

JOSEPH BURTON ELLER, JR.

Lineage Chart

George Michael Eller
Peter Eller, Sr.
John Eller
Simeon Eller
Jesse Franklin Eller
Junius Arthur Eller
Joseph Burton Eller, Sr.
Joseph Burton Eller, Jr.

Farming, teaching and religion have always been near the center of the lives of Burton Eller's long string of ancestors.

German heritage also runs deep. Three of his four grandparents-Schroeder, Wygal and Eller, were German. The Johnston's were Scotch.

Burton spent his first eleven years in his grandparents' house where his father Joe and mother Thelma (Wygal) and sister Judith Elizabeth lived 3 miles from the Smyth County court house in Marion, Virginia, a part of southwest Virginia known as the "Mountain Empire."

His grandfather, Junius Arthur Eller was born April 20, 1866 in Ashe County, North Carolina. Junius later settled in Virginia by way of Iowa and Nebraska.

Burton remembers large numbers of family and friends from all over congregating on the front porch of the white frame, two story farm house every Sunday. Though too young to remember (or care at that age) the names or their relevance, Burton remembers long hours of discussions about cousin so-and-so in North Carolina, Iowa, Nebraska or elsewhere. James Hook visited grandfather Junius numerous times during Burton's early childhood, always searching for updates to his book.

Burton's great-grandfather, Captain Jesse Franklin Eller (see the May 1991 Chronicles), moved to Wapello County, Iowa after the Civil War to join his brothers Harvey, John Cleveland and William. In 1873, Jesse moved to Clay County, Nebraska and homesteaded near Harvard. Junius would have been seven years old. Later in life, he talked at length of the flat terrain and black soil. As a boy, it was Junius' job to ride the check-row corn planter. He had to pull levers at exact intervals to allow the

kernels to fall into the furrows perfectly spaced. This check-row method allowed the corn to be cultivated from three directions for near perfect weed control.

The large acreage and level landscape in Nebraska meant horsepower could replace lots of manpower in crop production. Check-row cultivating allowed the horse drawn cultivator to replace the man-and-hoe so prevalent to the hills of North Carolina.

Because of failing health and the desire to be closer to "home", Jesse moved Junius and the rest of the family to a farm near Atkins, Virginia in 1880.

It was in Atkins that Junius met Georgia Johnston who lived in a large limestone house known as "The Old Stone House" on Wilderness Road (later U.S. Route 11). It had previously been a tavern and had witnessed the early settlers moving westward through southwest Virginia to Kentucky, Tennessee and beyond.

Junius and Georgia were married in 1888 and moved to one of the Johnston farms to begin their life together. The couple had thirteen children. Two died as young children and the remaining eleven lived long full lives. .

Junius was a teacher, farm supplier, machinery and hardware dealer (with brother Quincy) and farmer. He served several terms, including the chairmanship, on the Smyth County board of supervisors. He was also chairman of the county Selective Service, or "draft board" during World War II.

Junius' sons were all involved in agriculture. Laxton, Clay and Joe (Burton's father) together farmed the "homeplace" and other farms added over the years in Smyth County. Carlton was a large dairyman at Culpepper. Jack was involved in several agribusiness ventures. Daughters Myrtle, Evelyn and Ethel married farmers and spent their lives on the land.

Junius was proud of his family, land and livestock. His pride and joy were his purebred Shorthorn beef cattle. Eller steers and heifers won several championships at the Atlantic Rural Exposition in Richmond, Virginia and the Eastern National at Timonium, Maryland (near Baltimore). A few Eller Shorthorns even made it to the prestigious International Livestock Show in Chicago. Sons Carlton, Clay, Joe and Laxton all raised Shorthorns as part of their farming operations.

So, the subject of our article --- Burton --- was heavily indoctrinated with the world of cattle and livestock from birth. Before he could walk, he was riding in front of "Granddaddy" Junius on "Traveler" checking calves, lambs and putting out salt for the livestock.

Burton's father, Joe, and mother, Thelma (Wygala) were married on June 30, 1938, and moved into the homeplace with Joe's parents. Joe continued to farm the homeplace and Thelma was a lifelong elementary school teacher.

Horses, cattle, dogs, pigs and sheep were all a major part of Burton's childhood. Beginning at three years old, he would go to the field with his father and amuse himself with whatever activity was going on there.

By age 6, he was riding work horses, pulling hay to the stacks and freeing up labor for other jobs.

His first 4-H steer project was at age 10 and during the show, the steer was much taller than Burton. By the time he was a high school senior, Burton was showing steers, registered Shorthorn heifers and Holstein heifers, and bringing home lots of show ring wins. He also won several showmanship contests.

In high school, Burton was student body president, all-district in football, member of the concert band, and even strutted a year as drum major of the marching band.

The 4-H Club and Future Farmers of America got lots of Burton's time in high school. He was elected state FFA secretary and was awarded the National FFA American Farmer Degree.

Burton entered Virginia Tech in 1960 as an engineer-to-be. It only took a few months of slide rules, drawing boards and the career prospect of working inside with inanimate objects to send him over to the ag school and enroll in animal husbandry. Several honors came his way in college, including Who's Who nationally. A masters degree in physiology was also added while at Virginia Tech.

After four years with the Virginia Hereford Association, Burton moved to Denver in 1969, to join the headquarters of the American National Cattlemen's Association where he was corporate secretary and membership director. Over the next four years, Burton increased membership revenue 400% for the Association.

The good cattle market and the demand for cattle in the new large feedlots of the West sent Burton back to Virginia in 1973. Cattle were purchased in Mississippi, pastured in Virginia, and shipped to the Farr Farms Feedlots in Colorado.

The Washington office of the American National Cattlemen's Association had been opened in 1971, and was expanding. The lure of politics and a regular paycheck took Burton there to be Associate Director of Government Affairs in 1975.

The American National Cattlemen's Association headquartered in Denver, Colorado merged with the National Livestock Feeders Association headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska in 1977. The organization, the National Cattlemen's Association, was headquartered in Denver with a Government Affairs office in Washington, D.C.

in 1981, Burton was appointed Vice President of Government Affairs in charge of the Washington office. Because of the encroachment of the federal government into business and private lives, the Cattlemen's Washington staff grew from four in 1975 when Burton arrived, to eighteen in 1990. During his stint as head of the Washington office, Burton served on a numerous senators and representatives re-election steering committees, and was profiled in the book, Beechams Guide to Key Lobbyists, as one of the top lobbyists in Washington.

Early in 1991, Burton was elected by the Board as Executive Vice President of the National Cattlemen's Association. He is in charge of a staff of seventy-one in Denver and Washington, and is responsible for carrying out the association administration and the members' policy directives for the cattle business.

Burton maintains a beef cow herd on the farm near Marion. His mother Thelma, 78, has recovered from a bout with lung cancer (never smoked a day) and lives on the farm. His father Joe, 82, has battled Parkinson's Disease for twenty years and is practically immobile. But he still enjoys being driven over the farm and through the cattle and has maintained a strong sense of humor.

Burton was formerly married to Phyllis Powers from Sugar Grove, Virginia, who currently manages several very successful temporary personnel offices in Northern Virginia. They have three children; Trae, a senior at Virginia Tech; Kara, a freshman at Virginia Tech; Ashley, a junior in high school.



JUNIUS ARTHUR ELLER HOSTS FAMILY GATHERING AT HIS FARM IN MARION, VA. JUNIUS AND GEORGIA ARE BACK ROW, RIGHT OF CENTER. BROTHERS QUINCY, BEN, AND EDWARD, AND SISTERS VIRGINIA, MOLLIE, MATTIE, AND EMMA.

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