

LIFE IN PELHAM VALLEY IN THE 1950'S

By Barbara Mooney Myers

In the early 1950's I was a teenager yet had met a guy from Pelham, TN. I knew that I would marry him in time, and on May 30, 1952, we were married and moved to Pelham, TN to live where all Burnice Myers' family was from. His grandparents, Lonnie and Alice Myers and his father Floyd lived in between Pelham, Payne's Cove, and Burrows' Cove. There were cousins, aunts & uncles all over the Valley. His mother Elloise Myers Murphy and his stepfather, Ernie Murphy lived in Hillsboro, where he was a farmer.

There were little crooks and crannies everywhere in the Valley and a little home or farm tucked in here and there. The first place we lived was Smith Hollow or as a lot of folks called it, Rattle Snake Hollow. In warm weather, it was covered with rattlesnakes. Some coiled up on the rocks getting the sunshine. Others stretched out on the sand roads that went out to the main road. I'd keep a close watch for snakes when I was outside. I wasn't very fond of those creatures! I'd go so far as to say I was AFRAID of them. Our home was a little four-roomed house hidden next to the mountains and on one side by the barn was a large cave. We got all our drinking water from it. We had a wooden box to keep our butter and milk in. It sat chained to a large rock right near the opening of the cave. We had a lot of walking space here and room to tend land.

Burnice farmed the empty fields to grow crops of corn and soybeans, and we made a fine garden in the spring. I'd can up ever jar I could afford to buy or get from someone who was not using all theirs. I'd can pickles, tomatoes, squash, okra, beans, crowder peas, kraut, hot peppers, chow-chow, corn, jams and jellies. I picked blackberries in the outer fields near by as well as peaches and apples if I had a chance to get them someplace. The Hollow was a lonesome place to be when the cold winters came. I spent a lot of time there indoors where I cooked, sewed, and kept house. Burnice sometimes worked at sawmills or at logging, or occasionally at a service station in the winter since he couldn't farm. He and his dad, Floyd, would go to the mountains up from us to hunt. Lots of times, they'd come home with a tow sack full of squirrels or rabbits. They'd skin them, and I'd wash and cut them up for a hot meal. Then I'd fry them along with some potatoes and make gravy and biscuits. Everybody ate it all up because it was a high honor to have such a meal once in a while. Often we'd have squirrel or rabbit mulligan for the men since it was a favorite of theirs.

I didn't always know how to cook. Burnice and Aunt Alice showed me how to make a mulligan. The first biscuits I made Burnice fed them to our dog, Old Ben, for they were

hard and tough. The dog buried them in the field. After this embarrassment I learned to make good biscuits. Burnice kissed me many times over my biscuits. Each time he'd say they get better every time you cook. He'd always say, "takes a little practice to do things right, don't it Barbara?"

We'd go out and visit his folks if we got a chance for it was a pleasure to be with Granny Alice & Papa Myers, Aunt Sula and Uncle Will Edwards, and all the others we'd see. The men would get out their musical instruments. Grandpa Lonnie played a fiddle, Floyd, a harmonica, and Burnice a guitar. We'd all gather around singing and listening to them as they played. All the Myerses were musical. It was always a joyful time for us. I'd dread going home to a lonesome old place. Yet, it was our home, and I grew to love it. We had our first daughter almost 2 years later. We named her Peggy. Burnice and Floyd were crazy over her, spoiling her by holding her all the time. Burnice would sing to her at night, and she would fall asleep on his knee.

The third year of our marriage, we moved out of Smith Hollow to G.H. Clay's old home place near the present Cheatum Oliver Bridge. At that time we called it the upper end of Elk River. Burnice farmed G.H. and Uncle Garnett Clay's land. There was farmland on all sides except the side that faced the coves bordered by Elk River. We had 30 cows G.H. bought to milk for local dairies. Burnice and his dad, Floyd, milked the cows mornings and nights. A local driver picked up the cans of milk to deliver them to the dairy. Burnice tended this land where he raised corn and cotton, soybeans and some tobacco. He worked from early morning until suppertime or later- until the fields were all planted. We raised chickens, some turkeys and hogs. We even had game hens and roosters. We sold eggs and vegetables in summer, eggs and pecans in the fall to Hutchinson's Rolling Store that came around once a week. I'd trade all this for dried beans, flour, meal, coffee, salt, pepper, spices used to bake, lard, and a few other things. If I had the money every week, I'd get us a Coca Cola and put it in the icebox for a while. In the Hollow we had no electricity, but at this place we did, and we had water on the back porch.

We were thankful for the meals we sat down to eat for they would melt in your mouth. In the fall we'd kill hogs at Burnice's stepfather, Ernie Murphy's. His mother and I would cook a good meal for the men who had been working. We cured and salted the meat and got it ready for the winter. Elloise, Burnice's mother, would pet the kids and load our car up with extras. Our second daughter, Sue, loved to go to her grandma's house because she often got toys and candy.

After the hog killing, we'd go home and start grinding meat for fresh sausage and cutting up the tenderloin. I'd cook and can all this in half-gallon jars I had put back. We'd store the sugar cured and salted means in our meat room on the back porch. We ate good meals.

We stayed at home except for Saturday evenings when we visited his folks on both sides of the family. Often we'd drive to Tracy City if we had gas money to see my sister and her family. My mom, Josephine Mooney, stayed with us a lot. She helped me can and iron clothes. Lots of times though, when she'd leave we wouldn't see her for weeks, sometimes a month. James William, my dad and my brothers, Louis & Mansel Mooney lived in Chattanooga, TN at the time. My brother Joe lived in Ohio.

In summertime we'd go to the river and fish near our house. When we were lucky enough to catch fish, we'd have a cookout on the riverbank. Burnice would play his guitar and we would have a joyful evening at home. Sometimes Floyd and G.H. and his then girlfriend, Shirley, would join us for a good meal of fresh fish. Shirley Anderson was a second cousin of mine.

Many winters after 1956 my husband would go up north to Cleveland, Ohio, and work. When spring would come, we would usually come back to Pelham. That year we moved to Payne's Cove up at Mr. Cheatum Oliver's where Burnice worked for him at the sawmill. Cheatum had sons Marvin Earl, Jim, & Melvin and daughters Geneva & Joann. The boys worked right alongside their dad at the mill. By then, times were harder for us because food wasn't nearby as it had been earlier. It was gone, and many times we sat down to a pot of pinto beans, fried taters, a big onion, and cornbread for supper. We'd sold all our chickens, turkeys, cows, and had only a few game chickens around the house, very few eggs, not like we had before. We had more gravy for breakfast than we had ever had before. We let the children have the eggs in the mornings if they didn't choose to eat oatmeal. We ate a lot of oatmeal since it was cheap and good for you. Burnice wasn't fond of it, but he did love his gravy. When he'd kill a rabbit, we'd have it for breakfast. We sometimes went to the creek and giggered a few frogs. We would eat the legs. They were very tasty. My father-in-law caught me the first batch of frogs I ever cooked. They were so good fried up crispy with potatoes and gravy.

When we had the money, we'd buy a bushel of Irish or sweet potatoes if we didn't raise any. If I came across an apple tree or plum tree in a field, I'd load up and bring them home to can or to make fried pies for Burnice. He loved them. With the plums, I'd make jelly. I loved plum jelly with that tangy taste it had.

When we lived at Cheatum Oliver's old home place, we would eat supper, sit out on the porch and listen to Burnice play his guitar and sing Hank Williams' songs. Sometimes we would sing religious songs and I would sew. I made our bed quilts to use in the winters. The girls were growing up, and they'd dance around the yard while their daddy played the music. He could out do any country music singer in the town of Nashville. Anyway, in my heart he knew how to play and sing. Often Mr. Cheatum and his boys would come over and sit on the porch, listen to Burnice, and pat their feet. His music was our only enjoyment, for we had no video or record players to listen to. On warm days I'd pick wild greens or turnip greens if a neighbor had them. They'd sure perk up the appetite for a change. Mrs. Irene Oliver sent over greens sometimes. She was a wonderful neighbor and a hard worker. The Oliver family was a fine bunch of people to live near in those days. In fact, we had many good neighbors, the Argos, Clays, Wintons, and of course, all the Myers families as well as many others who lived nearby. We spent a lot of time just sitting around talking during the cold wintertime. On Christmas, I would raid the nearby creek banks or the woods for a Christmas tree, holly and spruce for bouquets for my tables. There was only hand made decorations for the tree. No lights, but still a pretty tree. I made a wreath for the front door and sometimes for the windows.

Money was scarce sometimes, but we'd spend time with Burnice's mom and sometimes his grandparents. Just being together and spending time was rewarding for us. Gifts were sometimes costly, yet love for our families was priceless, and meant far more. When we moved back to G.H. Clay's for the second time where Burnice could farm the land, I missed the old Oliver home place for there was no creek nearby. When it rained the creek would rise and we'd cross over on a two-log bridge with arm rails. The girls and I would trail the creeks when they'd dry up or even wade them hunting for pretty rocks and fossils along the banks. I'd raid the open nearby fields for wild flowers. They were so beautiful. I loved flowers and the outdoor life, parading through the woods, searching for herbs. I did it as a child and it was still in me as an adult. God created this world to his likeness and it pleased me to see the beautiful things he'd put here to see.

My mother also loved the woods and wild flowers. She'd sit on a rock gazing through the open spaces just hoping she's see the Lady Slippers in bloom in the early spring. Many times we'd go home carrying an arm full of good kindling to start the fire in the cook stove. Seems there was always a need for everything out there if we just knew how to find the use.

After we spent time in Cleveland, OH, getting back home was first choice on my list. I enjoyed taking the girls and going to the open fields where Burnice tilled and planted crops. Often I'd carry him his lunch if he was close by. I'd take him fried taters and biscuits and some tenderloin if we had it to spare. Sometimes I'd take an egg or two from the gallon that I had pickled and a jar of water with a chunk of ice. We'd visit the cemeteries in between. Those were the Goodman Cemetery in back of Aunt Hilda & Uncle Garnet Clay's and the Solomon Sanders Cemetery there on the main Payne's Cove road. Sometimes we'd all get on the tractor with Burnice and go to Payne's Cove Cemetery or to Burrows' Cove to the Sartain Cemetery or the Winton Cemetery on over in the field by a group of large oak trees. Only a few graves were there. Burnice's uncle Edgar Myers and his wife Nell Ruth lived in Payne's Cove.

Hilda Clay was my husband's aunt. She was a sister to Burnice's mother Elloise Campbell Murphy. They also had sisters, Ava, Nina, Lola, and a brother, Taft Campbell.

In the late fall, we'd gather walnuts & hickory nuts to use for baking. Often the kids would love cracking and eating them. We'd load our nail kegs with pecans to put back for the wintertime and for Christmas. From time to time Burnice would find a few chestnuts at one old home place near where we lived. We'd roast them on the fireplace. Sometimes we'd pop popcorn we had raised or roast peanuts if we had planted them. Elloise always raised peanuts, so we had some for roasting and for making chocolate fudge. It was always a treat to have plenty of nuts stored away. Eating was always better.

Pelham was a place for fine gardens, raising crops and cattle. The fields were full of fine milk cows and young calves for families to kill for beef. If we had meat, we usually had a good meal on the table. More often we had fried chicken, especially on Sunday. We had chicken for breakfast too if we had time to get them ready. It was a long process for we killed and dressed them then cut them up before we even got ready to do any cooking.

When crops came in, we were all happy to have the fresh vegetables to eat. The girls loved their corn on the cob. We all ate a lot of corn in those days. Corn was a cheap crop to raise. I'd can it in reused gallon jugs that once contained vinegar. In winter it sure tasted good on a cold day. There are so many times I remember – like my oldest daughter Peggy would beg her dad to let her ride on the tractor as he turned the soil. Many times she'd fall asleep as he finished his plowing. He'd carry her indoors to her bed for the night. The girls loved the Valley. They had a tire swing that their grandpa

Floyd made them that hung in the pecan tree in our front yard. Although they are adults today, they've never forgotten Pelham and the days when we lived there.

Burnice went back up north to Cleveland, OH, in 1962 and on March 15, 1963, he was killed in a car wreck on his way home from work. Our son was only 2 years old at the time. Since those days I have lived in Tracy City, Chattanooga, then back to Tracy City where I now make my home. I miss a lot of those old times we had. Things change over the years, but memories are still inside buried deeply just as my tracks where I once treaded in Pelham Valley. They can't be seen today, but they were there many years ago. My memories of these times we shared in the Valley with all the family and friends there remain even though many of them have passed on. Some I loved deeply – Burnice, Aunt Georgia Lee Clay, Aunt Sula Edwards, and Elloise. Still today when I travel through Pelham, I gaze at the old places where newer homes have now been built. I think about the changes, but my mind wanders back to the days when we lived there.