

The Cash Sisters: Frances & Mary



I admit, these two women hold a special place in my heart. They are the last of a dying breed in both Nelson County and the world. They are not only the toughest mountain women I have ever known but also the most private. For that reason, I never chose to give them any exposure in the Backroads newspaper or the first three Backroads books. But as plans began to take place for Appalachian Heart, the fourth Backroads book, I wanted to include them in a tribute to the mountain people that I know the best. Trying to a tactful way to ask if they would let me interview them, I hit paydirt when I told them Madeline Grant was going to do it. When they said “yes,” I was at their house the next morning! Madeline was the main caretaker for the sisters for many years. In fact, it was Madeline and her husband Wilson who built a small house and brought Frances and Mary out of the mountains of Cashtown, closer to Montebello where they could walk to the store and post office. Although they still lived a simplistic lifestyle it was a lot less harsh way of life for them.

“The Sisters,” Mary and Frances Cash

I had always heard about the Cash sisters but never had the pleasure of meeting them until my husband, Billy, took the pastorate of Mount Paran Baptist Church in Montebello. Frances and Mary would come to the homecoming service, revivals, and the Christmas program in December. They always referred to me as “The Preacher’s Woman,” which delighted the daylight out of me.

The sisters were the most unique people I'd ever met, and over the years I came to know and love them dearly.

I took many photographs of them and gave them copies, and was touched when I saw many of the pictures framed and hanging on the walls of their home. But I never published any of the photos for fear of infringing on their privacy.

I have wonderful memories of these ladies and at this writing (December of 2020) both are still living and now in their 80's and 90's. One memory I will always treasure was the time Billy and I took them back to their homeplace in Cashtown. We couldn't connect with the man who was supposed to give us a key to the main gate so we ended up walking. It was late winter with snow and ice on the ground and Frances assured us it wasn't that far, so we began the downhill descent to where they'd spent most of their lives. We slipped and slid our way down, with me taking a multitude of pictures along the way. Realizing we were walking down a very steep icy hill which we would have to come back up, I discreetly told Billy that on the way back, he should take the lead and stop every now and then to ask them questions so I could catch my breath. The sisters weren't affected by the mountainous climb at all; neither had ever driven a vehicle and foot traffic was all they ever knew.

We arrived at the Cash homeplace and many of the outbuildings were still intact. After I took pictures, Frances asked if we would like to walk down to their grandparent's house (Stanley and Littie Bell Cash). It was quite old but the two-story log home was still standing with the remnants of former living still inside. Looking at the abandoned



The Cash homeplace where the sisters were raised

structures, suddenly they took on a life of their own as the sisters told us the stories of growing up there. Next, we walked further down the mountain to the remains of their Uncle Joe's house that sat next to a small stream, then on to Dr. Bruce's cabin and the clear blue pond on his property. Dr. Bruce was a retired dentist from Stuarts Draft who built the beautiful get-away place among the mountain people and offered free dental service to any who needed it.



Stanley and Little Bell Cash's two-story log cabin

with stories of their childhood and I never forgot how much we learned that day.

By this time, it was getting long in the afternoon and I knew we had that uphill climb back to our vehicle. The women had no intention of stopping and wanted to know if we'd like to walk down another ridge to an old Indian den, where it was reported Native Americans used to camp. Since the sun was slowly sinking over the western skyline, we declined, knowing it would be dark in less than an hour. On the way home, Frances and Mary kept us enthralled



Stanley and Little Bell by their cabin in later years



Remnants of a wood cookstove inside the cabin

Another memory that will stay with me forever was the time I was out delivering the Backroads at the Montebello Store and ran into Frances and Mary, sitting on a large stack of cat-and dog-food bags that they had piled on the floor, sipping a Mountain Dew. I asked if they wanted a ride home, and, as they conferred, I talked to Madeline Grant, proprietress of the store. The sisters ultimately said yes, and we began carrying the bags of pet food to the trunk of my car.

Oh, yes, about the car. At that time, I was driving a 1968 fire engine red Ford Fairlane convertible, and on that warm summer day, the top was down. Although I didn't have my camera handy, in my mind's eye I will always see the picture of Frances and Mary sitting in the back seat with their gray hair flying in the wind and hearing Frances say, "I don't think I've ever ridden in a car that didn't have a top!"

Another time that Billy and I still chuckle over was the time we took the sisters over the mountain to visit their first cousins, Owen, Maybelle and Jimmy Campbell. Although only ten miles separated the cousins, they were getting older and the long walk was too much for them. Mary told me they hadn't seen each other in ten or more years so we made plans to take them to

visit. They were so happy to see each other that all five were talking at the same time. Billy and I sat in the middle, listening to the back-and-forth banter with heads reminiscent of watching a ping pong tournament. They talked away the whole afternoon with nonstop chatter and I'm not sure how much of the conversation each of them heard but, in the end, they were all happy!



Cousins: Frances, Owen, Jimmy, Mary & Maybelle



Reunited Cousins: Frances, Maybelle, and Mary

adjoining her in-laws' cabin and the old schoolhouse that Cyrus attended as a child. The couple converted the school into a home and raised their ten children there.

Frances, who was born on February 26, 1930, named her nine siblings in order of their births: "Dutch" (whose real name was Grant), Roy, Lucy, Hercy, John, Ray, Lester, Flossie, and Mary, who was born on September 29, 1941. At this writing in 2020 the only three surviving children are Frances, John, and Mary. Dutch, Roy and Lucy were all born in Piney River, and the rest of the children were born either at their schoolhouse home or their grandparent's cabin. The sisters' grandmother Lydia (whom they called "Granny Let") was the midwife who delivered all the children except Mary. Gracie Cash, who lived in a home on the Crabtree Falls road, delivered Mary. Of the ten children, four never married: Frances, Dutch, Lester, and Mary.

The extended Cash family, as well as their Campbell cousins (Owen, Maybelle, and Jimmy), lived in a very isolated part of the mountains and kept mostly to themselves. They were self-

The Cash sisters came from hearty stock with Campbell, Maddox, Cash and Mays ancestral names in their blood. Their paternal grandparents were Stanley Cash and Lydia (Littie) Bell Mays Cash. On the maternal side were grandparents Lewis Campbell and Millie Maddox Campbell. The Campbell/Mays/Maddox side of the family lived in Piney River, close to Shoe Creek. The Cashes lived up in in the Blue Ridge Mountains in a place aptly named "Cashtown," up a steep, dirt road that led to Crabtree Meadows at the head of Crabtree Falls, the tallest cascading waterfall east of the Mississippi.

The sisters' father was Cyrus Cash, son of Stanley and Littie Cash, and their mother was Judith Frances Campbell, daughter of Lewis and Millie Campbell. Cyrus and his siter Annie were raised up in a large, two-story log cabin in Cashtown; Judith was raised up in her parents' Piney River home. When Judith and Cyrus married, Judith bought seventy-five acres

sufficient, growing and raising everything they needed to survive. Frances relates, “Our kin people had some hard living. We’ve heard people say they had a hard life growing up, but compared to us, they had an easy life.”



The large Bingham Mays family: Little Bell on far left at seventeen years of age

Frances also said that as children, they didn’t get much education. The closest school was across the ridge on Nettle Mountain, quite a distance away. “We didn’t have shoes,” said Frances. “We walked in our bare feet summer and winter. The snow was so deep in the winter that we halfway froze to death, trying to get to school, so we just quit going. One of the teachers at the school named Marie Seaman, gave Lucy a pair of little slippers one time, but they were too big for her to wear.” The first pair of shoes Frances remembers getting was given to her by Chester Coffey. The shoes were hand-me-downs that didn’t quite fit, but Frances said she was glad to get *any* kind of shoe.

Lynn’s Note: *Frances added reasons for her lack of education. She told me in the winter months, after arriving at school, she had to sit in front of the woodstove for a long while to let her feet thaw out and warm up. I asked if her shoes got wet and she had to take them off and was appalled to learn that she had walked all the way to school, barefoot in the snow. I volunteered the information that some people without shoes would wrap rags around their feet and tie them on with baling twine. Frances’ next words put her childhood plight into a sad perspective: “Honey, we were so poor we didn’t have rags.”*

Their daddy farmed a little and cut wood, and in the fall, he was a crew boss for people picking apples at the various orchards. He was also very adept at making sturdy woven baskets from splits

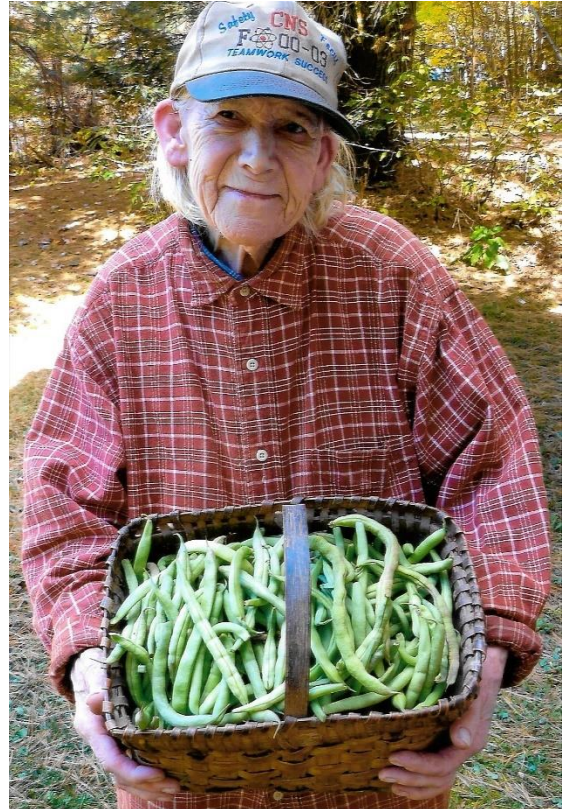
he'd make from white oak and hickory trees. Frances said he would look for a small tree that was free of knots as high up as he could get it, and then cut it in half, in fourths, etc., until he had a section he could handle and rip the splits off with his pocket knife. He would shave them down smooth, and when he was ready to make a basket, he would soak the splits in water to make them pliable and easier to weave.

His mother and grandmother taught him the art of basketmaking, and the sisters said that people came from near and far to buy them. He never sold them at the stores near Montebello, but folks knew he did quality work and were willing to make the long trip up the mountain to purchase one. He made everything from small egg baskets to rectangular garden baskets, round baskets of various sizes, to large hampers. His work was generational, meaning that the vessels would last from one generation to another and stood up to constant use.

Frances is shown holding one of the last baskets her father made, which she was using to carry in green beans from the garden. If you look closely, you can see the fine patina on the wood that has seen many years of use. While Frances worked in the fall months picking apples, Mary was content to stay home and help her mother and learn the art of basketmaking from her dad. "I made quite a few," said Mary. "I remember Irene Cash came up here and bought a whole bunch off me.

Dutch tried his hand at it, but the ones he made were too small and round and ended up looking like a horse muzzle."

I asked Frances if she made baskets and it was my turn to laugh when she said, "No, I didn't have time. I was so busy in the timber business I didn't have time to get my breath hardly." I can personally vouch for Frances's love of timbering. For as long as I've known her, she's been out by their never-ending woodpile with either a saw



Frances with her father's harvest basket



The rich patina shown on one of Cyrus Cash's baskets

or an axe in her hand. In earlier years, she used a crosscut saw to down trees, but her brother-in-law Robert Hite finally got her a used Homelite chain saw, and it opened up a whole new world of timbering for Frances. “Why I could cut trees this big (makes a big circle with her arms). I timbered saw logs, pulp wood, and locust posts that I cut in half.”

Bill Flippin once asked Frances who had taught her to cut posts, and she told him, “I learned it by myself. He’d (Bill) buy every one I cut and said I was the toughest post buster he’d ever seen.” When she finally wore out the Homelite, Frances purchased a new Stihl saw that she continues to use to this day. But she continues to split rounds of wood with an axe. I asked what she did if the axe got stuck in the wood, and Frances replied, “Why, I’d knock it out! I use a steel wedge and a wooden ‘glut’; that’s all you need.” She confessed that as a young girl, she was out chopping wood one day, and “I chopped my foot but didn’t tell nobody.”

Another source of income for the mountain people was picking apples in the fall. Frances would often ride to the orchards with her brother-in-law Robert, who was a labor hauler. She remembers the first time she met Johnny Coffey (my first neighbor here in Love and a well-known orchard man). “He liked to tickle me to death... the way he called everybody ‘Son.’ He was back on Dry Branch, and he hired me to pick apples. They had one tree that was surrounded by a wire fence, and nobody wanted to climb over that wire fence. I was skinny and light, and I walked that ladder bridge and climbed on up into the tree. I was about seventeen or eighteen years old and was an adventurer! Johnny bragged on me after that and said I was a better picker than all the Allen boys put together. Whatever he told me to do, I’d do it. He could always count on me.”

Gathering enough firewood to heat the house and stoke the wood cookstove was an ongoing project, and the sisters recall a snowy winter day when they had one of the family horses hooked to a ground-sled piled high with firewood; they came down the steep hill to their home riding on the back, going at a good clip. One of their brothers told them to stop or he’d tell their daddy, but Frances yelled back, “No danger, no danger,” as they sped home without incident.

In addition to their home, the Cash family also had the necessary outbuildings that went along with a mountain farm: a spring house to keep milk and butter cold, a ground house (root cellar) where apples and hog meat was kept, a place for the chickens (who provided eggs and meat), and three stables (two for their horses and a large one for the cows). When asked how many horses they had, a count of four was made: Bob, Jeff, Prince, and Bessie. Even after all these years, Frances could still recall the names of all seventeen cows: Dot, Daisy, Blackie, Rosie, Spot....etc.

Dot was Frances’s first cow, whom she milked two-handed style into a bucket. The whole time she was being milked, Dot would affectionately lick Frances’s back. The milk was then poured into two-gallon jars and put in the springhouse to keep cool. From the rich cream, butter was made in wooden or stone churns: Frances said this was a hot job in the summertime. They also made clabbered milk which was a thick substance formed when milk was left to sour.

The Cash family garden was extensive, and a large number of vegetables—potatoes, beans, corn, cucumbers, tomatoes, and cabbages—were grown to feed the big family. Potatoes and cabbages were buried in the ground over the winter and would keep well into the spring. Dried corn was shelled and taken to either Charlie Robertson or Ernest Grant’s mill to be ground into

meal. When coffee money was scarce, cornmeal was put on the stove and parched (burnt brown), then put in a grinder to make a substitute drink that Frances said made “pretty good coffee.”

When the weather turned colder, the family butchered hogs and cured the meat. Cyrus and his sons fished the streams for native trout and hunted squirrel, deer, and bear. When asked if she ate bear meat, Frances wrinkled up her nose and offered that her sister Mary does. “I won’t eat bear because it looks too much like a German police dog! I never have eaten it... that, and oysters!” I told her she’s missed out on two delicious meats but I could tell by her face she was unconvinced.

The family had no vehicles, so trips to visit relatives or the country stores in Montebello were made on foot with a sack to carry necessities back home in. The sisters said they waked out on the Crabtree road, but their grandfather Stanley was over ninety years old and still walked out of the mountains, “between the rocks.” When questioned about this phrase, I was told it referred to taking the rocky path across Spy Rock, a shortcut that shaved time and distance off the trip but was much more treacherous.

As children, the sisters said they didn’t have any store-bought toys to play with, but they fashioned “play pretties” out of rocks, sticks, and oatmeal boxes. Christmas was celebrated by visiting with relatives who lived close by. “We would go to our grandparents’ house, and Granny Let would play the organ, and we’d sing songs together. We never put up a tree in the house, but we would get an orange, some nuts, and a little candy for Christmas.”

Frances said that a lot of the time, she’d walk down to her grandparents’ cabin and spend time with them. She stayed for two months one time when her Granny Let was ill, and one night her Granddaddy Stanley put too much dry wood in the stove and caused a chimney fire. Frances said there was a few feet of snow on the ground, and they had to keep running out to the spring to bring in buckets of water to try and put the fire out. She said that the fire sounded like the roar of a freight train, and she was sure the house would burn down before they could put it out.

“Granddaddy crawled up on the roof and poured water down the chimney, and I climbed up into the loft and threw water on the flue. I stayed up all night thinking it would start up again and I never closed my eyes.”

When the family attended church, they walked out to Mount Paran Baptist Church at the head of Irish Creek, where they are still members. They have family buried in the church cemetery, as well as Churchville and at the Averill Campbell/Cash graveyard located on their cousins’ property.

As the children grew up, five of the boys got jobs at Klotz Brothers’ Junkyard in Staunton, and many of them moved to the town permanently. One by one they left home, and six out of the ten married. As their parents aged, they eventually went to live with their daughter Lucy near Staunton and remained with her until their deaths. Dutch, Frances, and Mary continued to live back at the homeplace, but life was much harder for just the three of them. They still had no electricity, phone service, or indoor plumbing, much less a vehicle to take them where they needed to go. They continued to make the eight-or-nine-mile trip to the store in Montebello on foot, carrying staples back home in a sack, just as their father had years before.



Mt. Paran Baptist Church homecoming: Mary and Frances with Billy Coffey

Winters were harsh and snowfalls were deep. Frances and Mary tell stories that seem unbelievable, except for the fact that we know they are true. Like the times they literally shoveled their way out to the Crabtree road with nothing but a snow “scoop.” Frances said it took them two full days to cover a distance of about four miles. They would shovel until about one o’clock in the morning and come home bone tired, only to start again the next morning. At the time, Frances would have been about sixty years old and Mary, forty-nine.

The sisters told me of an icy winter day they had walked to the Montebello Store and before they could return home, the springs that ran over the road home had frozen solid, making it impossible to cross. They had to hack the ice away with an axe in order to get enough footing to cross the road safely. They said it took them way up in the middle of the night to get home. And Frances said it took her one whole day to sharpen her axe head after the incident.

But if the sisters were tough, they were also inventive. They would pound horseshoe nails through the soles of their boots, cut them off and file them down to a point. In this way, they would walk on the snow and ice and never slip. It is said that necessity is the mother of invention, and the mountain people had plenty of necessities. I have always liked the little ditty the mountain people taught me when I moved here:

“Use it up, wear it out,
Make it do, or do without”

These words could not be truer for the native mountain people, who used whatever they had, patched clothing until it was threadbare, then turned around and cut up what was left to make quilt

pieces; they made do with the little they possessed with no thought of buying something new because they had no money anyway. And, more often than not, the families did without.

Sometime in the late 1980s, the decision was made for the Cash sisters to move from their homeplace in Cashtown into a new little cottage built for them by Wilson and Madeline Grant. They have lived there ever since. At this writing in 2013, the sisters were still walking two miles through the woods to the same store they have done business with for many years. They planted and tended a large garden and kept a flock of Leghorn chickens. Mary loves her kitties and has an abundance of them while Frances keeps four dogs.

They are both splitting firewood and hauling to the house in Mary's wooden wagon. They both agree that the house where they now live is easier to keep and closer to what they need, and there certainly isn't as much snow to shovel! In fact, the kind men of Montebello make sure they are well plowed out whenever the snow falls. Dutch moved off the mountain and lived with his sisters for four or five years before being confined to a nursing home and finally passing away.

As our talk wound down, I asked Frances if she sometimes missed living back in Cashtown. "Yes, I miss the old ways. It was quiet back there in the mountains. All you heard was the whippoorwill, whippoorwill, whippoorwill, and watch as that bird would get on the ash pile to dust his feathers. We could hear the cowbells tinkling up on the mountain. The ones on my cows had a 'tinky-tinky' sound... different than the others. Yes, I'm still walking. Still bustin' up wood. No, I don't never give up!"

***Update from Lynn:** As 2021 comes rolling in, the Cash sisters are still with us, although age is catching up with them. Frances will be ninety-one years of age this coming February and Mary will be eighty in September. Both have health issues of one kind or another and they are no longer walking long distances. Their longtime caregiver, Madeline Grant, died this past year, passing the gauntlet on to her daughter Patty, who continues to lovingly care for the sisters, taking care of all their needs. Last year, for the first time, they didn't plant a garden and they no longer keep chickens. Frances's four dogs have died out but Mary still has a few kitties. But they are still hauling in wood to heat the house and cook on their wood cookstove. I treasure the time I am able to spend with them because, as I said before, Frances and Mary Cash, "The Sisters" are the last of their kind in our area.*