

The Eighty-five Dollar Surprise

A Talk with Gladys Marie (Smartt) Short

Written by Jackie Layne Partin

A few years ago I met a sister of my maternal grandmother; she was the only surviving child out of eleven. It was a short, cordial visit on her front porch, but on 30 January 2009, I went back to see Gladys Marie (Smartt) Short only to find her just “trucking” right along on her little walker. She is the epitome of that group of mountain women who have worked extremely hard all their lives. One will see no diamonds on her withered hands, or fur coats in her closet, but her aged little body, being slowly damaged by skin cancer, demands respect from any visitor. On 04 July 2009, she will be ninety-five, and without doubt, she expects to be in her backyard celebrating with a party and lots of firecrackers. It was immediately obvious to me that Gladys wasn’t a moaner or complainer even though the pain she must have been feeling seemed to yell out to me.

Gladys Marie Smartt was born 04 July 1914, in the Flat Branch area of Coalmont, Tennessee. She was the eighth child of John “Da” Baptist Smartt and Mary Estella (Sanders) Smartt. There was a disagreement on exactly what John’s middle name was, but nonetheless, most folks called him “John Da Baptist.” John’s parents were Ezekiel (Zeke) Smartt and Effie D. (Cope) Smartt. Some of the Smartt and Cope families drifted out of Warren County into Grundy County many years before, sprinkling the mountain and valley with descendants. Her maternal grandparents were Joseph C. and Mary Cynthia (Sweeton) Sanders from the Payne’s Cove area.

John and Mary Estella lived near the Flat Branch community and for the most part, reared their children there. John was a coal miner. Besides Gladys, their children were Maggie (my grandmother), Henry, Farris, Dolly, Ernest, Grace, Ida, Louis/Luke, Thomas/Pete, and Lillie Betha Lee. Little Henry died around the age of three. During a thunderstorm and out of fear, he crawled under the bed and didn’t come out alive. His parents believed that the iron bedstead was struck by lightning killing the small child. Lillie Betha Lee died when she was about eleven months of age. There were many tragic deaths of young children in those days. In writing this, I thought of a line that was written by Elizabeth Purnell in her book, John Gamp. A young, impoverished, grieving mother who had lost several babies stated, “...I couldn't never think that thar was

ary one to spar...". Estella gave birth to eleven babies; each one had a place in her heart. Her motherly instincts would not allow her to be able to spare one of them, no not one, to a premature death. Parents die before their children; isn't that the way it is supposed to be? In 2004, my husband and two of his first cousins stood over a dying loved one whose body had been ravaged by a terrible disease. When the last breath was drawn, one of the men softly said, "That's the way it should be." My husband looked up and asked, "What do you mean by that?" The answer was, "The older ones are supposed to go ahead of the younger." Gladys also had a brush with death when she was a young child. Her mother had a tub of wash water on a chair when Gladys decided to climb up on the chair. The chair, tub and water came down on her and cut a large place on her hip; it was bad enough that Gladys thought her leg had been cut off. She thought for a moment as to what doctor tended her wounds, and the name Dr. Alder came to mind. Dr. Bryan Alder was a physician before Dr. William Rogers came to the area in 1931.

I asked Gladys where her little brother and sister were buried, for I could think of no graveyard in the immediate area of Flat Branch. Bonnie Oak Cemetery became the final resting place for the children. Gladys' niece Dora Meeks, child of her sister Maggie, died from burns caused when her clothing caught fire. Since Dora was a sister to my mother, I wanted to know where she was buried. My grandparents were living in Flat Branch when Dora died, but I never knew where she was buried; Gladys reasoned that most families in Flat Branch buried their loved ones in the Bonnie Oak Cemetery.

Some years before, in the area where the Smartt family lived and near Roddy Springs Road, there was a place called Meeks, Tennessee. There were mines all around that area at one time; these mines were named after a letter of the alphabet—Mine A, Mine B, and on and on. The town had a post office, a train stop and a beer joint according to the stories passed on through Gladys' son-in-law, Max Nunley. His father lived to be ninety-seven years old and lived during those days. One day while poring over old books and documents at the Grundy County Courthouse, I ran across an old book which was full of births that took place in "Meeks"... I cannot remember if it was Meeks Town or Meeks, Tennessee. In the "**Grundy County Herald Bicentennial Project**," one can read that around 1906 an "E. Gattis," when speaking of the moving of company houses from Clouse Hill to Coalmont wrote, "The one on Spiegle St. is nearly completed, and we learn that it is to be occupied by Mr. Rodgers of Meeks." From the use of "Meeks" here, one would think that E. Gattis meant Meeks, Tennessee.

Gladys went to school at the Flat Branch School. She loved school and would have attended every day if she could have. Her mother took in washing for people around the Coalmont area, and Gladys stayed home to help her with the work. She attended school every other day wearing one of her two dresses and washing the other for the next day that she could attend school. My mother told me the same story about her clothes as a small child. I never, not once, laughed at my mother's stories of poverty, and I never doubted that her stories were true. Gladys never bemoaned her family's poverty, but she would explain from time to time that "times were hard." I generally ask folks what they took in their school lunches "way back when" there were no school lunchrooms, and the "biscuit" always is the answer, but the item on the biscuit would vary—fried potatoes, sausage, butter, berries, or "nothing." In Gladys case, she remembered that sometimes her lunch consisted of a piece of cornbread with "grease" spread over it. In spite of the obstacles thrown in her way, Gladys managed to "graduate eighth grade." She was so proud when she told me that, and she was even prouder when she told me about helping her daughter with a math problem in a GED class. Obviously she had good teachers, and she applied herself well on the days that she did get to attend school.

As stated before, the females in the family took in washing and also split kindling to help support the family. There were periods when her father and brothers went off a distance to work, and Gladys and her sisters traveled with them to do the cooking. She remembered sleeping on leaves on the ground on those journeys. Once when she was washing clothes for the Frank Warren family, she was surprised to find eighty-five dollars in his pants pocket. To her eyes, there just wasn't that much money in the world. Gladys said that even though "times were hard," there was no way that she would have kept the money. She sent it back to Mr. Warren by one of her brothers. Mr. Warren, who owned a store in the vicinity where the Jehovah Witness' building is now, sent a message back to Gladys to come to the store and pick out a new dress. That made her so happy. She and her mother sometimes washed clothes for a pound of butter or other needed staple goods; often a family's whole wash would be done for "a dollar and a quarter." Gladys recalled that her father was always bringing home "strays" (wanderers) to eat with them. It was always a struggle to find enough food to feed everyone. This used up much needed monies for the family's existence. "I believe those hard times are coming again," she said.

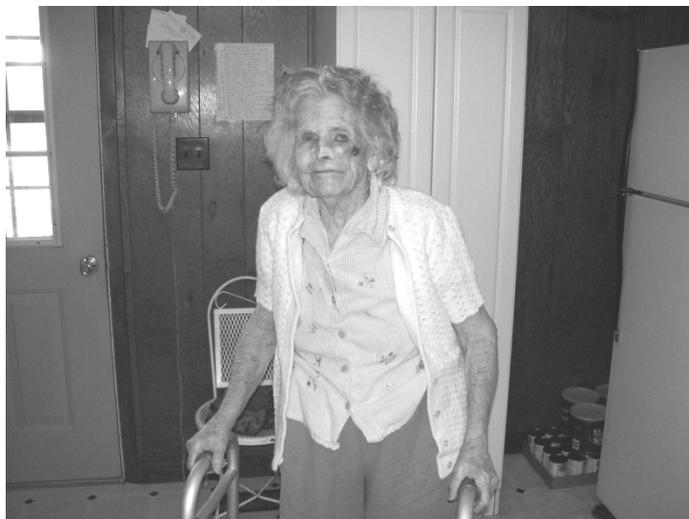
George Washington Short came along and stole Gladys' heart. She said that he was such a sweet man that folks began to call him "Sug" as in "sug"ar. Gladys and three of her siblings married into the same "Short" family. So it gets a little

confusing when one speaks of the Smartts and Shorts in the area. George and Gladys had two children, Betty and Jimmy. The couple never had enough money to built a house mainly because they were so generous to the neighborhood children and wanderers in the area. Their daughter Betty recalled that when she drew a name at school for Christmas, her father bought the child overalls, shirts or other much-needed clothing. They fed everyone and anyone who came to their door, and their door was on a small shack that was their home for most of their married lives.

Sug Short worked at the coke ovens, in the mines, at the tippel, hauled coal, ran dozers – anything he could to keep the family afloat. At times he worked for Lawrence Phipps and George Ramsey. Gladys and others set out pines, a part of the reclamation program for the mined lands. Sug helped whenever he could. It was cold weather and the banks of wasteland were slick when the rains came. The planters found it difficult to stand on the sides of the steep hills, and they often found themselves sliding to the bottom of the mounds.

Some years back, George "Sug" Short was given his black lung benefit money. The total was ten thousand dollars. He and Gladys had always wanted to live in a house instead of a shack, so they saw this blessing as an opportunity to build the little house in which she now lives. A family member was called in to manage getting the most house for the amount of money. He then built the house for the aging couple. To this day, she is just as proud of her little homestead as Queen Elizabeth of England is of her palace. She wanted me to see her back porch, a later addition. She pointed out where the little shack stood that she once called home.

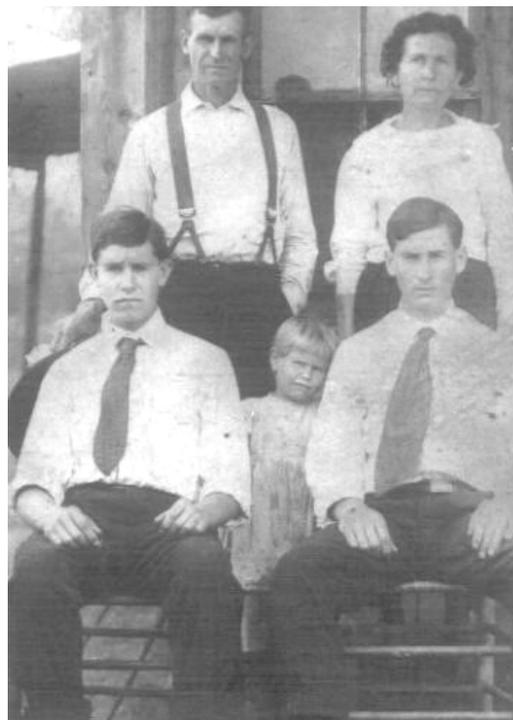
Sug has since passed away. Gladys' daughter and her husband live with her. Betty and Max are wonderful caregivers who provide companionship and ever-watchful eyes. Her immediate battle doesn't seem to be her "age;" she is battling skin cancer on her face, but with amazing grace, she does even that task. She's a tough mountain woman who had carried many a burden, but none of them has changed her from the "little bundle of love" that she has always been. After a big hug and moments of laughter, she smiled up at me and said, "Come and see me again."



Gladys Marie (Smartt) Short (2009)



Gladys Marie (Smartt) Short and husband
George "Sug" Washington Short



John Da Baptist Smartt and wife Mary Estella
(Sanders) Smartt with three of their children:
L to R—Elijah Farris, Thomas Winford and
Ernest

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