

Betty Marie Bryant Roberts

A Lifetime on Fork Mountain

This month I would like to write a tribute to Betty Roberts who sadly passed away on March 28, 2025, just four months after her husband Lester died on November 20, 2024. We are still reeling from the loss and would like to honor the Roberts family by printing her life story.

It's hard to say when I first met Betty. I probably met her husband Lester ahead of Betty because of my early association with the Blue Ridge Parkway from which he retired after 35 years of service. As I frequented Montebello, gathering stories for the Backroads newspaper, I met Betty's mother, Lois Bryant, at different senior functions and when my husband became the pastor of Mount Paran Baptist Church we got to know the entire Roberts family.

Betty was full of life and her humorous stories have always tickled me down through the years. Let me introduce you to Betty Roberts, giving her upbeat opinion of the ups and downs of life, as only she could tell it.



Betty Bryant Roberts, 2014

her pillow. Beulah later married Frank Phillips and had two more children; Delbert and Maxine.

Betty's maternal grandparents were Cornealius Washington and Beulah Roberta Campbell Bradley. At the time, the Bradley's were living in the mountain community of Coffeytown in one of the abandoned shanties built along the Dinky Railroad line which ran through the mountains, hauling logs to the sawmill in Cornwall. The Bradley's had six children; Lloyd, Ezra, Wilber, Florine, Madge and Lois Helen who was born on November 23, 1914. Cornealius died of tuberculosis in May of 1930, at age 37, leaving his wife to care for their family. Beulah moved to Montebello and took up residence first in a small log house located on Fork Mountain and later in two other homes on the same property where she raised her children. Betty said her grandma always slept with a small pistol under



Her oldest daughter Lois married Melvin Zirkle Bryant and the young couple moved down the mountain to what they called “The lower place,” where her mother had lived years before. There was also a house up the road called “The upper place” where they lived until Bobby was born. The family later moved into an older two-story weatherboard home on the Bryant property where

The log house Beulah lived in after her husband died. Betty was born on August 16, 1948, the eighth child of ten born to Melvin and Lois. Betty’s siblings, by order of birth were; Christine, who was born in January of 1933 and died a month later in February, Glennwood in 1934, Edgar in 1936, Wendell in 1939, Milton in 1941, Frances in 1944, Bobby in 1946, Betty in 1948, Gorman in 1949, and Phyllis in 1954. Betty said one of the midwives who helped her mother deliver her babies was Bessie Phillips. Betty said her mother had a hard labor with Edgar because he was so big. “Mama said Bessie stood at the end of the bed began to pray, Lord, it’s all in your hands; I’ve done all I can do for her. Mama thought, Oh, Lord, I’m going to die. But Edgar finally came and weighed ten pounds at birth.”



The two-story weatherboard house where Betty was born

Betty's grandparents on her father's side were William Franklin and Annette L. Ramsey Bryant, who were both born in 1884 and died in the 1960s. The Bryant's also had six children; Melvin, who was born on February 2, 1908, David, Russell, Walton, Fishburn and baby Irene.

The families who lived out on Fork Mountain when Betty was growing up were mostly the Campbells, Fitzgeralds, and Bradleys, as well as members of the Bryant clan. Betty remembers there was a sawmill in the meadow below their home that was run by Mr. Pamplin Bradley.



Betty's six-year school photo

Betty started school in the four-room Montebello School which was located on the hill above Painter Mountain Road. She remembers starting the first grade and going barefoot out in the woods, digging ginseng roots at recess. She remembers Robert Seaman as being one of the teachers at the school and her second-grade teacher was Miss Barbara Dickie who passed all the boys and failed all the girls that year. I asked what the deal was and Betty laughed and said, "I guess all us girls were such mean little devils she failed us. The other kids weren't much better. When the teacher would go outside bigger kids would start jumping up and carrying on. Some of the older boys would set the woodshed or the outdoor toilets on fire or they would rock the outhouse while we were in it. And the teacher would send us little kids down to the spring to get water. We'd put that bucket up on our shoulders, holding it with a long stick across our backs and march up that road, carrying it back. One time we went to get water at Nellie Campbell's house and tipped her cream over in the spring by accident. And me and Carolyn Seaman got into a fight in the second grade over some slide that went down the hill and she pulled my hair so hard I had bald spots all over my head. It's no wonder we failed! I also remember a Campbell boy who would jump on the back of the drink truck as it geared down the hill by Homer Anderson's Store and he'd steal the bottles off the back. Mama packed our lunch and it was usually biscuits. I remember Darlene Falls' mother, Vera, would pack her biscuits with persimmons on them and I loved those so we would trade lunches" Betty remembers another time she cut her foot at school and the teacher made her put her foot in a gallon bucket so she wouldn't get blood all over the car and drove over to Doctor Kennan's office in Raphine where he cleaned and bandaged the wound.

Although the Montebello School went up to the seventh grade, Betty repeated the second grade the next year at Fleetwood in Massies Mill. By her own admission, she did not like school and said she got her head pecked nearly every day while at Fleetwood when they had to put their heads down on the desk for a rest. "I wasn't used to no rest period and I'd sneak my head up to look around and the teacher would come around and pleck me on top of the head." She remembers some of her classmates as being, Darlene Falls, Larry Wheeler, Robert Humphries

Carson Bryant, and Amy Seaman. Betty went through the seventh grade at Fleetwood School and started classes at Nelson County High School but quit in the tenth grade to stay home and help her mother with chores around the house. There was always water to be carried up from the spring, clothes to be washed, berries and apples to be picked, gardens to be weeded, wood brought in and cows to be milked. Betty said when she was younger, she'd come home from school and wonder what her mother did all day long. By this time, she was getting a taste of her mother's daily recipe.



The barn and spring house where the family kept their animals and got their water



The Bryant smokehouse and ground cellar at their Fork Mountain farm

Although the Bryants had hooked up to the electric lines, Betty said they did not have a television and would walk across the field to their Uncle Dave and Aunt Kathleen Bryant's house on Saturday nights to watch the Jackie Gleason show.

I asked if they attended Mount Paran Baptist Church since so many of their family members are buried in the church cemetery and Betty said when they went to services, they went to Fork Mountain Baptist Church (the old Pogue's Chapel) which was closer in distance than Mount Paran. Preacher Bateman was the pastor of the church at that time. Betty's dad only owned a log truck so more than likely, the family walked to church.



Lewis Bryant in front of Betty in plaid dress

he was laid to rest in the Mount Paran Church cemetery.

After Betty quit school, Margaret Grant called her about a waitressing job at Whetstone Restaurant on the Blue Ridge Parkway. She was just shy of her 16th birthday when she took the job and went to work and that's when she got to know Lester.

Lester Holbert Roberts, born on May 26, 1945, was one of seven children born to Walter Alderson and Agnes May Roberts who lived in Wise, Virginia. Lester's mother passed away from heart problems when he was 16 years of age and in 1962, when he was 17 he came to live with his older brother in Staunton for the summer months. He found work at Transit Mix

Although Betty is an upbeat person, she is no stranger to sadness that comes with living on this earth. When she was nine years of age her young nephew died in a tragic accident. Betty's older brother Glennwood and his wife Mary were living in the old Fork Mountain Schoolhouse located on the Bryant property. Betty's daddy had come for a visit and was sitting in his log truck on the hill by the school and Glennwood's young son, Lewis Wilson, began climbing on one of the back tires with her brother, Bobby, holding onto him, helping him climb. The truck coasted forward and Lewis fell off the tire, sliding under the wheel which ran over him. He lived until they got to the hospital in Lexington but his injuries were too severe and he died on July 9, 1957, one month before his third birthday. Betty said she can still remember

Lewis's little casket, his funeral, and how

Concrete, loading and unloading trucks carrying sand and gravel. In his words, Lester said, “After I got up here I sort of just stayed and didn’t go back home.”

One of Lester’s co-workers at the cement plant was Lemuel Bryant, Betty’s cousin and he and Lester decided to hang around together one weekend. They ended up at a truck stop on Route 11 near Greenville and bumped into Betty who, in Lester’s words, “Asked me my whole life story!” That was on a Saturday night. The next day Lester came into Whetstone Restaurant where Betty was working and when she saw him, she told the women working with her, “There’s that boy I asked about all those questions to last night.” Betty walked over and asked what she could get for him and Lester, ever the smooth operator, replied, “I’d like to have a cup of coffee with cream and sugar but you can just stick your finger in it to sweeten it up.” At this point I can only believe Betty had a huge smile on her face. They began to talk and Lester invited her to go “snipe hunting.” For anyone who doesn’t know what snipe hunting involves, let’s just say it’s a setup for a joke played on an unsuspecting person. Although they never did go hunting, the couple dated for a while but shortly thereafter, in 1966, Lester was drafted into the army just a few weeks after his 21st birthday. He left for boot camp in Fort Bragg, North Carolina and from there, Lester was sent to mechanic’s school in New Jersey and learned to be a “wireman” which entailed climbing up poles and stringing lines. One of the men in his outfit told him that job wouldn’t be too bad if they were stationed in the states but overseas, he’d be a sitting duck up that pole in enemy territory. He ended up serving fourteen and a half months in Viet Nam, before being discharged, coming home on June 5, 1968.

He returned to Staunton and his job at Transit Mix, living with a fellow employee since at that time his brother had moved.



Lester while he was stationed in Viet Nam

During the time Lester was in the service, Betty had moved on and married a man by the name of Calvin Delano Cash. Calvin's parents were from Newport News, Virginia, but he was working at a plant in Stuarts Draft when they married. Once again, tragedy came into Betty's life as she explained, "I was married at twenty, widowed at 21 and a mother at 22." The newlyweds were living in Greenville at the time and Betty was pregnant with their first child when they decided to drive out Route 608 to a swimming lake on a Sunday morning. Calvin, Betty, her sister Phyllis, and Pete Seaman were wading along the edge and Calvin got out too far where there was suction under the water and he began to yell for help. He went under several times but never surfaced again. He died on June 30, 1968, at 26 years of age, leaving Betty and an unborn child. Her parents were getting older and the decision was made to move back home and help them while awaiting the birth of her first child; a daughter named Teresa who was born on February 16, 1969 and nicknamed "Missy." Three years later Betty and Lester had resumed dating and were married in the home of Preacher Giles near Fairfield on December 18, 1971. At that time Lester not only became Betty's husband but the only father Missy has ever known.



Betty & Lester and their four children, l/r: Melinda, Greg, Missy, and David Lee

That spring Lester found weekend work on the Blue Ridge Parkway as a caretaker, getting up trash and cleaning the bathrooms at the various visitor centers and restaurants. In the fall months the men would go out and cut brush and anything else that needed to be done. He stayed in that position for around ten years before becoming a mechanic at the Montebello maintenance office at milepost 29 on the Parkway. Lester did all the mechanic work on trucks, chippers, power saws and lawnmowers and he stayed in that position until his retirement in December of 2008. When asked if he missed work, Lester said he missed the men he worked with in the earlier years; Edgar Austin, Danny Myrtle, Elmer Fitzgerald, Saylor Coffey, Milton Bryant, Troy Painter as well as many others.

Their daughter Melinda was born on March 26, 1972 and the following December Betty's brother Gorman and his wife had a baby boy, David Lee, and because of family circumstances, Betty and Lester raised David as one of their own. On August 21, 1975 their son, Gregory was born, completing their family.



The Roberts family, August 1981



Melvin and Lois Bryant in later years

The family lived with Betty's parents until 1980 when Melvin and Lois gave the couple a little over four acres and the Roberts made a home where they continued to live. Betty's father, Melvin, passed away in July of 1990 and her mother, Lois, died in September of 2001.



Bryant siblings at Lois' funeral, Sept. 8, 2001 l/r: Gorman, Milton, Phyllis, Edgar, Frances, Bobby, Betty and Wendell

At this writing, in addition to Betty, all six of her brothers have passed away; Glenwood in 1975, Bobby in 2008, Edgar and Gorman in 2009, Milton in 2012, and Wendell in 2020. An infant sister, Christine Dottie died in 1933. Two sisters survive; Frances and Phyllis.

Lester and Betty's daughter Missy married Tony Weeks and they have two children; Matthew and Jessica. Melinda married Jeremy Campbell and they had two children before Jeremy passed away; Leanna and Nathan. Gregory married Crystal Fitzgerald and they have two sons; Trevor and Austin. At present, David has not married. Plus ---- grandchildren

I asked Lester what he did after retirement and he laughed and said, "There is *always* something to do around here." For many years after her mother died, Betty was the caregiver for Thelma Bradley while Thelma's daughter Gail was working. Throughout their lives, both Lester and Betty continued to keep busy doing what mountain folks do; gardening, canning, mowing, taking care of the grandchildren and doing things around the house that needed to be done.

In 2024 the Roberts celebrated 53 years of marriage before both passed away and the memory of Lester and Betty will live on in the hearts of those who knew and loved them.



Lester and Betty Roberts