

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, October 26, 2015

Eugene S. Ferguson (1916–2004): Gene Ferguson, named for his Uncle Gene Shallcross, was one of my 12 first cousins, all now deceased. As a five-year-old, he was the ring bearer at my parents' wedding in Old Drawyers Church near Odessa. At that time his family consisted of his parents, Bassett and Mary Shallcross Ferguson, and his older brother, Bassett Jr., five years his senior. They lived in an old farmhouse then in the center of Ridley Park, which the family named "Whitehall" after one of the Shallcross farms between McDonough and Mount Pleasant in southern New Castle County (Delaware).

When I was five I spent a week with the Fergusons while my parents were busy with the 1929 Yorklyn Trapshooting Tournament. As teenagers, Bassett Jr. ("Jimty") and Gene already had a going printing business with a huge press in the basement of Whitehall. They built a wooden signal and attached it to a tree to indicate when I could pass with my pedal car. Gene and I "played store" in a "widow's watch," a small cupola on top of the house accessible only by ladder. The Fergusons provided their young cousin with a great week of fun.

Gene Ferguson was graduated from Ridley Park High School in 1933 at the age of 17, and he was enrolled immediately at Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. Being a very studious introvert, he went through college in three years and obtained his B.S. in Mechanical Engineering in 1936 at the age of 20. Soon he had a job with the DuPont Company in its plant at Gibbstown, New Jersey. Riding the Chester-Bridgeport Ferry to and from work, he lived at home in Ridley Park for several years.

Having taken R.O.T.C. at Carnegie, Gene enlisted as an Ensign in the Navy in 1942 and trained at several East Coast locations before being deployed to the South Pacific in the spring of 1943. Just before he "shipped out," he was stationed briefly at Providence, and he and I had Sunday dinner together soon after I began pre-meteorology training at Brown University. After spending about two years on the islands, he was returned to the States, but only after a touch of malaria or the "crud," a skin disease that plagued him for many years thereafter. In May 1945, he was at the Charleston (South Carolina) Naval Base, and as I passed through Hunter Field near Savannah en route to the Pacific, we had dinner together again, this time at the Francis Marion Hotel in Charleston.

My cousin was discharged from the Navy soon after V-J Day, and he tried to go back to his old job with DuPont. His skin condition was very painful, however, and a specialist suggested he should try a drier climate. Early in 1947, he landed a job teaching in the engineering department at Iowa State University, and indeed his health improved. Here he met Josephine "Jo" Mobley, and they were married in the spring of 1948 in her home town of Kennett, Missouri. They had three children, Judith (born 1950), Daniel (born 1952), and David (born 1960).

Gene was a serious researcher and author of several books and soon became known as a foremost scholar in the new field of the History of Technology. In the early 1960s, he accepted a position with the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, and the family moved to Kensington, Maryland. He liked his job very much, but he and Jo feared for their family's safety where they lived. They returned to Ames, and he was reinstated at Iowa State.

In 1969, Director Walter Heacock of the Hagley Museum and Library worked out a fellowship program with the University of Delaware with a graduate degree offered in the History of Technology. Gene Ferguson was hired to work half-time teaching at the U of D and half-time researching at the Hagley Library. He and the family moved to Newark, and he loved his work. My mother and I enjoyed many Christmas dinners in their home through the 1970s. In 1980, he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Delaware, the only one awarded that year and the only one to a recipient with no more than a bachelor's degree.

Gene and Jo always liked the quiet times. They loved to go to Rehoboth on winter weekends, and in return for using my mother's cottage there, they did most of the maintenance. To be more remote, they discovered Ocracoke Island on the Outer Banks, and they built a lighthouse there of Gene's design that doubled as a rather deluxe second home.

In the 1980s, Gene retired, and he and Jo spent their time between Newark and Ocracoke. About 2000, with his health failing, they sold the Newark property and moved into the Presbyterian Home at Quarryville, Pennsylvania. Gene died there in 2004 and Jo followed about 2012. Of their three children, Judith lives with her family in Tucson, Arizona; Dan lives with cousins in Kennett, Missouri; and David lives in Ovid, New York. I never had siblings, but I had some great first cousins.