level, of the same sort, making our way through life the best we can. They had fought against America, and now

¹ Raymond O'Quinn, Jimmy Lamon O'Quinn, Teresa Leger.

they were in prison, but that heart demonstrated to him that they were just as human as he and that they had simply been called up to fight for their country and done the best of what they could with the situation they were dealt. While my Pawpaw isn't around to be asked, it may be wondered as to how the experience affected him.²

The O'Quinns moved from their home in Boyce in the winter of either 1944 or 1945, around Christmas, to a farm of 54 acres 12 miles outside of Alexandria in a little town called Lecompte (pronounced Le Count by the locals) when my Pawpaw was 3 or 4 years old. The property itself is very close to the LSUA campus, and most of the 54 acres remain farmland to this day, for those familiar with the region. They did not make the move via train nor truck, but by traveling over gravel roads in covered wagons. The farm had previously been part of a larger plantation, and when the O'Quinns moved onto the property they moved into a tenant farmer house leftover from the original plantation. The tenant farmer house was about the same size and structure as their previous house in Boyce, and so around 1948 Paw bought the shell of a used mess hall from the closed Camp Claiborne, transported it to the farm, and constructed walls within the old mess hall to make a house with four bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, and a dining room. The dining room and kitchen were not constructed from within the old mess hall but constructed entirely by the family and attached to the old mess hall. Paw and Mama only had 6th and 8th grade education respectively, but, with the help of their children and siblings, were able to construct with their limited funds and tools several rooms, buildings, and barns for the farm. The new house was so much larger than their previous ones, that the family had a hard time figuring out what to do with all the space. The family had always raised a plethora of

² Jimmy Lamon O'Quinn.

animals—cows, horses, chickens, etc.—as well as growing different crops, primarily to feed themselves while selling excess produce and meat. Initially, this is how the new farm was managed, but slowly over time Paw purchased more and more dairy cows and by the early 50s the farm had transitioned to primarily focusing on dairy production. Previously, the family had mostly grown cotton to sell, but as they moved to dairy farming they shifted to corn and grain used to feed the cows. All of the brothers, including Pawpaw, assisted with the farming as soon as they were able to, starting with simpler tasks like picking cotton or planting crops when they were younger, and helping milk the cows or till and manage the land when they reached their teens. They often drank and used their own milk and, lacking any sort of refrigeration system, used a system of underground cisterns, reinforced with wood and concrete, below the tenant houses filled with water to keep the milk cool and prolong its freshness. It was hard work which the whole family had to do, but the family was very close-knit, and they always had enough to eat.³

Once in Lecompte, many of the brothers began school for the first time in their lives. The school building in Lecompte is rather impressive, considering the size of the town, standing three stories tall and being made of brick with a neo-classical exterior and many classrooms and maps, a built-in amphitheater, and a lot of green space outside of the building. The building, registered as a national historical place in 1992, now serves as a historical museum and public library from the town of Lecompte, but back in the 1940s, it was the one school building, serving grades one through twelve, for the whole town of Lecompte and the surrounding area. The building was twelve miles further into Lecompte from the O'Quinn farm, and my Pawpaw and his brothers

³ Jimmy Lamon O'Quinn, Teresa Leger, Sandra O'Quinn, Raymond O'Quinn.

traveled to and from school via the school bus. Due to the difficulty of travel, the family having no automobile of their own, the brothers didn't do much outside of working on the farm and school, but in school, they were very active. My Pawpaw was the class secretary as well as being in the 4-H club, track, the boys' varsity baseball and basketball teams, the school's state basketball team (while being 5' 5"), and was voted most likely to succeed (his peers called him by his first and middle names, so in the class yearbook the two were written together as "Leeroy O'Quinn" rather than "Lee Roy O'Quinn"). Leeroy's brother Lamon recalls that in his youth he was a very outgoing person who made friends easily. Another brother, Raymond, recalls that he always kept good grades and that while he wasn't the most popular, he was always friendly, if a bit quiet, and he never stirred up trouble. Once graduated from high school, he went to college for one semester before quickly realizing that it wasn't the path meant for him. ⁴

On the 13th of January 1951, Shelby O'Quinn, the oldest of the brothers, enlisted in the United States Army serving a total of 4 years. Exactly five years later, on the 13th of January 1956, Lamond O'Quinn joined the Alabama Air National Guard, serving a total of 37 years before retiring. And, just over three years after Lamon, on the 11th of August 1959 in Alexandria, Louisiana, Lee Roy O'Quinn enlisted in the United States Navy. He stayed in the navy until 1985, a service of 26 years, and continued work for the navy as a civilian servant as late as April of 2003, right before I was born, 44 years in total. Another brother, Raymond, also attempted to join first the air force reserves and, when rejected out of hand for his heart murmur, the army reserves in the 11th grade (so he could join the army full time when he graduated), but was rejected both times due to health complications, specifically being rejected from the army for his

⁴ Old Lecompte High School Museum, Jimmy Lamon O'Quinn.

hearing. Despite three of the brothers joining the military and four being drawn to it, they did not discuss in detail joining the military with each other and so it cannot be assumed the reasons one had for joining were the same as the others. Lamon said that his primary motivation for joining was a patriotic desire to serve and his secondary motivation was his pragmatic realization that it was a full-time job and that he didn't want to farm. Raymond said that there was a general feeling of obligation to join the armed forces, both because boys their age felt a patriotic obligation to serve their country and because they felt that, if they did not join, they would be drafted and then would have less say of where they go or how they participated in the military. ⁵

When my Pawpaw joined the navy, he entered boot camp at Great Lakes Naval Camp in Illinois near modern-day North Chicago and he was then commanded to make his way to the San Diego Naval Training Center by the 5th of November 1959. During his training, he became a Personnelman, a now non-existent position in the navy that managed clerical and administrative duties involved in maintaining personnel records, preparing reports, and other similar tasks. In February 1961, he was transferred to Okinawa via the Attack Squadron VA-144; and in August of 1962, he was transferred to Charleston South Carolina. On the 16th of November 1962, whilst in Charleston, he was promoted to the rank of Personnelman Second Class. Paw was no longer able to work the farm, and in January of 1963, Lee was transferred to the Naval Auxiliary Air Station in New Iberia on a hardship transfer which allowed him to spend his weekends up in Lecompte managing the farm. In January of 1963 Pawpaw met Sandra Linnertz (called Mawmaw by her grandkids) and the two started dating. As they were together longer, my

⁵ Jimmy Lamon O'Quinn; Raymond O'Quinn; U.S. Navy Record of Discharge, Release from Active Duty, or Death: Lee Roy O'Quinn, 26 April 1950.

Pawpaw started getting back from the farm earlier and earlier in the week, and in the July of 1963 the two married. Lee had been considering leaving the navy when his first term expired, but since he married, he decided to simply join the naval reserve and continue work as a civilian servant in Gulfport, Mississippi, which he was transferred to in August of 1963. He stayed in the navy reserve for two years, reenlisting into permanent service in January of 1965 as a Personnelman First Class, and continued to work at the Navy and Marine Corps base in Gulfport. In October of 1966, he was transferred to the USS George K. Makenzie (DD-836) based in San Diego; in August of 1968, he was transferred to the Naval Recruiting Station in Jacksonville; and from September of 1971 until the July of 1973, he was deployed to the USS Eversole (DD-789) also based in San Diego. Mawmaw remembers him being deployed to Vietnam for around a year, and this was almost certainly on the USS Mackenzie around 1967. By 1967 he had received a Vietnam service medal and by 1970 a meritorious unit commendation, navy unit commendation, Vietnam service campaign – XV, Vietnam campaign medal with device, a combat action ribbon, and three good conduct awards. My Pawpaw was generally quiet about his experience in Vietnam, not sharing many war stories with his brothers or children, though it is possible that as a Personnelman he did not see much in the way of active conflict. One story he did share was that in 1967 he was deployed on the USS Mackenzie, one of the destroyers that helped put out the fire on the USS Forrestal, and there he saw one of the sailors jump from the ship to his death in order to escape the fire. ⁶

⁶ U.S. Navy Record of Discharge, Release from Active Duty, or Death: Lee Roy O'Quinn, 26 April 1950; U.S. Navy Certificate of Permanent Appointment: Lee Roy O'Quinn, 16 November 1962; U.S. Navy Certificate of Permanent Appointment: Lee Roy O'Quinn, 16 January 1965; Armed Forces of the United States Report of Transfer or Discharge: Lee Roy O'Quinn, 9 August 1963; Armed Forces of the United States Report of Transfer or Discharge: Lee Roy O'Quinn, 19 January 1965; Armed Forces of the United States Report of Transfer or Discharge: Lee Roy O'Quinn, 19th October; 1967; Teresa Leger; <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/g/george-k-mackenzie-dd-836.html>.

After his deployment on the USS Eversole, Lee Roy was transferred to Naval Communication Station Harold E. Holt in Western Australia in the October of 1973. On the 1st of November 1970, he was promoted to Chief Petty Officer; on the 16th of July 1977, he was promoted to Senior Chief Petty Officer; and sometime after that, he was promoted to Master Chief Petty Officer. Once a Petty Officer, my Pawpaw began to receive periodic evaluation reports. One given on the 13th of August 1973 by W. H. Ayres Jr. placed Pawpaw in the top 1% of typical Chief rateses, the rater saying “Ratee continues to stand head and shoulders above his contemporaries in the performance of his duties. Serving as the Personnel Officer in a remote area...he has faced problems not usually dealt with by a Chief Personnelman...In direct counselling he faces each problem with complete objectivity and a meticulous attention to fairness...Ratee is eligible in all respects and is recommended for advancement to Senior Chief Petty Officer. His command of the English language both oral and written is outstanding.” In the October of 1975, he was transferred to New Orleans to head important clerical and administrative projects there. From August 11th, 1982, until September 2nd, 1985, he was the Director of Navy Manning Plans Division as the Enlisted Personnel Management Center in New Orleans. In his own words he, “was responsible for the development, maintenance, and monitoring of the Navy Manning Plans for the entire Navy. [He] determined program goals and developed the organization independently to support the needs of the Manning Control Authorities...[He] coordinated all division efforts with data processing personnel, detailers, readiness monitors.” After he retired from the navy and became a civilian servant my Pawpaw became the Assistant Director and then Director of the MCA Liaison System Management

Department, where he, “Acted as the single point of contact for Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet, Commander-in-Chief Atlantic Fleet, and Commander Naval Reserve Force[.]”⁷

While my Pawpaw was in the military he started a family. His first child, Timothy O’Quinn, was born on the 21st of June 1966 while he was deployed on USS Mackenzie. Mawmaw and Tim stayed in New Iberia for roughly six months before moving to California. After being transferred to Jacksonville, on the 14th of January 1969 Teresa O’Quinn (my mom) was born. By the time that the family had moved to New Orleans, Lee was able to work in such a way that he was home before his children got there. He said that being with them and around them was important and so it was important to him to be home. He was president of the Slidell Bantam and Baseball Association and took an active role in youth sports generally and specifically with my mother’s activities in soccer and my uncle’s activities in soccer and baseball. He didn’t pay much attention to his children’s academics besides looking over their report cards, parents generally were not the most involved in their children’s academics at the time, but he stressed to his children that they must apply themselves to their work. He didn’t really physically discipline his children, preferring to talk to them about what they did wrong, and when he did physically discipline them, he tried to still explain to them why what they did was wrong. My mom remembers that while they were never told to go to college, there was an expectation that that is what they were supposed to do. She said that he also tried to talk to Tim about joining the military, but he was unwilling to consider it. Up until the 1980s, Pawpaw would have periodic seizures that would last several hours and be accompanied by profuse

⁷ U.S. Navy Certificate of Permanent Appointment: Lee Roy O’Quinn, 1 November 1970; U.S. Navy Certificate of Permanent Appointment: Lee Roy O’Quinn, 16 July 1977; Master, Senior, Chief Petty Officer Evaluation Report: Lee Roy O’Quinn 73Aug13; Item 24 – Continuation Sheet – Lee Roy O’Quinn 8/11/82-9/2/85; Item 24 – Continuation Sheet – Lee Roy O’Quinn 5/19/90-8/03; Teresa Leger.

sweating. No medical diagnosis was able to be reached, but it is believed that they were a result of malaria he had contracted in Vietnam.⁸ Years later, I remember riding on his lap in the big tractor, making homemade ice cream, shucking corn, and going on road trips. By the time I was old enough to remember, my Pawpaw was getting old, and he needed to breathe from oxygen tanks occasionally to get enough air. Even then he worked a small farm on his land and would welcome us grandchildren with open arms and a smile whenever we saw him. I remember him as being kind and loving, but ten years later and I find my memories vague and fuzzy.

I wanted to write all of this to construct a more solid, human image of the person whom I remember those ten years ago, to understand the world he grew up in and how he lived his life. I think if the reader were to stop here, they would find in my Pawpaw's life much to be admired. He rose from what we would now call abject poverty through hard work and service to his country, he returned home via a hardship transfer so that he could work the family farm on the weekends when his dad couldn't any longer, he served his country in high-ranking administrative positions in the navy for decades, and all the while he started and cared for his family. If the reader wished to stop here, I think they would still be able to understand perfectly well why I decided to write this paper about him, but as I have researched and written this paper, I kept on returning to a particular parable from antiquity and a particular moral lesson I think my Pawpaw's life highlights, and if the reader would still like to read further, I would like to share it with them.

⁸ Teresa Leger.

First, I have to tell the story of another man who served his country over two and a half thousand years ago, but I promise I will be shorter with this one. Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus was a Roman statesman from the upper, patrician class of Roman society. In a time of crisis, he was appointed dictator, and after achieving a swift military victory against the enemy, returned all his powers to the Senate and returned to his farm to plow his fields. Ever since Cincinnatus has been a symbol of civic virtue demonstrating how to wield power selflessly.⁹ As I have written this paper, the story of Cincinnatus has come back to me time and time again for reasons which were, at least initially, beyond my understanding. My Pawpaw and Cincinnatus really have very little in common beyond the fact that they were both farmers and they both served their country. Cincinnatus was from the rich upper class of Roman society while my Pawpaw was born poor, and Cincinnatus served only for a brief time and as a military commander while my Pawpaw served for years as an administrative leader. However, after having finished this paper, having constructed at least a somewhat detailed overview of much of my Pawpaw's life, I think I understand the connection. Let us reinterpret what we mean by service. Instead of viewing service as sacrifice towards the goals of our nation or community, let us view service as sacrifice to improving the lives of those around us. Cincinnatus does not leave power due to a selfless attitude towards power, but because, with the republic saved, he can best serve those around him by leaving his political power behind. With this view, Cincinnatus represents a different kind of civic virtue, one I think the reader will find throughout the life of my Pawpaw.

Despite living in a state of abject poverty, the O'Quinns of the 1940s and 50s were happy and healthy, because they loved and served each other. The German POWs did not impress upon

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Quinctius-Cincinnatus>

my great uncle their common humanity through their military service, but through the creating of a heart in the ground which, and this admittedly cannot be determined for certain, they may have made simply to alleviate the dread they all no doubt felt being so far away from home. Through childhood and school, my Pawpaw, his brothers, and the rest of his family remained poor but continued to work together and care for each other, and eventually many of them joined or attempted to join the military feeling that it would be the best way for them to sacrifice for their nation. As I read through many different military documents from my Pawpaw's service—evaluations, letters of recommendation, and more—one of the things most impressed upon me was how he seemed to care for those around him. Evaluation after evaluation stressed how he went out of his way to solve problems for people and to advise and help them through tough situations. He didn't simply serve his country for 44 years, he served to make the lives of those around him better. And when he started a family this principle of service, conscious or unconscious, remained. Oscar Wilde once wrote "Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them." and, at least from what I have been able to tell, Lee Roy O'Quinn's children felt no need to forgive him for anything. Beyond the typical sacrifices parents make for their children, he helped try and prepare them for their futures while still loving and caring for them. Even at an old age, with many ailments, he did much for his grandchildren to make them happy and to love them. I think we could all do better to view service as not something we do for ideals of concepts, but for people, to improve the lives of those we love, and, I think it is fair to say, the life my Pawpaw lived illustrates in many ways how we can do this.