

TB and a Letter to Charles Burton

By Barbara Glakas

On December 22nd of 1934, Herndon Mayor Allen H. Kirk typed out a Christmas letter to Charles Manley Burton on Town of Herndon letterhead.

Kirk (1876 -1955), a very accomplished mayor, served in that capacity from 1933 to 1937, during the Great Depression. Burton (1910 – 1935) was a member of Herndon’s well-known Burton family. He was a graduate of Herndon High School and was a member of Herndon’s Volunteer Fire Department. His namesake and grandfather, Charles Marshall Burton, was the town’s first Town Sergeant in 1879.

Kirk was writing to Burton while Burton was at the Catawba Sanatorium. This institution was founded in 1908, was located in Roanoke, and was the first of many state-sponsored health institutions created for the purpose of treating and containing tuberculosis (TB). At that time the only known treatment for TB was fresh air, sunshine and a healthy diet. In 1800 the infectious disease of TB (also known as consumption at that time) was prolific, killing about seven million people per year. The TB vaccine started being used in 1921 causing cases to decline sharply in the 1920s and throughout the 1930s. One of Burton’s descendants said, “He had been in a sanitarium for several years.” Kirk had once spent some time at Catawba himself. In the letter he described himself as “an ex-T.B.,” and a “graduate of Catawba Sanatorium.”

During Kirk’s time as Herndon’s mayor, the town’s first beer and wine sales licenses were approved, the town joined the Virginia Municipal League, the position of Corporation Counsel (or Town Attorney) was created, the town voted to fund its own sewer and disposal system and got a Public Works Administration grant for the same, and the town started discussions about taking over the Chestnut Grove Cemetery that had been privately run by a cemetery association.

Kirk was born in Illinois but lived in Herndon for most of his adult life. He was a college graduate and in the 1910s and 1920s he was a farmer and merchant, married with several children. By 1930 he was a proprietor of a pool room. Later, in the 1940s he worked as a postmaster station agent. At different points in time, he lived in Herndon on Elden Street, 5th Street and Oak Street.

Of interest in his letter below, Mayor Kirk mentioned many Herndon residents, giving us a snapshot glimpse of life in Herndon in 1934. The letter refers to “Uncle Geo. Harrison,” as everyone in town called him, who came from a local farming family dating back to the 1870s. George Harrison also served as a county supervisor, helped organize Herndon’s Volunteer Fire Department, helped grade the town’s dirt roads, and was an all-around town go-to fix-it guy.

“Uncle Ed. Gillette” refers to Edgar E. Gillette, who was a carpenter and home builder who lived on Grace Street. Like Kirk, he had also served as mayor (both in the early 1900s and in the 1920s) and was a prominent member of the Herndon Masons. “Pete Reed” may have been a reference to Charles H. Reed, another prominent home builder. Although his name was not Pete, we have known at least one other early Herndon resident - a blacksmith named James - who was

nicknamed Pete and we wonder if that may have been a common nickname of the time for people who worked in the labor industry.

Hazel and Willie are two of Kirk's children. "Martz" refers to Ernest Martz, who operated a pharmacy out of the old Herndon Hotel that once stood on Lynn Street. "Si" most likely refers to Silas F. Hutchison who at one point lived next door to Kirk on Elden Street and would later go on to become the Herndon postmaster. "Annie" refers to Annie R. Walker, who was the Herndon postmaster in the 1930s. "Robinson" refers to Frederick W. Robinson, a World War I veteran who operated a dairy feed and farm machinery business on Center Street. He later went on to be one of the longest serving members of the Fairfax County School Board.

Kirk also refers to "cello-glass," a strong type of glass that allows the penetration of ultraviolet rays. "C.W.A." refers to the Civil Works Administration, a short-lived job creation program as part of the New Deal. And "F.E.R.A." refers to the Federal Emergency Relief Act, another New Deal program.

Hints of hardship are indicated in Kirk's letter, as the time period marked the middle of the Great Depression. Re-printed below is the letter that Allen Kirk wrote to Charles M. Burton in 1934.

Dec. 22, 1934

X-mas Greetings to Chas. M. Burton

Dear Charles:

Have just finished a letter to an old Aunt of mine who is laid up in a hospital in Belvidere, Ill., for repairs, and will write you a short one.

Same old town, same old crowd, all scratching all the time and getting nowhere.

Don't know what I am going to do for nourishment this winter unless I get a job, bad outlook for an ex-T.B., graduate of Catawba Sanatorium and one who needs plenty of sustenance in order to carry on, but I refuse to worry, that is mostly why I am here to-day, and eat and sleep just as well as if I had a million.

Uncle Geo. Harrison was just over to see me and said the Lord and his turnip patch would have to carry us through the winter he guessed.

We were both foreman on the C.W.A. road work last winter and both eased through that. Uncle Geo. is a remarkable old man and tough as a pine knot. Am trying to get some F.E.R.A. work for this winter so he can take a gang of men and clean up that cemetery of yours, it is a disgrace to the Town of Herndon.

Have my home finished and moved in and sure like it fine, would not make a single change if I could do it over. Uncle Ed. Gillette and Pete Reed were plenty slow and did a fine job. Never built anything before but a 2-seater back-house and that didn't suit me, so I am surprised to find my new home pleases me.

Have two 12x16 sleeping porches. Hazel and Willie are sleeping out this winter too, and my wife and I use the other, so I have the whole family out now. They howl some of those cold nights but I run them out every night. I have cello-glass on the west end to keep out the snow and rain and wire screen on the south. That cello-glass is great stuff, lets in the sun and air but keeps the storm out.

Am going to get a couple of pigs, just as soon as I can raise money. What are they worth at Catawba? Have never been able to find any except there. My old one that I brought from Catawba burned in the fire.

Si has his new home almost completed and will move in about the first of the year. He and Annie and Mary are sure busy with the Xmas mail, but they do very well. Martz is remodeling the Hotel and expects to start his new drugstore soon. Herndon Ice Co. has been sold to a Manassas company. Robinson is going to run for County clerk against Richardson. He ought to win. Have a drunk up in the Mayor's court occasionally, but my holiday special of \$10 and costs slows them up considerable.

Well, remember that I came back from Catawba and am still here. Suck in plenty of that mountain air and stick to the cure so that Herndon can boast of two alumni from Catawba Sanatorium.

Give my kindest regards to Dr. Nicholls and anyone else who might remember me.

Uncle Al.

Charles Manley Burton died of TB in 1935 at the age of 25.

About this column: "Remembering Herndon's History" is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon's past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of "Remembering Herndon's History" columns is available on the Historical Society website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org.

The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society's website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org, and the Historical Society's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.

Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com.