Keeping Records

with

Numerals, Symbols,

and Drawings

Grace Foster shows her father, Lawrence Peterson, her "geo-board."

Article by Teresa Cox

One of the most interesting and entertaining talks we've had so far was with Mr. Lawrence Peterson, of Ayden, North Carolina, the father of Mrs. Grace Foster, who teaches math here at the school.

In fact, one of Mrs. Foster's innovative teaching devices led to the interview. She developed what she calls a "geo-board" for demonstrating the angles
in a circle. The board consists of nails in a circle with one nail in the center. Strings can be run from the center nail to the others on the circle to form desired angles and arcs.

When Mrs. Foster showed her geo-board to her father, he told her that it reminded him of one method of keeping books and records in earlier times when many people couldn't formally read and write. Mrs. Foster saw that her father was quite knowledgeable on a wide range of this type of informal "non-literate" record keeping. She felt that he would be a likely person for Life on the Pamlico to talk to.

And she was right. We interviewed Mr. Peterson, and he, in his charming "down home" manner, presented us with a fascinating analysis of the use of symbols, numerals, and drawings to keep track of books, dates, and records in eastern North Carolina in the 1920s and earlier.

Mr. Peterson began by telling us that, years ago in eastern North Carolina, before public education was widespread, people would keep accounts and books and records the best way they could.

Old people who couldn't read and write could count to ten cause they got ten fingers. And when it come to writing, my granddaddy used to explain to me how different things worked. My granddaddy used to explain to me how different things worked. My granddaddy made barrel staves and you had to have some way to count them and keep track of them. So everybody had his own notch. If you cut logs, why you'd put your notch on your log so you could recognize it in case it got mixed up with somebody else's.

And it was the same with X [writing]. A man couldn't write his name, he made an X. If he couldn't write his name, you would put his name down, and he would put an X. He could look at that X and tell it was his. Now, it sounds funny to just make an X, but everybody has a little different curl. And they could recognize it.

And way back my granddaddy was a farm overseer. And my granddaddy ran the cotton gin in the fall of the year and baled cotton. And the way he kept track of it, he tied a knot in a string. He had a little controversy with the man who was buying the cotton, so my granddaddy decided he would keep books. From then on, since he'd been questioning his honesty, he made his mark so he could explain.

One of the methods of keeping records—the circle split into pie-shaped sections—was the inspiration for Grace's creation, the "geo-board." The board contains nails in a circle with one at the center. Strings can be run from nails on the circle to the center nail, forming sections. Mr. Peterson explained that his daughter's teaching device is strictly a modern extension of an old technique.

That was Grace's idea on the strings. Give me a piece of paper and I'll show you the way I saw it. They would draw you [Armstrong] here like that and put glasses on you. Say you had a beard; they drew
you a beard. That means they could recognize you. You worked one day for them; he

put that over here like that. So over here he owed you one dollar. You worked another day; he put you down and put you a dollar over there. Okay, you went on like that and then he'd scratch it off. So he'd owe you five dollars.

All right, but let's say in the meantime, you borrowed a quarter from him. So he wouldn't put you down a dollar there; he'd owe you 75¢. So there's 75¢.

If you got a half a dollar from him, there's a half a dollar. Quarter, like that. See, quarter moon, half moon, three quarter moon.

If you think back, barrels of stuff like flour and meal are measured in a peck, a half a bushel, and a bushel. Flour was the same way. Flour used to come in 12 pounds, 24 pounds, 48 pounds, 96 pounds, and 192—that was a barrel. See, you had half a barrel, 1/4 of a barrel, and, then, that was divided up.

So they would use the circle and the "pie pieces" to keep track of the portions of the barrel of four too?

Yes. If a man wanted to keep track of the days in a gestation period—like a mare or a cow or something another like that—then he would have to have some way to put his date down to figure out the times. He
didn't know Roman numerals no higher, probably, than twelve, 'cause that's on the clock. Then he would come back over here, say the fourth month, the tenth day—he'd make a cross. I have seen V and IV for four. But most of them used four straight marks for a four. The fourth month, the tenth day. Over here he would put down, say if it was a cow, two hundred and so many days from this date to over here he would put that down too. That meant this was what he owed over here.

That's April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November, December. So that would be the fourth of December, which would be the twelfth month and the fourth day.

_How would they make the ten?_

With an X. See, that'd be the twelfth month, and the fourth day.

_If it were nine, would they use IX?_

No. Most of 'em that I saw would be five and four. The X was just 10.

_So it was all ones and the X?_

 Mostly. Every once in a while you'd see a V.

_But that would be just for five? You wouldn't see VI?_

No. I don't remember every seeing a VI in none of their markings.

_When Mr. Peterson was quite young, he worked in a store keeping records. There he was privy to some old books in which the use of drawings to represent individuals and transactions was extensive._

_Well, now, this man that was running the store, it was his father's books he was showing me. He didn't keep books like that; he could read and write a little bit. He wrote your name and everything. But he had his father's books. Mr. Bill Lilley showed me his father's books. His father's name was Henry Lilley. And he showed me different [drawings, symbols] that he_
[Henry Lilley] used.

What were some of those?

He had one man named Jess Dudley who was his foreman. So he had him drawed with a big hat, like a Mexican hat, because he always wore a big straw hat. See, the big straw hat was the foreman.

And he would have like a field. And this man keeping the books was crippled, which his son was crippled too. So if you were going to work for him, he would send you to plow, and he had that field drawed like this in his little old book thing. And he had a tree drawed up here on it. Not a good drawing but a tree.

Okay, you started to the bridge where you crossed a ditch. And he expected you to get to that tree because the man with the straw hat plowed from there to there in a day. That was your day's work, see. If you didn't make it, he'd question you. That's the reason he had this elaborate drawing system, see.

Like the buildings and stuff, he had it notched. Like his corn barn was made out of logs. So he had his corn barn drawed, and he had notches cut in the end of the logs that were so far up, you know. So when his corn was put in and leveled in that barn, they told him what notch it went to.

He would have this picture of the barn in this book.
And he'd put the year down, and this would be his corn barn, which he would have drew so you could see. And then he would put over here how many barrels of corn he had.

Say, if he had 75 barrels of corn, then he would draw five, seven. And he would draw a circle around the seven. A circle meant multiplied by ten. So he would have that 70, and then he'd have another 5 beside of it--75.

You were telling me earlier that the numbers they used--these people who really didn't know how to read and write--that they went up to twelve.

Yes, because, you see, twelve was on the face of a clock. And that's where they picked up their numbers. You know, older people were proud. He didn't want to tell nobody he couldn't read and write. So he kept it to hisself, if he could. The only time he'd let you know he couldn't read and write was when it got down to "got to." Then you'd find out that a person couldn't read and write.

I was raised around the store like that, and somebody'd come in, and I'd know he couldn't read and write. But I'd write it down on that paper sack he was going to put it [the goods he'd purchased] in, each thing, and add it up and give it to him and let him carry it home. He'd get somebody or he'd set down and figure it out [what was written on the sack].

Some of them didn't have enough confidence in his own self to believe "I can do it," you know. But they would get by; it just took longer.

Earlier when you were talking about barrels of flour, what would they do to indicate a portion of a barrel, draw a picture?

Yes! They'd draw a picture of a barrel. And probably put an F on it. See, they could make an F or something like that. But they couldn't spell.
How would they indicate something like twelve pounds of flour?

This is where you come in with something like this [Grace's geo-board]. See this is 24 parts. Twenty-four would be a whole barrel of flour.

Now, this is where Grace calls the geo-board, and it's got 24 equal parts?

Yes. Usually they would have 12.

Corresponding to the clock?

Yes. Twelve [parts] is a whole barrel of flour. You see, this is a half. This is a fourth, an 8th and a 16th [of a barrel]. Let's say he was going to draw one fourth of a circle; that would be a fourth of it [barrel of flour]. Say you wanted a 16th he come back in here and draw it like that. And this wouldn't be there. It'd be like a wedge of cheese. And then he might dot it all around showing you that he just took a fourth of it.

Fourth of a Barrel of Flour

This--what Grace calls a geo-board--corresponds to a clock?

Yes, it would correspond to a clock. See, the inner [circle] has twelve, and the outer [circle] 24.

You said something earlier that's interesting to me: that first they used the Roman numerals because of the clocks and also the Bible. Is that right?

Yes. Most all of your older Bibles, the chapters in it--first, second, third, and all like that--were Roman numerals. And the clock was Roman numerals, all the face clocks. So you had some way to pick up the numbers. And by being taught from the Bible, that's what you picked up.

And so even though somebody was taught from the Bible, there was a good chance they couldn't read? But they would be able to recognize the numbers?

Yes! Because he looked at it, you know. Like I said, they were embarrassed to let you know they couldn't read and write. So even when he went to church--maybe somebody in the family could read. Like my uncle, his wife could read, so she read the Bible to him every Sunday night. And he'd go to church and have his little red ribbon or blue ribbon where the preacher was going to preach the sermon from. So he went in and held that Bible up and looked important.

Continuing with his discussion of Roman numerals, Mr. Peterson stated that builders, in years gone by, would use these numbers notched by axes to mark logs
for the proper locations.

When you got ready to build a barn, like this would be a corner of the barn here, this log would be one, two, three, four. This end's got a one on it, this one's got a two, this one's got a three, and this one's got a four. So you put Roman one on this, and one on this. So you know that corner goes together. Matches. Two over here, on each end. That way you don't turn it around the wrong way. Then it [the joint] had a hole bored in it 'bout this big. And a peg drove down through that, cut off smooth.

Even though limited by education and by working with an axe or hatchet, the early woodsman was quite inventive in using the Roman numerals. Mr. Peterson told us a humorous story about the use of the Roman numeral L (for fifty).

The L L I saw, the man had an L like that, and then another L. Then he had a line drewed under it like that.

So I asked this old man what that was. I hadn't ever seen that. I knew L was fifty, but I said what the hell has he got two for?

They done it with a hatchet. And I asked Mr. Vic about it, and he said, "See Fred Majors; he'll probably tell you." So I asked him. And he said, "Well, the man couldn't cut a round C for a hundred with a hachet, so he put a double L down!" He might not a knowed that a C was a hundred! But he put that down there and he said you add it together. And it was a hundred, and what he was doing was putting a date down!

You mentioned that many times for five you would do four ones and the cross instead of doing the V?

Yes.

Why would they do that?

Well, most of the time, you would be counting, see. They used to do break new ground way back. You measured off twenty by twenty feet. And a man grubbed that up, and that's what you called a task, which would a been a day's work. So the man, he wanted to keep track of it and make sure there weren't no argument about it. So the first day he dug one task, the next another, and the next day another, and the fifth day another. Well, he couldn't keep on putting them marks down there 'cause it would mess him up—he couldn't count that high! So he'd come back every five and do that [a mark across four ones]. Most everybody could do ten, do ten times, which is easy. He would do that. He wouldn't a had no place for a V, for a five, 'cause
he was building it up one at a time. Therefore, he figured V wasn't no good no way and just discarded it.

All right, he'd be like breaking the ground?

Yes. With a grubbing hoe. Just digging up the roots and stumps and whatever would be in that task. It would be in a field. It was laid off in tasks. It seemed like about twenty by twenty [feet] was a day's work. You grubbed all the roots out of that twenty by twenty. It was counted one task.

Where would he make that mark?

Probably on a stick. He'd split off a piece and put a mark on it. Sometime with a pocket knife.

And then when he got up to five he'd put a cross?

Put the cross 'cause you get too many, you couldn't count.

Let me ask you again about these drawings to represent people. You have one of me--what I'd [Armstrong] look like--and one of the foreman. You were telling me about a left-handed man.

Yes. My granddaddy—I was telling you about this Lilley fellow—my granddaddy was probably grubbing up tasks of land for him. And he had him drawed upside down because he was left-handed. Upside down with a hoe in his hand 'cause he was left-handed. That was his way of recognizing him when he saw him in his book. See, everybody had to have a distinctive character about him that nobody else didn't have. There might a been another left-handed person. But my grandfather he drawed upside down; that way he'd recognize him.

Upside Down—
left handed man

He had one man in it drawed, which was a black man. And he had him drawed putting a notch in a pinetree for logs. I knew the black man; his name was Bull Lee. That was his sign. He was cutting a notch in a pinetree.

And that's what he did a lot?

He did that a lot.

Let me just get some biographical information. Are you from this area?
I was born between Vanceboro and Griffin, little place called Epworth. I spent six years in the navy during World War II. And then I lived around Ayden a while. And then I lived in the western part of Virginia for ten years. I've been back down here about three years.

It evidently took eastern North Carolina quite a while to get electricity and that sort of thing. Grace told me to be sure and ask you about the difficulties that people had just because they didn't have electricity.

Grace was seven or eight years old before we got electricity. Some places they had it, you know. I lived up close to Ayden a while; we had electricity there. I left from there and went down to Epworth where I was born, and we didn't have electricity there. Didn't have a telephone.

And we used kerosene lamps, pumped the water up with an old hand pump. The first refrigerator I bought ran off kerosene. Had a little old lamp set down in the bottom, looked like a regular lamp. And you put that down under it, put the kerosene in it, and light it. You had to get the wick set just right. And it would freeze. Had a little freezer compartment about that wide [very small] and that deep—get about three ice trays in it. And it was a great big old thing, set up high.

As in many of our interviews, the conversation turned to the way schools were in an earlier time.

When I went [to school], a lot of kids dropped out of school the day they got sixteen. That was mandatory: you had to go to school 'til you were sixteen.

Were there many people in school then who couldn't read?

Not too much. The teachers, they would insist on you reading. In other words, there weren't no momma going to the teacher and crying to get me transferred up to the next grade! When I come out of the 7th grade, there was a man in there 21 years old. Now, he drove the school bus and farmed a little bit too, but he was 21 years old.

They didn't pass people back then?

They didn't pass people. If you couldn't do it, you just stayed where you were. The first thing you learned was [penmanship]. You learned how to draw a line up and down between two lines, like that. Then you had to draw a circle like that. Make that come between the two lines.

My first grade teacher was named Lillian Joiner. She was born down here at Cassius Corner, near Vaudenier. In fact, she raised my baby sister. My mother died when I was little, and she raised my baby sister. And she used to buy old pencils. And she'd hit you on the head so hard she'd break it.

The school where I went to school for the first seven years had a generator. When I first went, it was a 32 volt lights. And you had a coal heater. If you done anything mean, every mean, every once in
a while, lightning would strike a pine. And you'd have to cut wood or dig up a stump.

They had really hard discipline?

Yes.

Nobody misbehaved much?

Oh, yes, they would. The way they punished them was different. You never talked back to a teacher. Some did, but if you did, you just had it. I can remember going to school when a bigger boy would do something and they'd whip him a time or two, with a switch. If that didn't seem to do much, every morning you had to go to chapel—you went in and sang "America, the Beautiful" or something or other—and while we were in there doing that, if you had been bad and you'd been whipped a couple or two or three time and it hadn't straightened you out, they whipped you on the stage before everybody.

Is that right? What grade was this up to?

Up to the seventh. When you finished the 7th, then high school was four years. Wasn't but 11 grades.

Things have really changed, haven't they?

Oh, yes! When I was a boy—I was telling Grace when we come back from lunch. In 1928—I was bout five or six—my granddaddy had a fishing partner. My granddaddy lived on one side of the river, and this man lived on the other side. And they fished together, they were good fishing buddies. So this man, he sold out his farm and went down to Bath. And he told my granddaddy how good the fishing was, so we went down there to go fishing on the weekend. Just go into Bath. Grace said that was quite a trip then. And I said yes because my granddaddy didn't even drive over 15 miles an hour! It'd take a half a day! And just old dinky roads.

Everytime it'd rain, it was mud, wasn't it?

Oh yes! I had a great uncle lived over in Jones County. And my step great granddaddy, he lived with him. We'd go over there about once a year. My daddy always carried an axe in the car to cut a prize [lever] pole in case we got stuck!

Now you talk about somebody living off the fat of the land, they lived off of it. My granddaddy's half brother—when you went to their house to eat, the only thing that got bought was salt. Everything else they raised. You'd drink yaupon tea sweetened with honey. Had milk, butter. My aunt cooked loads of bread, sour dough bread. Oh, that smelt so good. Vegetables, all kinds of vegetables! If my uncle could get him some herrings, he'd salt them down. Like I say, I was pretty lucky to be raised up around older people. My granddaddy was what he called a yearling boy when the Civil War started. And my mother's daddy was born in 1860. And his daddy got killed in the Civil War. Mother married again, and married a man younger than she was. They had two children by her. 'Course, back then kin folks were a lot closer than they are now,
and we'd go for visits.

One impressive thing about our talk with Mr. Peterson was that people of an earlier time would not let educational handicaps stop them from doing, with great accuracy, what they had to do as far as keeping records was concerned. Like the old saying goes, "Where there's a will, there's a way." And furthermore, we understand what Mr. Peterson means when he says that he was lucky to be a boy "back then."