

More Ghosts in the Garden

Written by Will Balk, Jr.

Tuesday, 13 June 2017 14:48



A couple of years ago in these pages, I wrote of ghosts - both spectral and historical - we have come across in our old farmstead in what was once the Carolina backcountry in the upper coastal plain near Augusta and Orangeburg. The old homeplace has been sitting there for some two hundred years; it is hardly surprising that a couple of centuries of hard-working folks should leave behind evidence of themselves and their lives, and we are often pleased to discover some artifact of the farm's past buried in the soil or even to be visited by the occasional inexplicable apparition.

Only a few of these hints of the past have been about the gardens around the farmstead. The old trees, of course, have been here for much more than a hundred years, although it is likely that the land around the farmhouse had been stripped of almost all trees from the beginning, the better to provide acreage for crops and lumber for the buildings.

The immediate surrounding yard would have had a low picket fence, inside of which the bare ground would have been swept daily. Ornamental plantings would likely comprise only a few isolated specimen plants, perhaps a large and showy clump of Spanish Bayonet (*Yucca gloriosa* or *Y. aloifolia*), or a clump of the ancient white "Cemetery Iris," *Iris albicans*. There were certainly daffodils planted in circles around the saplings that would become these aging oaks and hickories that we cherish now.

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It would have been much later in the farm's existence that ornamental plantings would have been introduced, although the mistress of the farm doubtless would grow pass-along plants in old tin cans on the porch. Once the farm brought in income sufficient to expand, fancy shrubs like camellias and gardenias were planted around the property and pecans were planted in groves.

The remnants of these horticultural episodes define much of the character of this farm today. The pecan grove is close enough to help shade much of the yard, and it provides a handsome space where there would have been an open field between the house and the nearby road. The great old camellias bloom faithfully each winter and spring, and the rest of the year, they are strikingly beautiful green mounds twice as tall as I am.

Our antique daffodils never fail to bloom, sometimes announcing the arrival of spring as early as November or December, and they have naturalized into the occasionally-mown lawn which has taken the place of the former swept yard of yore.

These are some of the ghosts of the place, remnants of the lives lived here over the centuries. There are others, less obvious and harder to find, and we cannot know what ghosts have by now left without a trace. There are a few sprigs of ragged old *Liriope* that crop up, and there are some handsome shrubs of the wonderful native Beautyberry, *Callicarpa americana*, that are so perfectly located that I wonder if perhaps they were planted deliberately, dug from the woods and placed so as to enjoy their spectacular violet-purple show along the driveway.

Imagine my surprise and pleasure several mornings ago when I got in my truck to run some errands. As I drove out the driveway, I spotted out the corner of my eye a flowering stalk beyond the muscadine grape arbor, behind the old *Camellia sasanqua*, under a tree next to where I remember the old chicken coop stood some fifty years ago. I pulled over and got out to check on this new strange thing appearing where nothing had been before, except perhaps for a few weeds in the summer.

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