



Pall Mall native Ernest Buck, 92, is considered by many area residents to be Fentress County's unofficial historian.

Story and photo by Mark E. Johnson

On Jan. 6, 1956, 42-year-old schoolteacher and farmer Ernest Buck collected three eggs deposited by the laying hens on his Pall Mall farm.

March 6 of that same year was a much better day, however.

He gathered 30 eggs that day.

Which is also good when compared to the 16 eggs he collected on Aug. 6, 1956.

And how, 50 years later, do we know that these somewhat mundane figures are accurate?

We know because Ernest wrote them down. In a careful hand, scribed within ruler-guided columns, is an accounting of every egg Ernest gathered during the year 1956, broken down by month and day. And there is a similar "egg record" for every other year that Ernest kept chickens as well.

"That's what my dad does," laughs Jim Buck, the youngest son of Ernest and his wife of 68 years, Grace. "He records things."



But Ernest's interests were by no means limited to hen eggs. For example, every vehicle the now 92-year-old ever owned is noted in a ledger, including model-year, purchase price, the year he obtained it, and whether he bought it with cash or by trade.

From these records we know he bought his second car, a 1937 Plymouth coupe, for \$300 cash in 1943.

Ernest also has a detailed accounting of every job he's ever held,

complete with his hourly wage. In 1943-44, for example, he helped produce B-24 bombers at Henry Ford's Willow Run plant in Ypsilanti, Mich. His wage was \$1.30 per hour.

And practically every penny he's ever spent or earned is chronicled in his notebooks. On Jan. 7, 1951, he spent \$3.60 on 100 pounds of 16% cattle feed. The next day, he earned \$2.20 on five-and-a-half-dozen eggs.

In 1998, with Jim's encouragement, Ernest compiled these

and dozens of other amazing statistics and stories — including entries from a diary he began in 1938 — into an 86-page spiral-bound book called "Ernest Kellen Buck, A Look Back." Ernest's modesty is evident in a note handwritten on the book's inside cover.



"I wrote this on the insistence of Jim, for his information. I did not make an outline. I wrote on the various topics as they came to me. I never meant for it to be made into a book. Ernest Buck."

Printed only for the purpose of preserving the family's history, the entirely handwritten document follows the Buck lineage through several generations. It contains many details — some humorous and some heart-breaking — of life in Depression-era rural Tennessee as well as his many years as an elementary school teacher and principal of Jamestown's York Institute and his days on the farm.

Still an active gardener and farmer, the former director of Fentress Farmers Cooperative (he served six three-year terms) finds great joy in entertaining visitors with stories of his early years in his beloved county.

In describing his — and possibly Fentress County's — first encounter with an airplane, Ernest writes:

"In 1919, the first airplane came over Fentress County down the Wolf River sailing on into Ky. It passed right over my head, and made a very loud noise. I hunted up and down the three roads that intersected at our house for a car. I had never heard of an airplane, so I did not know to

look up, therefore, I did not see the plane."

A few days later, the mystery was solved ... somewhat.

"Someone was at our house and was telling about being at Forbus, Tn., and seeing an object flying through the air that looked like a bunch of planks nailed together, making a very loud noise and [with] black smoke coming out the back of it."

It was months later, Ernest admits, that the residents realized the object was an airplane.

"Back then, we called it an 'aero-plane,'" he says.

Heartbreaking loss

In the winter of 1923, Ernest's 39-year-old father, David, a sharecropper, contracted tuberculosis and died within months, devastating the young family. He left behind his wife, Dollie, 11-year-old Ernest, and the boy's three younger siblings.

Of his father's last days, Ernest writes:

"He knew all along that the T.B. would kill him. He was very concerned for the future of my mother and us children. I have followed him to the barn and would hear him there praying out loud for God to heal him, but if it was not God's will, that He would be with us and see that we made it through life."



Now, more than 80 years later, Ernest still chokes with emotion when recalling the memory. But he laughs at the recollection of a trip to Murfreesboro that he and two of his friends "attempted."

"We went in Uncle Marion's old 1929 Ford car. We had no trouble until we got to the New River hill this side of Huntsville, Tn. There on the hill, we had a blow out in a tire. We fixed it and then had six more before we got to [nearby] Armathwaite. We stopped there and borrowed a flashlight. We walked about a half mile in the dark and strange county to Ted Brook's father and borrowed his spare wheel and tire. When we got back to the car, we had more trouble — we had locked the keys in the car! We made it home late."

And Ernest's first attempt at squirrel-hunting proved to be less than Hemingway-esque.

"In 1927, when I was 14 years old and living in Woods Hollow near Glenoby, my dog, Old Ring, treed a squirrel over in the woods near my home. I found it sitting a way up in the tree, out on a big limb. I had never shot a shotgun, but I went to the house and got my father's old 12-gauge gun to kill the squirrel. On the way back to the tree, I got cold

feet and began wishing the squirrel would be gone when I got back. I looked up and saw what I had seen when I left for the gun. I aimed and fired. But what I thought was a squirrel was a piece of bark — no squirrel. So I got introduced to the gun and have done a lot of squirrel-hunting from that day."

Ernest also writes of the winter of 1932 when he and his family nearly starved to death and survived almost exclusively on the 20 gallons of molasses they had produced from a small cane patch the previous fall. At times, he writes, the molasses were used for medicinal purposes, much to the dismay of the children.

"When spring came, our mother would mix a batch of molasses and worm seed together. [She would] line us up for a big spoon full of worm seed and molasses to rid us of roundworms."

Two pages of his book are devoted to home remedies for various ailments. To cure a "side ache," for example, he prescribes that the patient "lean over toward the side that is hurting, lift up a small rock, and spit on the ground where the rock laid, and place the rock back."

To remove warts: "Find a hollow stump with water standing in it and wash the warts in the stump water. Turn around and leave and don't look back."

And to stop bleeding: "Use soot from stove or chimney," or "read from the Bible, Ezekiel, Chapter 16, Verse 6."

Get yourself a diary

When pressed to explain why he has filled dozens of notebooks and ledgers with so much information over the years, Ernest replies in typical fashion — with a story.

"Back around 1938, I taught two children whose mother was a friend of the family," he says. "She asked me if I ever kept a diary. I said no. She told me to go get myself a diary pad the next time I was in town."

As a young teacher trying to impress, Ernest dutifully followed directions.

"I just started writing everything down," he says matter-of-factly. "Some of it I did for income tax purposes, but most of it was because I thought it would be interesting to look back on. And sure enough, I get a lot of satisfaction from reading over the notes I made years ago."

And no event or moment seemed to have escaped Ernest's careful notice, and none is too small for him to enjoy, as evidenced by this recollection from his days at the Willow Run bomber factory:

"On Sat., July 24, 1943, I saw Henry Ford pass through the plant. I was sitting in my cubbyhole working on something and I caught Ford's eye and he winked at me! I'll never forget that."