David Lee Kelly

Fire Eater! Writer

Kavanaugh

1 April 2005

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Okmulgee, Oklahoma
May 14, 1932

M. R. Newton, I will finish the carpenter work on your farm house as follows.
Finish casing out windows, ceil (sic) walls that are not ceiled (sic) and hang and
lock doors that are not already finished...provided you will furnish me room and
board and gass (sic) and oil for transportation and materials that it takes to
complete same as above stated...and if we can not agree, I will not enter into an
agreement or covenant with you.

P. K. Robins
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Polk Kavanaugh

This was written during the depths of the Depression when the fields had turned to waste in Oklahoma and the poor farmers lost everything. John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1940, painted an accurate picture of the suffering that many families of the South dealt with daily during the early 1930s. The above excerpt is from a brief letter written by my Great-Grandfather, Polk Kavanaugh Robins. He was 57 years old at the time, and to keep food in his stomach and a roof over his head, he worked odd jobs doing carpenter work, a trade he knew well.

Polk Kavanaugh Robins entered this world on 27 January 1875 in a new home built along a hillside in the Southern Ozarks that straddled the meandering Arkansas River. Born in the township of Knoxville, Johnson County, Arkansas, a western Arkansas area that would quickly grow with many new families, just as the Robins, trekking west from the recently war-devastated regions of the South.

Kavanaugh, as he would be called throughout his life, was the second son born to William Elias Robins and Elizabeth Jane Sloan. Kav was one of nine siblings raised in a new South. He was part of a new generation that would suffer the continued hardships of rebuilding what was lost to the

Yankees by near five years of war.

“Just before she died I held Rachel Jane and Rosa Lee up to kiss her then I kissed her and said "Hun you are going home to Mother in a little bit, she will meet you there to kiss you, so you kiss her and tell her that Daddy, Rosa Lee, Rachel Jane will be home before long...”

Kavanaugh's father, William Elias Robins, along with his two older brothers, Samuel Hollingsworth Robins and Henry Albert Robins, fought for the Confederacy as privates in the infantry: Co. B, Phillips Legion, Georgia Volunteers. Samuel and Henry volunteered in the fall of 1861. William joined his brothers in the fall of 1862 after his 18th birthday. Phillips Legion was formed with mostly young men and a few experienced soldiers from the Florida Wars, most from Whitfield County of Northwestern Georgia. The Robins brothers fought under Gen. Floyd in the Sewell Mountain and Hawks Nest Campaigns before they were sent to the coast of South Carolina to become part of the Northern Virginia Army under the command of Gen. Longstreet. The brothers fought in the Battle of the Second Manassas, Boonsboro, Sharpsburg, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Brick Church, Gettysburg, Chicamauga, Knoxville, and the Wilderness. Samuel was gunshot in his left knee at the Wilderness and spent seven months recovering before he returned to duty. Henry and Samuel were captured at Sailor's Creek on 16 April 1865 just outside of Appomattox. William Elias managed to escape capture only to surrender with Lee at Appomattox on 9 April 1865. Samuel spent the next three months with his brother Henry as prisoners of war at Newport News Prison and then Hampton Prison. Henry contracted measles and died in the prison hospital on 18 July 1865. The next day Samuel was released to return home as a survivor of the bloodiest conflict to be fought on American soil.

William's daughter, Maggie, wrote about what happened next (from *Eliza Jane Robins Obit. August 1929*):

> "... August 22, 1869 Eliza Jane Sloan was married to William Elias Robins, a Confederate soldier, who had stacked his arms with the remnant of General Lee's army at Appomattox Court House and walked with bleeding feet back to Georgia to help in the reconstruction of his native state. Mrs. Robins went into the Methodist Episcopal Church South with her husband who had been reared in that faith, and these two traveled life's pathway together until death called him forty years later.
>
> Two years after their marriage they moved to Knoxville, Arkansas, where all of their children were born except the eldest, Leila, who was born in their Georgia home. The move to Arkansas was frought with danger. Part of the trip was made by train but the last hundred miles had to be made behind an ox-team over swollen streams and uncharted roads through forests with a six month old baby to shield from the hardships of the journey...."

Thus William Elias Robins started a new chapter in his life with a growing family and a fresh start at a life of liberty and peace in his new home. William and Eliza would grow to be respectful citizens of Johnson County, Arkansas, and later Ft. Smith, Arkansas, as they raised their family of nine children in the principles and teachings of their ancestors and Creator.

William's second son, Polk Kavanaugh Robins, the subject of this article, learned carpentry from his father and from both his parents the teachings of Jesus and the Holy Bible. In his early teens Kav would opt out of school to pursue a career in carpentry. Some family historians believe that Kav chose this career path to help support his family during the economic depression of the early 1890s.

Polk Kavanaugh married Hester Alice Jane Norman on New Years Day, 1897. To this union nine children were born, seven surviving to adulthood. Hester's and Kav's children were: Ethel, Rachel, Mae, Tennie, Loretta, PK Jr., and Norman. Their girls were born in Knoxville, Arkansas, and their boys were born in Stigler, Oklahoma, after Kavanaugh's family moved there in 1909 . Kav did his best to help support and meet his family's needs. Hester worked hard at home and earned extra money laboring at the ironing board, pressing shirts for neighbors and businessmen while Kav built homes and crafted furniture along with working a large garden. This is how the Polk Kavanaugh Robins family grew and survived the ever changing world of eastern Oklahoma while raising a family into the early 20th century.

"Kav was a simple man; a poor working-class man of Southern heritage and faith. His life's story could be easily shared by thousands just like him in the hopeful rolling hills of eastern Oklahoma."

Life was already hard for the Robins family when the crash of '29 cast its ugly shadow across the nation. Life for all of us brings happy times along with times of sorrow and darkness. Kav had already lived a life full of these moments when the Great Depression threatened to tear his world apart; a depression that tore deepest at the soul of the working poor. Kav stood to lose all of his worldly possessions that he had, and he did lose just about everything. But through even the darkest days of the Depression, Kav kept his faith and survived the perilous road he followed. A different road, yet quite similar to the road his father and ancestors had followed on their personal journeys of life in America's South. A life full of hardships and character-building experiences.

I have been blessed with a number of letters from Kavanaugh and some of his family members; letters that have survived for over 70 years. These letters have helped to bring to life the personality of my Great-Grandfather, Polk Kavanaugh Robins, and his daughters and siblings. I was born more than a decade after Kavanaugh ended his journey in this life in December of 1944, and I never knew him. But I somehow feel that even though he died in poverty, he was actually a rich man whose wealth was brought forth through his heritage, love of family, and of his Creator. Kav was a simple man; a poor working-class man of Southern heritage and faith. His life's story could be easily shared by thousands just like him in the hopeful rolling hills of eastern Oklahoma.

In closing, I have added various letters to help paint a picture of Kav's world in Oklahoma during the early 1930s. A world that brought even the best to their knees.

Holdenville, Okla.
March 30, 1932

Dear Papa,

Guess you are having cold weather there as well as we are here. Hope you are feeling better. Mamma has the flu till she can't hardly talk above a whisper. Mae came home yesterday evening. Hubert is staying at his Pa's for a while. P.K. is about the same. We still have to buy the medicine for him. Margaret and Robert sent the children two cream chocolate rabbits for Easter. We talked about sending you one but didn't have enough postage and of course they couldn't resist the temptation of eating them when they were where they could see them. Loveta's Sunday School class had an egg hunt and Bobbie went up to Nickol's and hunt with Billy and Johnny.

The man came up to turn off the gas the morning after you left. I had $4.70 left out of the $7 you left so I gave him that and told him it was all I had. He didn't turn them off and we owe nearly $8 more. I took the $1 you sent in your letter and got P.K. two bottles of medicine, sack of stud, head of cabbage, ½ doz. lemons, 25-cents eggs.

I wrote Uncle Hollie when I was at Wetumka and let him know our condition. They did not let you read it but I know from what Tennie said they tried to make it everything but what it was, to her. Maybe they didn't to you.

But it's the last letter any of your family will ever get from me and as for me asking them to do something for me or us, I'll never. If they want to help, it will be without my begging or asking. I'm not mad but I mean every word.

We will get by some way. I don't know just how. Just wish that I were well. I feel better.

Take care of yourself.

Love from all,

Ethel

(Kav's eldest daughter)

(Written on Consolidated Fuel Company, Miners and Shippers, Muskogee, Okla. Letterhead stationery, Postmarked May 28,1932)

Saturday afternoon

Dear Kavanaugh:

I will try to write a note and the car running. Was so rushed could not look after business. If the woman near farm does not want to board you at reasonable price, just go and come from home and go ahead clearing ground where stuff will grow. If surveyor located enough corners for you to know how tens lay, don't have him do any more until we get back. I would like to see how the land lays before locating the house site. I did not have time to talk to lumberman and thought might know about houses by time we get back.

If Hollie gets time to take a look at the abstract tell him it is at the Guaranty Abstract Co. on 4th St. between Okmulgee and Broadway and I owe $3.00 on it. He can pay it and I will pay him when I come. If he has no time just let it alone until I come. I talked to Dr. Dodson and he assured me we could fix things all right when I return.

There is a bag of red Irish potatoes in a bag under the Frigidaire in that basket that are all sprouts. Maybe you can plant them somewhere and we can get back before they grow much. If you don't stay at the place near farm maybe you can get some school boy for about 50 cents a day to help you kill snakes a few days.

Plenty of eats in Frigidaire for few days.

Your sister

M Robins Newton

If Mr. Bradford calls, tell him he will have to wait till I come home

(Kav's sister, Maggie)

May 31st, 1932

Dear Sister and all:

"Is it well with thee? Is it well with thy husband? Is it well with the child?"

These questions were asked by Elisha and it included the whole family and of course this would fit your immediate family. But if it was one step higher the word child would be changed to children. So that is the thing that was on my mind when I thought I would write you.

I hope that it is well with all.

I got your letter. I stopped the Surveyor. He was 30 yds. west of where I was at the N.E. corner of the 80 and that is as far as we got, beginning at the N.E. corner of the N.E. - 10. I think the corner stone had been moved. There was not a corner stone within ½ mile of land that we could get an established starting point. Yesterday was "Labor Day." Thornburgh wanted me to help finish his house but the old man said he didn't have the money to pay me and he would have to do it himself. He has about $75.00 worth of work to do yet and all his money gone. So Thornburgh would not pay me to help so that is that. It rained here last nite and this morning early and it looks like it is going to pour down some more now.

If the weather permits I intend going down to [the] place tomorrow. So don't worry about Hollie and myself. We will make it O.K. So stay as long as you want to. That farm won't spoil in a year at least. Judge Colton died Sunday eve at 11 o'clock. I gathered about 3 qts. of cherries. I don't know what to do with them - just leave them in the Frigidair I guess. Margaret, how are you? It seems like I ought to be hearing your Mamma saying something to you. It's just a little bit lonesome around here. But how lonesome it would be if you were gone.

I am not going to promise that I will keep my bed made up but I will promise to keep most of the pans and dishes clean.

So I close with very best wishes and regards to all.

Lovingly,

Kavanaugh Robins

Holdenville, Okla.
June 30, 1932

Dear Dad:

There is very little news of importance.

The Kiddies are almost over the whooping cough. They had quite a time. Little Bobbie couldn't keep a thing down for nearly two weeks.

Jack & Tennie were still at Tulsa last we heard from them, but they aren't using her in the beauty parlor any more and they were thinking about leaving. Tennie had an attack of appendicitis a few weeks ago.

Hubert & the children are still with his parents. He & his Dad have been working for the funeral homelaying sidewalk.

The rest of us are still existing.

Dad, I didn't think those old teeth were any good, and I read an ad in the paper and I sold them. Suppose you have had your others fixed by now, if you haven't you might as well have Uncle Holley or Aunt Maggie stand good for the bill—if they can't let you have enough change to have the work done.

I know that you've done enough repair work on the houses for them to have paid you more than they have anyway. Looks like you would send a statement of the work you've done and the amount of pay you've received, am't due etc., so that we'd know something about how much is due you—for if you should pass away suddenly as Grandma did, we children would have no means of knowing just how much is owing to you—of course if you'd rather your brother & sister & niece to keep on pocketing it as they have for the pass two years, rather than to demand your part for your own daughters and sons, well just let them pat your back and soft peddle you in order to gain their point.

In the letter Uncle Holly wrote in Feb. He advised that we'd better move back to our house at Stigler. It isn't a house we need it's food and something to wear. You know we can't get credit here—neither could we if we were at Stigler. The boys are both nearly barefooted—and we girls would be too, if the shoes hadn't been given to us.

We had sliced cucumbers and onions the other day and Loveta said, "Oh, this is what Daddy likes."

Many thanks for the $l.00 it all went for groceries.

Lovingly,

Mae

(Kav's daughter)

R.R. #3, c/o L. G. Reece
Webbers Falls, Okla.
Sunday, Aug. 28, 1932

Dear Brother:

Have just written a letter to Dean. Now I will write you one and then write P. K. Jr. one.

First I will say that when I left I looked for a Bible and I got one out of the shelf in your room. I hope it is O.K. with you. I know it is but I was afraid it

was one that you preferred. It was the "Gideons." Well this is Sunday eve and a little lonesome too for me. I thought they had S.S. here but no servises [sic] of any kind. If I stay down here they will have to beat that.

Hollie, Newton was mad because you had not paid your board and mad because I was paying mine in work and so was Maggie. She ordered me to get my duds and get out and said if you was not going to beat what you were that you could get your duds and go too. I took her at her words and got out. I put my things in the room you said for me to. You can do as you like. Maggie said she would not have kept you there but she thought you was going to marry. Now Hollie I hope I have not caused any trouble. If I have I must humbly beg your pardon and ask God to forgive me for God knows I love you. I will tell you all about it when I see you. Think I will be up there Sat. nite and Sunday I have enough to make out on until then and I can pick cotton next week if I don't get a job there in town. I may not come until Sunday. It will take me all week to finish nailing up all the lumber I have and build a flue and there will be one room that I can't finish then.

P. K. Jr. has him a job in the hay fields. Said as soon as he made enough dough to get him a pony he would ride down to see me. Never said a thing about the rest except that they were still managing and that he thought Ross and Loretta were at Ponca City. His address is 224 N. Kelker St., Holdenville. No [sic] he was going to get him a job, a boy friend of his is working for the Indian now and he was going to get on through him. I had rather P. K. Jr. would come to me than for me to go after him hadn't you?

Well I missed Sunday School and Preaching today but I am just making it fine. Just a little lonesome. But I believe it beats being nagged fussed at and quarreled at and abused and mistreated for no reason. Hollie I believe God Allmighty [sic] is going to give us a few days better time yet. I just feel that way and can't help it. I pray that God will still lead us and as David said stay close by me, and not leave me in my time of trouble.

Lovingly,

Kavanaugh

over

Hollie I am going to address this to the court house and as soon as you read it tear it up and throw in waste basket. If you want to write me be sure and keep the correct address. R.R. #3, Webbers Falls, Okla. c/o L. G. Reece. Be sure and keep in touch with Mr. Campbell and you might tell him if he will give me the plans and specifications of anything he wants done a few days before I start that I can do anything he wants done. The idea in this I like to study my lesson before I recite.

Kav.

Holdenville, Okla.
Nov. 22, '32

Dear Dad:

We had a real cold spell here about a week ago, a little snow even——we thought surely winter had come, but it has moderated and seems like summer again. Loveta was a "Poppy" on Armistice day. She was in a play that was given at the Grand Theater——wore a red paper dress. She did her parts well, and was real sweet. Hubert sent some snapshots of the Kiddies. One with their clown faces & suits on, one with their pajama's and another with their new suits on. They are all very cute. Loretta, Ross, Tennie, Jack, Jackie, Raymond are all coming for Thanksgiving. We are expecting Hubert and the children, too——but do not know for sure if they will get to come. Of course, it won't seem right if you aren't with us too. Bobbie heard us talking about P. K. Sneaking off——so he said to tell Dad to sneak off home from Aunt Maggie.

Don't suppose we'll have Turkey but maybe hen will taste nearly as good.

Lovingly,

Mae

Ada Oklahoma
Feb 22 1933

Dear Dad

This is a sad letter for me to write and first I want you to forgive me for not letting you know about dear little Flora Mae's death myself, but I was so torn up in grief and sorrow that I just asked one of the women here to call Mae or Mother which ever one that could come to the phone and tell them to let you know because I had to send several telegrams and charge them to Dad's phone anyhow. Dear Little Flora Mae took sick Jan 10 she just got to go back to school one day after Christmas holidays, it was arthritis rheumatism that she took down with and little over two weeks after then she developed double Bronchial pneumonia and had pulled through all of that and last ten or twelve days before she died had been taking quite a bit of nourishment her little cheeks were getting pink and she had gained some strength, but of course the leakage she already had in her little heart was weakened by it. But then again it looks like it is the way Brother Morris said in preaching her Funeral maybe the good Lord had just got sorry for her Dear Little Mother in heaven because she was so lonesome and just called Flora Mae home to be with her, anyway it was his will for her to go, I had prayed for her and asked God to let her get well because she helped me so much with the other children and she was so sweet, I just didn't believe I could possibly give her up, but God is a merciful God because he never took her nor her Mother untill I consented in my heart to give them up if it was his will that they go then he waited untill daytime to take them both, the little dear died at 9:02 Sat. Feb 18 and we buried her on the 20th that was the day you remember when we buried Rachel just eleven months ago. Yes the little darling sure did suffer, about the last three weeks the rheumatism had affected her jaw bone joints and she hadn't been able to say but just one or two words at a time.

Just before she died I held Rachel Jane and Rosa Lee up to kiss her then I kissed her and said "Hun you are going home to Mother in a little bit, she will meet you there to kiss you, so you kiss her and tell her that Daddy, Rosa Lee, Rachel Jane will be home before long" and then she turned her sweet little eyes and looked at me. Oh Dad the day she was saved last summer in a revival here certainly is a sweet and comforting memory to me, and if it wasn't for knowing that some day my little family can be reunited never to part anymore I just couldn't stand it. Ross and Loretta didn't get to come because he couldn't get off from his job and she was sick with the mumps anyway.

Hubert

(Kav's son in-law. Husband to Kav's daughter Rachel who died in March of 32')