

Frances May Hudson Fitzgerald



Lynn's Note: Frances was the longtime owner/operator of The Mountain View Tea Room, the last country store in Tyro. Frances, a gentle, humorous soul, was one of my favorite people and she was so gracious to always let me have book signings at The Tea Room whenever a new book came out. I would make a lemon pound cake and take it with me so everyone coming in could have a slice of cake while we visited. In the fifth book, *Mountain Folk*, I was privileged to sit down with Frances and record her life story. I will never forget that afternoon and how much I learned about this humble woman. Frances passed away on January 3rd, 2021, and was laid to rest beside to her beloved husband, Austin "Junibug" Jr., in the Jonesboro Cemetery. In honor of this quiet Christian lady, I wanted to include her life story as the first article in the 2021 NCHS Backroads blog. My sincere sympathy goes out to her entire family and all the friends who loved her.

Frances Fitzgerald at the Mt. View Tea Room

Anyone traveling on Route 56 through the village of Tyro is familiar with the Mountain View Tea Room, which has been a landmark for many years and is the last country store of its kind in that area. Frances Fitzgerald has been the proprietor of the Tea Room for over half a century and has a wealth of information and memories as people have come and gone through the front door over the years. She continues to live in the back of the store, making it handy to keep house and cook meals in between customers. For the last five years, in the fall months, Frances also works at Tommy Fitzgerald's apple orchard just up the road on Harper's Creek and then

comes home and opens the Tea Room from 5:30 until 9:00 pm in case anyone needs some last-minute items.

When asked about the store's unique name, Frances explains that the former owner, Inez Taliaferro, thought up the title. Inez had a little snack bar where folks could buy hot sandwiches, cold drinks or a cup of tea and sit down to enjoy their purchase. Since the store already had a name people were familiar with, Frances decided to keep it once she and her husband bought the business and began running it.



Looking around the Tea Room evokes a time in history that is starting to fade. Walls and ceiling are paneled in the old beadboard siding that was popular in homes, churches and stores a hundred years ago. Shelves line the walls where canned food is displayed along with old oil lamps and a variety of household items for sale. A large woodstove occupies the rear of the store where people can sit and warm themselves in the winter months and Frances said a long bench used to sit next to it which was usually filled with local folks visiting with each other. A pool table dominates the middle of the store that serves not only as a gaming table but a catch-all for a little of everything and sometimes acts as a changing table for babies. The Tye River runs to the rear of the store and a breathtaking view of the Priest Mountain, the tallest in our area at 4,063 feet, can be seen from the front porch.



View of the Priest Mountain from the Tea Room porch

Frances hosted a book signing at the Tea Room for my third book, *“Backroads: Faces of Appalachia”* and I brought a lemon pound cake for refreshments and we had a good time talking to folks we knew from that side of the mountain. The next year when I published my fourth book *“Appalachian Heart: Oral Histories of the Mountain Elders”* she had a repeat event that everyone enjoyed.

Frances agreed to let me interview her for the fifth book, *“Mountain Folk: More Oral Histories of the Mountain People”* and I told her we definitely needed to have another signing so she could sign her autograph as well. We did just that! When the sixth and final book, *“Crazy Quilt: A Patchwork of Yesteryear,”* came out in 2019, we had the last signing, along with the expected lemon pound cake on the pool table.

There are certain people who are hand-picked to work with the public. Frances is one of those people; a quiet-spoken woman genuinely interested in others. She has a listening ear and gentle humor, making her the perfect storekeeper to keep folks coming back. So, fix yourself a cup of coffee, set right down and enjoy Frances’ story.

Frances May Hudson was the first child of six born to Scott Edward and Sally Stevens Hudson. The Hudson’s six children by their order of birth is: Frances, who came into the world on April 14, 1937, Mary, Scott, Jr., Joyce and Josephine who were twins and a baby brother, Lewis. All six siblings at this time still survive.

Doctor Dickie delivered Frances and her sister Mary and he was the one who named both girls. “Mama said as soon as the baby was born and cleaned up, Dr. Dickie would give it a name... he didn’t give the parents time to name the babies themselves.”

Frances’ father was from the Lovingston area of Nelson County and the family moved around as he found various kinds of work. At the time of her birth the family was living in Massies Mill. Her father was a farmer and later found work at a farm in Freshwater cove owned by a Mr. Fortune. After that, he took a job at the American Cyanamid Plant in Piney River that made titanium oxide which was used in making paint.

When Frances was school age, while the family still lived in Freshwater Cove, she first attended the school in Lovingston. Later, the Hudson family rented a big white house on Route 56 belonging to Bill Boling, directly across from where J & K Country Grocery now stands (the present Old Mill) and she began attending Fleetwood School in Massies Mill. She remembers some of her first teachers being Minnie Dodd, who taught the second grade, Ruth Anderson, third grade and Mrs. Webb, fourth grade. Frances couldn’t quite remember who her fifth grade teacher was but said Mrs. Turpin taught the sixth grade. She went to Fleetwood through



Frances at seventeen years of age

the tenth grade then the older children were bussed to the new high school on Route 29. Before the new school was built, which consolidated three area schools, there was Fleetwood, Lovingston, and Rockfish schools, all of which had eleven grades. Frances played softball and basketball and all three schools played against each other in tournament games. Frances finished up the eleventh and twelfth grades and graduated from the Nelson County High School in 1957.

I asked if anyone in her family played musical instruments and Frances said no but “I’ll tell you a little story. When we were little and Mama would be busy cooking or doing something, Daddy had an old guitar and he would take us out on the porch to play and sing for us. We always thought he could really play but when we got older, we’d ask him to get his guitar and sing and he told us

he never could pick it, he just strummed it to keep us kids entertained. He said he couldn't play the guitar; he was just playing at it!"

In the early years, before the family had access to electricity, Frances said they lit oil lamps in the evenings to see by. But some time later they did hook up to the electric lines coming through the county and she can remember the family's first washing machine. "It was a Maytag that after the clothes had been dashed, you fed them through a wringer and put them in rinse water."

As the children grew, they all help with work around the house but when Frances was around eight years old, she became the babysitter for all her younger siblings. "Mama would work outside, feeding the chickens and milking the cow and she's set me in the rocking chair with a baby on each leg and tell me to rock them until she came back."

Frances said she always was fond of horses and her daddy had a gray work horse named Nancy that Frances and her siblings used to ride bareback. "She was so gentle and good. We'd walk down in the fields, put the bridle on her and bring her up to the gate to get on her. Daddy would want to work her but Nancy wouldn't let him catch her so he'd say, one of you children go get her. He plowed with her and pulled logs out of the woods. My brother would ride her to the mountains to get the harness hooked up so she could start pulling the logs out to the landing. She'd wait patiently until he'd unhook her then ride her back up the mountain again. When daddy had to sell her, all us children cried."

When Frances was a teenager, she and several family members worked in Turpin's peach orchard in Lovingston. Frances said she worked in the packing shed doing whatever they asked her to do. "I was what you'd call a "gopher" ...go for this, go for that."

I asked Frances how she met her future husband, Austin Fitzgerald, Jr., always known by his nick-name "Junibug." She said their bus driver, Parrish Strickland, told him to come down and ask her for a date. Frances laughed and said, "I told Junibug that Parrish was the one who got him in trouble!" The date consisted of going over to Lovingston and having dinner at Joe Lee's Restaurant. Subsequent dates were going to the movies at the theater in Lovingston or to dances held at the large hall located next to the courthouse. Back then movies were mostly westerns and the dances had live music instead of a DJ playing vinyl records.

Junibug's parents were Austin Fitzgerald, Sr., and Florence Lawhorne Fitzgerald, who lived up Harper's Creek. Austin's daddy was Pat Fitzgerald who lived up on Coxes Creek.

Junibug, who was born on February 6, 1934, was three years older than Frances. He had enlisted in the military before they started to date and had served in Germany before being discharged in September of 1957, three months before they married on December 7th of the same year. The Fitzgerald's were married by Rev. Francis at the Presbyterian manse in Massies Mill. Witnesses were Mrs. Francis and Miss Sanford who was a school teacher who boarded with them.

After Frances and Austin, Jr. were married they lived with his parents on Harper's Creek for about a year. Junibug worked with his father cutting timber and later he worked with Harold Campbell who had a truck hauling business.

Austin, Sr. then bought a home known as the Old Tice Place which was located up Battery Hill Road and the young couple did some much-needed repairs before moving into their first home. At

the time, Frances was working at Rayless Department Store in Lynchburg and Junibug found permanent employment at Morton Frozen Foods in Crozet. When their first son, Austin David, was born on July 12, 1960, Frances continued to work but when their second son, Bobby Wayne, came along on July 27, 1963, Frances quit her job and became a full-time mother. When the boys were three and ten months old respectively, the Fitzgerald family bought The Tea Room from Mrs. Taliaferro's daughter in March of 1964 and Frances began a new career as a storekeeper.



Junibug Fitzgerald and young son David



David's fifth birthday party with family

The Fitzgerald's started in the cattle business when Junibug and his father went to the livestock market hoping to buy some steers to fatten and sell in the fall. When Austin, Sr. saw a nice lot of six Black Angus come into the ring he urged his son to bid on them. Junibug bought all of them but discovered as they were being loaded that they were heifers (females) rather than steers. Austin said, "No matter, they will make you good cows." They continued in the cattle business from that time on, raising Angus as well as Charolaise, a pure white animal that was Junibug's favorite, and a mixture of both. Through the years they've cut hay around the area to feed the cows during the winter months.

At that time there were several other country groceries in the Tyro area. Junior and Margie Hatter ran one up the mountain and Byron and Louise Bradley had a store just up the road. Below the Tea Room, Captain Billy Massie ran a store that also housed the Tyro Post Office. When Capt. Billy's store closed, Byron and Frances both put a bid in for the postal office but Byron's bid was lower so the post office was set up in his store. There were no hard feelings as Frances told me, "With two small children underfoot and all the people coming in and out to buy things, I had my hands full." The Tea Room had hours from 7:00 am until 9:00 pm, Monday through Friday and

they closed at 6:00 pm on Saturdays so the family could spend a little time together. On Sundays they opened after church and remained open until 9:00. Over the years the hours have stayed the same except in the fall When Frances works at Fitzgerald's Orchard and she reopens at 5:30 pm.



Family portrait: Bobby, David, Frances & Austin

had lunch meat such as ham and bologna and big wheels of “rat cheese” in wooden boxes that most country stores had sitting on the counter. Dettor, Edwards and Morris, of Crozet and Callahan of Lynchburg were the wholesale food vendors who serviced the Tea Room as well as other companies who wholesaled hardware and novelty items as well as bread, milk and snacks. Frances said they carried Monticello Ice Cream, which, in her opinion, “Was the best you could buy!”

People who popped in on a regular basis were Daniel Lawhorne, Icem and Peggy Lawhorne, Clemon and Peggy Lawhorne, Lester and Sylvia Allen and Corine Painter. In year's past, a lot of thru-hikers walking the Appalachian Trail would walk the two miles down to the Tea Room to stock up on high energy foods. Today, Frances said she doesn't have as many AT hikers because they can stop in the town of Buena Vista, south of Tyro, and pack enough food to hold them to the next big town of Waynesboro.

Frances used to attend church at the Tyro Presbyterian Chapel, directly behind the Tea Room but after it closed, she began going to Harmony Presbyterian Church, just up the road a mile or two. Her son David and his wife Sherry restored the old church and now live in it and raised their two children, David Austin II and Alexandra Dean there. Bobby Wayne lives in another house on the property and Frances raised his daughter, Tasha, “As one of my own.”

With that many other country stores in close proximity, I asked Frances if there was enough business to support all of them. She explained, “Before Lovingston started to build up with the new Food Lion and Dollar General Store, this little hollow was a booming place, because everybody did their whole week's shopping in these four little stores.” Although she didn't carry a line of fresh meats, the Tea Room



Four Generations: Bobby, Frances, David, Austin, Jr., Austin, Sr., and Pat Fitzgerald

Frances said Dave Hatter used to come in and tell her boys long-winded stories while she was working, which really helped entertain them. Even though the Tea Room is located right on Route 56, Frances said she never had a problem with either one of the boys going out to the road. She recalls Bobby Wayne as a little boy would sit in his playpen and stick his legs out of the slats and pull himself and the playpen along the floor, over to where the Zesta crackers were kept and open the package. “Every morning you could bet he’d work his way over to those crackers. He wouldn’t eat them; he’d just rip open the box. I would smack his little hands and pull him back and he wouldn’t fool with them anymore that day. But the next morning he’d be right back. About the third time he did it, I got the switch I kept for David and I kind of switched his little legs and from that time on he never fooled with them crackers anymore!”

When Bobby Wayne was eighteen years old, he was in a serious motorcycle accident close to home that injured his right arm so severely it had to be amputated but Frances said he adjusted to losing his limb and continues to help his brother with the farm work.

Junibug as well as many of his family members have always been big hunters and the Tea Room was a local hangout for those who brought in deer, turkey and bear. It was also the place where the bear hunters gathered in the morning to map out where they were going to hunt that day. Bear hunting has been, and continues to be, one of the most popular sports in Nelson County, especially for the men living in the mountains.



Tyro Bear Hunters l/r: kneeling: Daniel Lawhorne, Junibug Fitzgerald. 2nd row: Wickey Stevens, Glennie Fitzgerald, David Newton. Top row: James Lewis Mays, Warren Mays, Danny Stevens, John Henry Fitzgerald and Junior Evans.



Tyro's "Junior Bear Hunters"

Frances recalls the harrowing night of August 19, 1969, when Hurricane Camille ripped through Nelson County, causing major loss of life as well as property. She recalls not only the torrential rain but the near-constant lightning that lit up the night sky that evening. She was thankful her daddy asked to take the kids back home with him to Shipman earlier in the day because she wasn't sure she and her husband would survive the flood that covered the land where they lived. The Fitzgerald's went to bed around 11:00 o'clock and didn't realize just how much water was surrounding the Tea Room until Junibug mentioned the roof was leaking and Frances got a pan to put under the stream of dripping water.

"I laid back down again and dozed off to sleep for about thirty minutes before Junibug said, 'Frances, that pan is running over.' I always put a flashlight under my pillow since the children were little so I flashed it over to where the pan was and got up and noticed my feet were wet; the water was coming into the store from the kitchen. I walked to the windows and looked out with my flashlight and saw the water was level with the windows. Luckily, I didn't try to open the front door or I think the water would have exploded the house. Knowing we were surrounded, I asked Junibug what were we going to do and he said the only thing we *could* do was ride it out. So, we climbed up into the attic and stayed there until morning. All night long we could hear things falling off the shelves in the store. At daybreak, Junibug cut a hole in the gable end of the house so he could see out and noticed Odell Lawhorn's car was sitting out in the field. Odell lived on the road above us and Junibug said he had probably washed away in the food. When we finally came down from the attic, we were in mud up to our knees. We went outside and Junibug and some others walked up to where Odell lived and found him hanging in a tree. Odell climbed down and as they were walking back, noticed something that looked like a doll tangled up in the debris. They went to see about it and found Ashby Staton's daughter, who had washed down the river. They took her body back to the church. A helicopter flew over and we waved a white dishrag but he didn't land; he was just flying over to scout out who needed help. A bunch of men got a rope and we were on the opposite side of the river and they wanted us to get into a tub so they could pull us over to the other side. I told them I couldn't swim and if the tub turned over, I'd be gone. But they cut a big tree that had fallen over a telephone line and I told them I would walk across if someone would hold onto me. We walked to the other side and up over the mountain to Mr. Fitzgerald's house on Harper's Creek.

Junibug's brother, John Henry, and his family lived just below the Tea Room and Frances said it washed part of their house away. John Henry and his wife, Frances, climbed in the attic with their newborn son, J. H., Jr. who was just a few months old. "They had J. H. in a little bassinette next to their bed and when they woke up and realized the water was inside the house, the bassinette had already floated into the living room and never tipped over because Frances had put a piece of plastic under the baby mattress which acted like a boat. God does work in miraculous ways because if the basket had gotten into the main stream of water flowing through the house, the baby would have washed away."

Frances said it took about a month to get everything cleaned up and many Mennonites came to help with the cleanup and grim job of recovering bodies and transporting them to local funeral

homes. “I was out back, trying to clean clothes and Junior was gone to try and get us another vehicle since ours had washed away when this Mennonite man came up to me and said, ‘Young lady, do you need any help,’ I told him I wouldn’t mind some help so he left and when he came back, he had a whole truckload of people who came and helped us clean the mud off the furniture and anything else that had to be done.”



Large Equipment pushing rocks back into the Tye River after the flood



The main road through Tyro washed out, looking west

Frances said although she wasn't really scared, whenever it rained hard after that, she and her family would seek shelter at the Roseland Rescue Squad, "Just as a precaution; to be on the safe side." I know many people in Nelson County who still feel the emotional impact of hurricane Camille's damage to this day.

When the Fitzgeralds's first got married, Junibug contracted pneumonia and it settled in one of his lungs. The doctor told him he needed an operation to take out the diseased portion of the lung if he was to survive. He had the operation but a blood clot formed in his leg and Frances said it always gave him trouble after that. Later he developed heart problems and ultimately that's what took his life in 1998.

That was over sixteen years ago but Frances, in her matter-of-fact way, said, "You accept the idea and try to move on. There's no turning back, you just have to go forward." People wondered if she would keep the store after her husband died and Frances told them, "He's gone and I have to live my life until my toes are sitin' up!"



Frances at the Tea Room in 2015

Frances, who at this time is now seventy-seven years of age, continues to be the proprietress of the Tyro Tea Room and when she's not waiting on customers, she says she loves to read. Her two sons live just outside her back door if she needs help and she still attends Harmony Presbyterian Church. Her grandson, Austin, lives at home and works locally. Granddaughters, Alexandra and Tasha have jobs and live elsewhere. Tasha is in the process of adopting two children; Christopher, age five, and Hailey, age two. When the adoption is final, Frances will have two new branches added to her family tree.

And so, this is the story of Frances May Hudson Fitzgerald; a soft-spoken woman, a keeper of the faith, and an encourager of anyone coming through the door of the Mountain View Tea Room.



The last picture of Lynn & Frances at the Tea Room, spring of 2019
Photo taken by Kristin Gembara