

## **Ruby Burnett Learned to Bend With The Changing Times**

*As Strong as Refined Metal, This Carter County Lady Celebrated Her 93<sup>rd</sup> Birthday With Family and Friends*

**By Sherry Lowe - 2007  
“Happy Birthday Granny”**



I have been blessed for my entire life to have many special friends and family about me. But one of the most special is my dear grandmother, Ruby Burnett. On October 21, 2007, Ruby Davis Burnett, pictured above, will celebrate her ninety-third birthday, as usual surrounded by a large number of her family, in her small home at Iron Hill, in Carter County, Ky. The community of Iron Hill was formerly known as Charlotte Furnace because of the iron furnace located there. That furnace was created in 1873 and was the last of the great iron furnaces to be built in Carter Co. and it was the only one of the iron furnaces to ever be sheathed in metal.

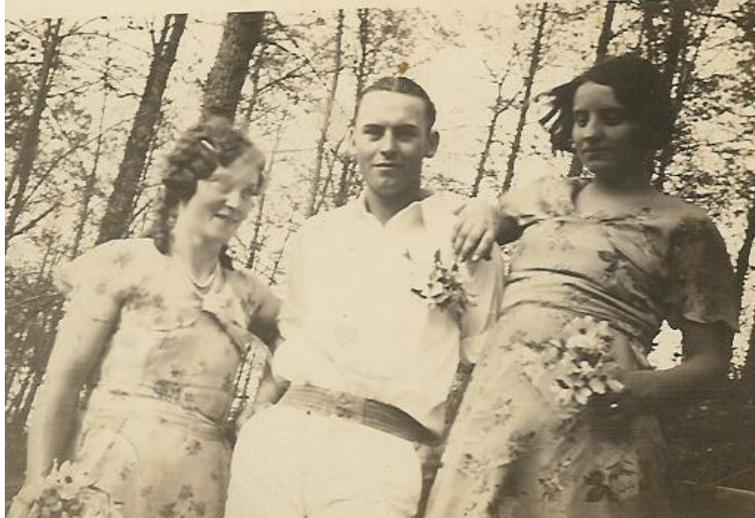
Ruby was born on the western side of Carter Co., in a small community known as Wesleyville, the daughter of Elbert (1885- 1965) and Dovie Erwin (1894-1980) Davis.



(Pictured are Elbert and Dovie Erwin Davis circa 1911)

Ruby was not given a middle name at birth, but when she found out other children had middle names, she promptly decided that her middle name would be Mae. As an innocent child in the early 1900's, Ruby didn't know about electricity, or telephones, or televisions, or horseless carriages, let alone dream of seeing a man walk on the moon. Yet, she has seen all these things and many more. But the most important thing to Ruby, besides of course her dedication to God, is her family.

In 1931, Ruby was introduced to a handsome young man by the name of William "Willie" Lee Burnett, by his sister, Mabel. Willie was born August 11, 1911, the son of Henry (1872-1965) and Lucy (1878-1915) Wicker Burnett. Ruby and Willie soon became an "item" and decided to marry. Thinking Ruby too young to marry and wanting her to continue to go to school, Ruby's parents requested the local Clerk not to issue Ruby and Willie a license. But young love determined will always find a way. Since Ruby could not be gone very long without arousing suspicions, Willie's older sister, Edna, posing as Ruby, drove with Willie to Greenup County, Kentucky, where the families weren't known. At the Greenup County Clerk's office, Edna signed Ruby's name, and a marriage license was obtained. All the while Ruby and Willie's sister, Mabel, remained in full sight. Then later that evening, with the license in hand, Ruby and Willie promptly drove to the home of Rev. J. R. Wright, not far across the county line, and at his home they were married. To be able to afford the fee for the marriage license, Willie had cooked a batch of molasses and sold them around the community.



(Pictured left – right: Mabel, Willie and Ruby circa 1932.)

There was a small two-room house on the farm of Willie’s father, at Iron Hill, that was empty. So Ruby and Willie filled it with a few pieces of furniture obtained from each side of the family, and they were able to set up housekeeping. When raising her children, times were hard and money was short. Nearly everything they ate was raised on the farm.



(Pictured: 1<sup>st</sup> row Patsy, Carl; 2<sup>nd</sup> row Everett, Bill, Russell “Bud”, and Maxine. 3<sup>rd</sup> row, Ruby, taken circa 1943)

The nearly 50 acre tract of land that they farmed had once belonged to Willie’s grandfather, Balsar Newman,. Many years later, Willie and Ruby would purchase this tract from Willie’s father. Seven generations have now walked the grounds of this little farm. It remained a producing farm until the Commonwealth of Kentucky took the main fields and barn to construct the “AA” highway around 1999. Today Ruby no longer

depends as much on the produce of the farm, but my Uncle Bud raises ample garden there for all the family to share in the harvest.

On a still cold morning of 1943, Ruby and Willie were awakened by the heavy smell of smoke and the roar of flames in the ceiling above where they had been sleeping, as their little house quickly burned. Ruby and Willie were just able to shuffle out the children with only the meager clothes on their backs. There was no fire department to come to the rescue and no neighbors close enough for a bucket brigade, so they could do little but stand in the cold snow and watch their tiny home being consumed by the hot blaze and become a pile of ashes. When word spread of their loss, neighbors and family began to gather and do as much as they could. Ruby and Willie and the children had to move in with Willie's father, Henry Burnett, but always known to me as "Poppy". After a year or so, and many nightmares of awakening to the licking flames later, they saw their little house being rebuilt, larger and better and eventually with one special new addition, a second front door so that in the event their home should ever catch fire again, it would be easier to escape the structure. That house is still Ruby's home today, and it still has two front doors. Of course, it now has a bathroom, running water, electricity and gas heat, all those little extras that were left out of the reconstruction.



(Pictured are Willie and son Carl in front of the new home that was built after the fire. The door that can be seen between the post is the left door and there is another just to its right.)

Ruby and Willie had six children: Maxine (m. Kenneth Mullins); Russell (m. Fern McGinnis); Bill (m. Betty McGinnis, sister to Fern); Everett (m. Sue Foster); Patsy (m. Luke Back) and Carl. Today Ruby has 6 children (1 deceased), 15 grand children (1 deceased), 29 great grandchildren (1 deceased), and 8 great great grandchildren.



(Pictured are 1<sup>st</sup> row: Patsy, Ruby, Maxine; 2<sup>nd</sup> row: Everett, Russell, and Bill circa 1970)

I was only a child in 1961, but I'll never forget the screams of my grandmother, the dark dreadful morning that the State Police came to her door to tell her of the death of her youngest child. Carl Elwood had gone over an embankment while driving the night before and he had been found not far from the car, lying on his stomach with his head cradled in his arm, just as he normally slept each night. Carl was more like a big brother to me, always teasing me and playing games with me and I missed him terribly then and now. But life must go on, even when we think we don't have the strength for it. It was about this time that Ruby and her family found a special strength as she and each of her other children dedicated their lives to God. Today she and her family are still serving God as they worship at the little county church, Carter Christian Holiness Church, that we all love so much. In fact, Ruby has seen two of her sons pastor the church and the other serve as ordained deacon and teacher.

Almost every family has a recipe or two passed on which evokes memories of childhood. For all those that have had the pleasure of sampling Ruby's cream candy and/or one of her moist molasses stack cakes, to even get a whiff of a similar product (because there are none other as good as hers) would bring fond memories and a smile to a watering mouth. Ruby made her candy to a precision that was beyond factory standards, pulling and pulling the candy by hand until it reached the perfect peak of creaminess. Ruby would cut her pieces just so and fill a full bag and sell it for mere pocket change. If she could see that a piece was broken, well we got those bags for she would never sell a bag that wasn't as perfect as possible. Of course, we didn't mind as we gobbled down those little pieces of heavenliness. And her stack cakes, well each of her ten layers had to be just the right thickness, and baked in an iron skillet. The homemade apple butter would ooze from between those layers in a most poetic way. Unfortunately, arthritis has stilled those precious hands these days and although we try and try to master her techniques, none are so sweet and none are so good as the ones previously prepared by those hands of Ruby with so much love and pride in workmanship. Ruby now at the age of 93, is finally delegating some of the work to the

girls, and training them at the same time, on each Sunday morning to prepare Sunday luncheon, which will be enjoyed by the many members of Ruby's family following Church. At times there have been so many cars at Ruby's on Sunday afternoon that people have actually asked if we've had a death in the family. Fortunately, it's just Sunday lunch normally consisting of brown soup-beans, green beans, fluffy mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, a tray of meat-loaf or pork roast or beef roast or fried chicken or sometimes two or three trays so that everybody gets their favorite, fried potatoes, white country-gravy, corn, macaroni and cheese, cornbread and biscuits and of course a whole host of delicious desserts. These wonderful foods feed from 30-50 family members each Sunday, except on Mother's Day. On Mother's Day each year, Ruby will allow us to grill hot dogs and hamburgers, but she has to make the hot dog sauce and the rest of us bring a covered dish. That allows her to attend the early morning Church service and receive her pot of flowers and her well deserved honors as a Church mother.

Around 1957, Ruby had the honor of becoming Santa's assistant . You see each Christmas Eve, Santa would contact Ruby and let her know that he was coming to visit her grand daughter, me, and my parents would take me to see my grandmother while Santa delivered my presents. The first delivery was so successful that Santa just added all of Ruby's grandchildren, as they came along, to this secret schedule and thus began the annual Christmas Eve dinner at granny's table, during which time, Santa was sure to arrive at our homes while we were away. The food and the love flowed from Ruby's table as usual on those Christmas Eves, but it was filled with an even more special taste and air of excitement than usual. This tradition has expanded to great grandchildren and even great great grandchildren. In fact, no matter where in this world Ruby's descendants are, if it is at all possible, they will be at Grandmother Ruby's house for Christmas Eve dinner. There is a set of steps that run up the wall of the dinning room to the upstairs area, and it has been the pleasure of each of us to sit on those steps to eat until we become old enough to sit at the big table.

When I was a little girl, being the first grandchild of Ruby and living next door to her and my grandfather, times were certainly "grand" in deed for me. I can remember slipping out of bed early in the morning and running bare-footed over to their house to put in my request for breakfast. Those were days when doors were left unlocked and it was safe for a child to play outside and out -of-sight, without parents being worried. The other grandchildren and I spent our summers wandering all around the farm, while our grandmother and mothers canned the harvest of the gardens. Since I was the oldest, I often got the job of washing the worst off the jars in a large tub of cold water. You see the jars had been stored in the smokehouse all winter and they were dusty and sometimes filled with cobwebs. So I did the first washing, before the jars were taken into the house for a more thorough and hot water bath. I also remember stringing up leather-britches, watching the huge tub of apple butter bubbling over an open fire and helping my grandfather skin squirrels. My very favorite meat in the world is still pan-fried squirrel.

{For those that don't know, leather-britches are green beans that we strung with a needle and twine before hanging them up to dry. Once completely dried, the beans would be taken down and placed in a container. To cook the leather-britches, they had to be soaked in water to reconstitute them and then they would be cooked just like fresh green beans.}

One of my favorite activities in those golden days was to “go visiting” with Ruby and Willie. Being so near to them and being their very curious grand daughter, I was always anxious to go with Ruby to see her friends in the community and surrounding areas, Mrs. Audrey Burnett, Mrs. Mildred Elliott, Mrs. Flossie Akers, Mrs. Mary Ellen Oakley,. and Miss. “Sis” Whitt, to name a few. At those homes, I saw such wonders, I’m surprised that my eyes didn’t pop. For example, at the home of Mrs. Audrey Burnett (Ruby’s sister-in-law) there was a long hallway with a cool stone floor, off which were the bedrooms of the home. In one of those bedrooms was a quilt-frame that was hung from the ceiling so that it could be pulled down for the ladies to work on a quilt. When they decided to stop for the day, the frame was pushed back up and out of the way. At the home of Mrs. Mary Ellen Oakley, there was a working spinning wheel that was taller than me. Occasionally, we would travel to the nearby town of Grayson to get groceries and supplies, and there we would often visit Ruby’s mother, my great grandmother, Dovie Davis. I remember that “Mamaw Dovie” had a kitchen filled with beautiful glassware and an eclectic salt and pepper shaker collection.. I suppose sitting in that kitchen and starring at all the things I wasn’t allowed to touch, could have something to do with my love of glassware and dishes even today.



1951-52 Iron Hill Homemakers

Pictured Left to Right: Flossie Akers, Audrey Burnett, Ruby Burnett, Myrtle Gibson, Maxine Burnett Mullins, Mildred Elliott, Carrie Carroll, Mary Bentley. Not pictured: Gladys Minniehan, Edna Floyd and Betty Burnett.

The generous love that Ruby has shown for her Church, her community, her friends and her family, has been the backbone and the glue that has held our family so closely knit for all these years. The love that keeps us coming back time after time to sit around her table and share news of the week each Sunday morning; is a love that will forever burn strong in the hearts of her descendents.

These turn-of-the-century ladies were stronger than refined metal, and yet they were able to bend with the changing times. They walked with pride and dignity, and they kept their heads held high. They could take nothing and make it into a home. Ruby and the women like her have set a high standard that the women of this century should certainly aspire to.

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