

## Lora Burgess Ramsey Coffey



**Burgess Coffey at her White Rock home**

There were certain people that I met over the twenty-five years that Backroads was published who had a special place in my heart, simply because I had more contact with them. Burgess Coffey was one of those people. I first met her and her sweet family at the Eli Coffey homeplace along the North Fork of the Tye River in a stretch known as White Rock. It's one of the prettiest settings imaginable, and whenever I'm over there, it takes me back to a time when White Rock was a bustling community, complete with a school, church, mills, a few general merchandise stores, as well as a blacksmith shop.

Through Burgess's eyes, the now-quiet hamlet was suddenly alive with people who had died years before but still lived on in the vivid memories she passed on to me. Names like Holloway Coffey, the seven-foot-tall blacksmith who dated two women for forty years because he didn't want to offend either by asking one to marry him. Burgess told me the problem was settled on the day they buried one of the women, making Holloway's

choice for a wife an easy one. He finally married Alice.

Burgess had a warm, welcoming smile that always drew people to her. Her soft-spoken voice and unforgettable laugh are forever etched in my mind, and I can still picture her face. She referred to me as "my girl," a term that always pricked at my heart and made me want to squeeze her tight. When I had a total house fire in March 1986, Burgess called me up and said she had something for me. When I drove over to her daughter Margie Hatter's house, where Burgess was staying, I cried when she presented me with two blue handmade pillows with a note that read, "For my girl . . . these pillows are for you to lay your sweet head on." People were so generous after the fire, and I appreciated everything they did for me, but those two pillows that Burgess made for me represented all the Godly love she showed to everyone.

For many years, her extended family continued to hold their family reunions at Eli Coffey's cabin, on the fourth Sunday in July. Long wooden tables were set up on the grounds with an overabundance of delicious food to pick from. I always headed for the enamel pot with a metal dipper to fill my glass with fresh-squeezed lemonade. After everyone sat down and had their fill, music was played throughout the afternoon. All the old-time songs were played, accompanied by

guitars, mandolins, and fiddles. Children headed for the Tye River across the dirt road and played in its cool waters.

Members of the family tree included the Ramsey, Coffey, Allen, Harris, Steele, and other branches. They come to the reunion each year to catch up, reminisce, and compare early family photos. It was always such a treat for me to drive up the picturesque North Fork Road (Route 687, “closest thing to heaven,” as Preacher Billy Morris used to say) to the Ramsey reunion, where I got to see Burgess and her family. I took pictures for the the Backroads and it seemed everyone looked forward to seeing who was going to be featured in the upcoming edition of the newspaper. Over the course of years, I felt like part of the family myself, and then in a twist of irony, I married Billy Coffey in 1993, and suddenly I became everyone’s “cousin” by marriage!

Lora Burgess Ramsey was born on April 28, 1902, to William Marshall Ramsey and Serena Susan Painter Ramsey, who lived at the bottom of a deep hollow under the shadow of Bald Mountain. She was told that her mama was in the field dropping corn on the day she was born. Burgess said that she worked in that same field from the time she was a young girl until she got married. Her father had six children with his first wife, Mary Elizabeth “Mollie” Hamilton, before she died in 1899, and then he had ten more after he married Burgess’s mother. As a child, Burgess said that she had a good life. Like so many of the mountain families, they lacked many of the material things in life but were very rich in the basics. Or as Burgess puts it, “I never looked at the money part of it. I had plenty to eat, plenty of clothes to wear; I had my health and my family’s love, so how could a person be any richer?”



**Music at the annual Ramsey reunion**



**Ramsey homeplace at foot of Bald Mountain**



**The Ramsey family; Burgess 2<sup>nd</sup> left at top**

I remember Burgess telling me that her father built a wooden boardwalk from the back of the house to the outdoor privy so the children wouldn’t have to walk on the muddy ground. And the outhouse had different sized holes; one for the adults, one for the teenagers and a small one for the

little children. She remembers the wooden floor inside their house being worn smooth and bleached white from all the repeated scrubbing.



**William "Bill" Ramsey**



**Burgess, bottom left w/ sisters Lina & Mary (top)**

Although the children didn't receive gifts for their birthdays, their mama always baked each of them a cake. On her sixteenth birthday, however, Burgess was given a set of flatware, which she then used at the family table.

She met her future husband, Hercy Franklin Coffey, while still in her teens. He was a good friend of Burgess's brother and used to come home with him to visit. They courted for about two years before Hercy went into service, then another two years after he came home. When the couple married on April 3, 1921, they lived up the North Fork Road a few miles from White Rock, closer to where the Blue Ridge Parkway was to be constructed. Their next home was located just down from the White Rock School, where they opened a little store in the back of the house to supplement their farming income.



**The tiny cabin where all the Coffey's lived**

Later the Coffeys moved into Hercy's parents' cabin, which had been vacant for several years because his folks had moved to a house in the Ladd area. Burgess and Hercy set up housekeeping in the cabin in June, but later that fall, his parents decided to move back, along with their son Tom and another son and his family. Burgess laughed and said, "What a sight! Twelve of us living in that tiny cabin together."

In 1932, they built their own home next to Eli Coffey's cabin. By that time, their family



***Hercy and Burgess Coffey's homeplace at White Rock***

of three daughters was complete. Marjorie Velma (Jan.11,1922), Lura Myrtis (Dec. 24,1922), and Aldor Lorine (Oct. 23, 1926) grew up in the white frame house that bordered the Tye River right



***Hercy & Burgess at their White Rock home***

in the heart of White Rock. Hercy borrowed money and built his own gristmill and later added a sawmill, which he operated. They again opened and operated a small store, which was stocked with a little of everything. Burgess said that her husband always liked being his own boss. He tried working for someone else, but after just a short time, he tired of it, coming home and saying, "Never again!"

Burgess stayed at home and did what had to be done. She was an excellent seamstress and took in sewing for other people, as well as making all their daughters' clothes. She recalled that people often paid her in tomatoes and roasting ears for her work. And she once traded her older sister a handmade rocking chair for an old Minnesota sewing machine. She remembers it made a stitch that looked almost like a handmade quilting stitch. But Burgess did her share of making quilts by hand and passed that old-time art down to her children.



***Standing in front of the church***



***Burgess showing her log cabin quilt***

The family attended services at the White Rock Christian Church, just up the hill, across the bridge. Reilly Fitzgerald was the first man to preach there. Preachers that followed were Davis Coffey, Pettit Coffey, and Emmett Perry. Burgess said that Ellwood Campbell, who was a favorite preacher from the Wintergreen area, preached his first sermon there. The congregation had great revivals back then, and the people would walk down from the mountains carrying lanterns to light their way home. Many said it looked like thousands of fireflies as people walked through the hills.

Burgess said that they had a good life back then, with virtually everything they needed right around their home. From a store and mill to a church and school and even a daily paper out of Lynchburg and mail service, the people of White Rock seemed to have it all. I asked Burgess if she could recall any of the other families that lived around them, and, in an instant, she began reeling off names like:

Roseanna and Edward Carr, Quincey Coffey, Mitchell Fitzgerald, Boston Taylor, Holloway Coffey, Eulie Fitzgerald, and many others. Just like it was yesterday, she reached back in her memory and counted off each family from the North Fork of the Tye River all the way up to Durham's Run.

Burgess's darling Hercy passed away on May 28, 1956, and before he died she promised him that she wouldn't live by herself. So, after his death, she began living with each of her three daughters at various times.

At the age of sixty-one, she decided to take up the art of oil painting, and much of her primitive art now hangs in the homes of family and friends. Burgess explained that Captain Billy Massie's mother is the one responsible for showing her how to paint. "One day when I was over visiting, I

watched her and said, ‘You know, I believe I could do that.’ She encouraged me to try, and I just cleaned off an old canvas and started right in. When I had finished, I asked her what she thought. She looked at it for a bit and then said, ‘I’m going to be honest with you . . . it looks horrible!’ But that didn’t hurt my feelings at all, and I kept at it. Pretty soon, people couldn’t tell my paintings from hers. My proudest piece was the picture I painted of my childhood home up on Bald Mountain. The old homeplace burned down in 1916, so I painted it completely from memory.”

I finished up by asking Burgess if she felt as if she had had a good life all in all. She was quick to reply with a yes and laughed as she told me how she teases her preacher Billy Morris about being poor. “When he starts in about how poor he used to be, I tell him that I never was poor. My daughter Margie always butts in and says, ‘Oh, Mama, how could a person get any poorer?’ But I never felt poor inside, and that’s what counts.”

Sitting with Burgess on the porch of Eli’s log cabin, I pause to just look around for a moment. Those beautiful dark blue mountains loom above us, and just a stone’s throw away, the waters of the rocky Tye River sing their sweet song. Here we were, sitting amongst God’s unspoiled creation in a place that hasn’t changed much in a hundred years. There is so much beauty to take in and so many memories to fondly look back on. No wonder Burgess thought she was rich... she was! The pure nostalgia of it wells up inside me and makes me homesick for a life that I was never even a part of. I am so grateful for the little taste of it that I’ve been able to savor by knowing and talking to people like Burgess Coffey.

**Lynn’s Note:** *My sweet Burgess passed away on January 19, 1993, at ninety-one years of age. At her ninetieth birthday party, I asked her how she felt about living to be that old. She replied, “Honey, I never expected to make it to eighty much less ninety. Life has been very good to me, and God has blessed me so richly with a loving family and friends. My 90<sup>th</sup> birthday party was wonderful because it was a total surprise, which is a lot better than sitting around waiting for something exciting to happen.”*



**Burgess Coffey at her surprise 90<sup>th</sup> birthday party**

## More Burgess Coffey Photos



*Burgess shown with her grandchildren*



*Burgess with one of her dogs*



*Burgess and her daughters; L/R Lura Steele, Lorine Allen and Margie Hatter*



*In front of her general store w/ grandchildren*



*The "Mayor" of White Rock on her porch*



*With her brother, Brainard Ramsey and Burgess at her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday party*