

The Challenges of a Young Bride in Smith Hollow

By Barbara M. Myers

When my husband, Carl “Burnice” Myers and I married in the middle 1950’s, my honeymoon wasn’t as most brides would have wanted it. We surely weren’t on some beautiful island or aboard a ship on the ocean. We spent close to a month with his mother Elloise Campbell and Ernie Murphy, her husband. Sometime later Burnice came in all smiley. “Well, we’ve found ourselves a house”, he announced. “Where is it?” his mother asked. “Anywhere that I know?” “Smith Hollow”, he said. “Oh, Son”, she said, “that’s away from everybody, and snakes sleep with the people there at night.”

I was so frightened that I wanted to go into the family bedroom, crawl into the closet and hide. The way Elloise spoke of that place, I couldn’t live there. I’d be frightened at all times, and if Burnice left me there alone while he worked, what would I do?

Well, anyway, I was married now, and we were like most other married folks who had to go wherever the other one has to go to keep the marriage together. Burnice and I had very little to move except the two of us, but we had to try. Elloise gave us a bed and a dresser, and a couple of chairs, straight backed ones to sit in. Burnice and Ernie, his stepfather, made us a long table for the kitchen. We got a cook stove from one of Burnice’s aunts. His mama gave us a kitchen cabinet that needed a lot of fixing up. Burnice and his father, Floyd, both had that gifted hand to build or repair anything. Anyway, getting our little three-room house put together kept me pretty busy. This took my mind and thoughts off of being afraid of living in Smith Hollow.

For several weeks I sewed curtains from material Elloise gave me. I made two pairs for the front room and 1 pair about 36” x 60” for the kitchen window. It was put in longways instead of up and down as the front room and bedroom windows were. Most of the sewing was done by hand for here we had no electricity, nor did I own a sewing machine.

Cooking wasn’t my hobby in those days, for my husband fed my first biscuits to our dog, that his granddad had given us. Brownie buried the biscuits in the old garden space! They were made from plain flour, without salt, or soda, or baking powder. I wasn’t a master cook yet, and I didn’t know what went into making biscuits.

Burnice told his whole Myers family on our first visit there that he used my biscuits for ammunition to kill rabbits and squirrels. I was so embarrassed! I often cried from his smart remarks, but I set it in my mind to please him soon and then I’d just sit back and listen to him brag on me. Floyd, his father, was a pretty good cook himself. He showed

me how to do a lot of cooking. He often made goulash from squirrel or rabbit and lots of vegetables and spices. It soon became one of my favorite dishes to cook.

Smith Hollow grew on me. We used water from the cave. It was so cold no ice was needed to cool it down. Our milk, butter, and any extra meats were kept in a chained wooden box Floyd had made. He connected it to a large rock to hold it in one place.

Our first daughter, Peggy Darlene, was born while we lived in Smith Hollow. She was a beautiful baby with her daddy's dark hair and a round face like the Myerses and Campbells. Burnice would even take her out to the garden and lay her on a quilt as he worked. I'd watch her like a hawk does a chicken. My mind was on these big rattlesnakes that nested everywhere there in that hollow.

One evening near sundown we were all sitting on the front porch. Floyd and Burnice were occupying the only 2 chairs. Me, I sat on the right side of the porch, putting my bare feet on the flat rock there we used as our step to come up on the porch. We were all laughing over something Floyd had told us. He was always full of funny jokes. He had gotten up to toss a cigarette butt out into the yard. Suddenly he said, "Barbara, don't move at all. Keep as still as you can." I looked down beside the rock there and saw one of the largest rattlesnakes I've ever seen.

Burnice came around from the back of the house to the side I was facing and said, "Slide your feet over the other way slowly to the porch." I did just as he had instructed and stood up on the porch. He took the chopping axe he'd grabbed by the side of the house and chopped the snake in several pieces. I fell to my knees. I was so weak in that few minutes the only thing I could do was thank God that I wasn't bitten by that snake. I kept saying, "Thank you, Lord" over and over and crying like a baby with Floyd and my husband both trying to tell me things would get better. It was one of the worst experiences I'd gone through in life. I wanted to move after that, but we had a real pretty garden now at its full growth with onions, cucumbers, squash, lettuce, radishes, and our beans, okra and corn was growing like crazy. I guess it was from the pasture fertilizer we'd carried home from the fields where Burnice's uncle had cattle. Mama called it weed fertilizer except we kept the weeds pulled out from amongst the corps. Now was no time to leave, so I just kept closer to the house and watched every step I took.

Going back and forth to the cave for water or carrying in wood was my worst times. Sometimes washing and hanging out the laundry to dry was bad too. Floyd stayed pretty close to the house a lot himself. Ever so often I'd hear him shoot the gun we had. I'd never see any results, but he'd say, "You didn't need to see it." I knew it was probably another snake that he had killed because when he killed a squirrel or rabbit I knew it.

Berry picking time was upon us that year. Just up from us was a bed of flat rocks, so I took Peggy with me. She was about two then, so I sat her down with her doll and blanket on the flat rock there and walked over just a step or two where the blackberry vines were hanging full. I began picking them. At the time I was about 3 months pregnant with our second child. I picked for about half an hour before I decided to go sit by Peggy and rest a while. I laid my hand flat down on the rock bracing myself and noticed a large crack between the two rocks. I looked down and quickly saw that there was a nest of snakes between the rocks. My voice grew barren. Not a sound would come out. I was numb all over. I finally slid over slowly away from the crack pulling myself up by the strength of my left hand fixed firmly on the other rock. I grabbed Peggy up and ran to the house. I left the berries sitting right there. They were far from being important.

Floyd was sitting under the oak tree splitting up some kindling. "My goodness, Barbara, you're white as a sheet. What's wrong?" "It's a nest of snakes", I said. "And where are they this time", he replied. "Between the flat rocks right up there behind the house", I was able to utter. He ran inside, grabbed the gun and slipped out the back door. I never even heard the shot for I was still feeling numb inside.

When Burnice came in that evening, we had supper, and he told me to pack up a few things and we'd go to his mother's for a few days. I went and packed without a reply.

God had granted me life twice, kept me safe from getting snake bit for some reason. There's always a purpose that only God himself knows. I suppose it was my family, or the child I was carrying. Anyway, we struggled many long days, weeks, and months the garden was gone. Finally were able to move to my husband's cousin's house over by Elk River. Here we had electricity, a well on the back porch, and neighbors close by. Here Burnice farmed several years for G.H. Clay. We were more contented, and Burnice was happy farming. He also milked 25 or 30 cows morning and night. So, he kept pretty busy, both him and his father.

Our second daughter Carla Sue was born that year. Crops were rewarding that year too. With good crops, canning vegetables were in good supply. We had hogs to kill. Finally life was more productive for the whole family, and we felt safe and secure. Life had been a challenge in Smith Hollow.

Smith Hollow is located between Valley Home (Crossroads) and Payne's Cove off Chapman's Chapel Road.