

Interview of Betty Marie Ellis

Feb. 24, 2011

At her home, 10 Washington Ave, Woodfin, NC

Interview begins with Marie showing me some pictures in a photo album.

ME: That's about the way we looked when we were married.

KV: And when were you married?

ME: 1948, I believe. This is our church down on River Rd. It's Riverside Baptist, if you go down Elkwood Ave. to River Rd, it's the first church on the left as you go toward town.

And this is our first son. We adopted all three of our children. And he's the first one.

KV: And what's his name?

ME: His name is Adrian. He was born in '57 and we adopted him in Jan. of '58.

KV: Here he is in his crib. He was a beautiful baby.

ME: And that's the little girl--the girl who did the book [photo album]. She was born in July of '59. She's two years younger than him.

KV: She looks pretty young here. Oct. of '59 the picture says.

ME: Isn't that cute? Isn't that just like a little boy? [he's got high heels on in this picture.] And this is our third child; she's Nancy. [Another photo shows the two young sisters.] This is Cynthia and this is Nancy. My husband's grandfather had made this little bed for them when they were growing up, and it's still good and they're still using it for the babies.

KV: Pictures of Cynthia and Adrian. Cynthia's got on a Polly Flinders dress [i.e. one with smocking on the chest]. At least that's what we used to call them.

ME: I didn't make that one. I made most of their clothes. I even made Adrian a suit one year. For Easter.

KV: Ooh wow, you must have been quite a seamstress.

ME: God's given me a lot of talents that have kept me busy over the years. Adrian was a big boy. And then Nancy, when I went to work, she went to Little Beaver College [a nursery school, not the College in eastern PA] up there on Beaverdam. And this is her graduation.

KV: 'So were these neighborhood pictures all taken in Arden?

ME: No, they're in this neighborhood. We had lived here ten years before we adopted them. We bought this house in '46 or '47. I made these little dresses. Remember when smocking was popular? I made theirs and then I made one for every little girl in the family one Christmas. And then I made these dresses, bright red for Christmas. And this is my husband.

And then for my 75th birthday, I told my daughter I wanted to rent a bus. So I rented a bus from Ralph Young and we went out to a restaurant in Dillsboro--what's the name of that restaurant there that's so good and famous?

KV: I have no idea.

ME: Well, twenty-five of my family rented a bus and went out there--the Dillard [?] House.

That's our trip out there. And that's my son-in-law; he works at UNCA. He works in Vehicles.

KV: Has he still got the job? [Job cuts have been pretty drastic this year due to State budget cuts to state-related school.]

ME: Yeah, He's only got about two or three more years before he can retire. He feels pretty good about it [keeping the job until retirement].

KV: Now I want to start out with your early childhood. Where were you born?

ME: Fairview, Flat Top Mountain. My momma and daddy were there when I was born--at the very top. But the only way you could get up there was horse and buggy back then. I was born at home--never heard anything about any hospital. My mother never talked about it, so I don't know about any midwife. Maiden name was Marlow; my mother never put an "e" on the end of it, but I always did.

My children--the oldest one was Adrian who died in 2006; he had diabetes, type A and heart problems, too. Passed away in his sleep.

Cynthia Joan Mc Abee lives in Weaverville; she worked in the Chancellor's office when Dr. Brown was Chancellor. Now she works in the Accents on Asheville shop at the Grove Park Inn.

Nancy Elaine Capps, she's not working because she has a lot of health problems. She had hip problems and had hip surgery when she was 13; she walks and gets around and now she's got breathing problems--is on oxygen.

I graduated from high school in, I guess it was 1947. Got married the next year.

KV: So you taught yourself how to do all the things you can do?

ME: Well, yes, I guess, but I also took many courses through the Home Extension Services of the Dept. of Agriculture. And then I took a beauty course and had a beauty shop for years; the beauty shop below the Woodfin Water Office was ours. We sold it when Adrian was 8 months old, and I stayed home until Nancy was about 4 yrs. old. My husband had a motor service and I was a bookkeeper for him--had on the job training for that. We sold it, closed the shop in '84, and had a motor home and traveled a lot. Then we had an accident in Sept. of '84, and my husband died as a result of that. I had taught ceramics for the Home Extension Service for years. They gave us a room at the Woodfin Community Center; they gave us a room down there, where we kept our kiln and molds. They had a number of clubs that taught people how to be better home owners. We have a number of women in our club--32 or 33.

KV: What do you remember about your childhood?

ME: Well, we were a very poor family. And my daddy drank, so we had a worse childhood because of that. But we carried our water and bedded our stables, built our fires in our kitchen. I guess we had oil later on. In fact, when we were young, my grandfather had a chicken house on his property and we heated that whole building with the cook stove, and I remember having a big bed in the one room but my two brothers slept at the top of the bed and I slept below them across the bed. (laughs) But it didn't hurt us. But we weren't the only ones, because it was a poor community. There were a lot of people in this sort of situation.

KV: Was there anybody else around you up there? In terms of neighbors?

ME: I don't remember anybody there on top of Flat Top, because we moved from there when I was four years old. But I remember we rented a house from somebody and lived in the house. We never had much money, but Daddy didn't work much. His father made white liquor and Daddy had a lot of brothers, several of them all drank it, but we weren't the only poor people--there were a lot of hard-up people then. Not much money in those days, a lot of hand-me-downs then.

KV: You had said it had been a hard childhood; and your daddy drank.

ME: There was no meanness when he drank. He was exceptionally kind, exceptionally kind. Eventually he was in service, in the Army; I remember he was stationed in Lakeland, FL., and then things were easier for my mother. And then he worked for the Biltmore Police, but I don't remember how the money was. But when C.P. Clara opened up, I went there. I lived in Fairview, went to high school in Fairview and graduated from that High School. But one of my neighbors owned Asheville Beauty Academy, and she took me with her every day, and that's how I got a beautician's license. It was up there where the old Chamber of Commerce used to be, up on Haywood St. [in the area of Hotel Indigo], and she took me every day, and made it possible for me to get my beautician's

license.

KV: That was nice of her, wasn't it! What was her name?

ME It was Mary Desmukes Clingman; she didn't have any children. She was a woman on her own for a long time, already had her name established and she established Asheville Beauty Academy. Then eventually she married a Mr. Clingman. She lived near us. So she just started taking me right after I finished high school. She gave it to me as a graduation present. She just took me on in. All that stuff just floats around in your memory and I guess I hadn't taken any time to put it all together. My parents couldn't have afforded it, and I didn't have money for lunches; I'd just take a biscuit or something like that. And in the summer I also worked at Kress's. I could get a ride into town with one of our neighbors for that.

KV: You'd said that your father came from a large family. How large was it?

ME: I'd say there must have been 10 or 12 children in it. I'm not really sure.

KV: Oh, my, that is large.

ME: And his father had been married before because there were two stepchildren in the family. And one of the stepsisters owned a restaurant in Chimney Rock; Dalton, Daisy Dalton; and then the brother was in the Henderson School system.

KV: What was the name of your high school? and the grade school?

ME: Fairview H.S. and the grade school was in the same building. So it was just Fairview School all the way through. We went to summer school for our last two credits, walked there each day, so that we could graduate in the summer.

KV: What did you do in school as a child that you particularly enjoyed?

ME: I enjoyed school. And I really think in my mind that I was a teacher's pet. I just liked to do stuff; and I just did what the teacher asked us to do, so I got the name of being the teacher's pet from that. I don't know for sure that I had that but I just did whatever the teacher needed to have done. I didn't ever get punished because I never did things just to be mean; so I never got punished. We rode the school bus, and we had a junior-senior banquet. I remember that one neighbor lady was young enough to understand it, so she loaned me a dress so that I could go to the junior prom. We didn't have a senior prom. It was a very small class.

KV: Did everybody go to summer school?

ME: No, but anybody who lacked two credits could get them in summer school; it was

three hours in two different classes. And we just had our own little graduation exercises. And we walked to school and back.

KV: And you all lacked the same two classes?

ME: Yes. I can't recall what they were, but we all finished them and graduated.

KV: Did you have any special friends?

ME: Oh, yes. We went to church and had neighborhood people.

KV: What church did you go to?

ME: I went to Laurel Pines Church, and it's on Old Fort Rd. It's still there. And we walked to get to church; we didn't have a vehicle in our family for long time. We didn't have electricity until just before I was married. [1948]

KV: And what did you do when you got electricity?

ME: I was working--I must have worked a while before I was married I think I bought my mama a new wash machine--you know the old wringer type?

KV: I remember those; that may have been the main type on the market then.

ME: We used to do our laundry down at my grandfather's house; there's a creek running down by his house, and there were pots there. We'd fill the pots and boil the water--get the water out of the creek. Run them through the wringer and hang them on the line. I used to do the ironing; I loved to do the ironing. And I'd put a clean scarf on. I guess it was when we lived in that little house on his property. About three miles up Old Fort Rd. It doesn't all fit together in your mind, unless you've kept up with it in your mind. I haven't thought about these things in a long time.

KV: So these are almost like new questions for you.

ME: Yes, yes.

KV: What do you think were strengths of your community when you were growing up?

ME: People cared for each other. There were not a lot of things to do, and people kept in touch. There were not a lot of telephones, so it had to be by voice, traveling, people talking to each other. I can remember one summer when we were taught to be careful to watch out for mad dogs, we just knew we were to watch out for, even tho' we'd never seen one. The news just traveled. I guess they didn't have vaccines for them then, so the news really traveled.

KV: It's amazing how news traveled without telephones.

ME: Well, we talked to each other at church each Sunday, that was the one fellowship time when people could talk to each other.

KV: And people from the same neighborhood area went to the same church.

ME: Yes, yes. And even the preacher lived in the same neighborhood. That makes a lot of difference. I didn't like his preaching. I can remember one funny thing that happened one summer Sunday. Our church has benches, like a lot of churches then, and of course the windows were open because we didn't have air conditioning. A neighborhood friend of mine and I would always walk to church together, and she had an uncle who was not married and quiet, and refined kind of, generally kept to himself also came to church and he was sitting in front of us. One Sunday when we standing and were supposed to be praying, of course we weren't, we were peaking around. And the man in front of him had his head bowed and he had on a white shirt, and you know how there's a gap between the collar and the man's neck when he has his head bowed. Well, there was this caterpillar crawling along the top of the bench, and Huston, who was the same age as our parents, picked up the caterpillar and dropped it down the gap between shirt collar and his neck. But it was so unlike him that my friend and I had to slip out during the prayer and go to the back because we were about to burst out with laughter. Huston didn't go out and socialize or anything like that, it was so unlike him that we just had to laugh. I don't know what happened after that, what the man did or what happened to the caterpillar I don't know whether Huston knew that we'd seen it. He didn't get married until later in life.

KV: Who do you think was most influential in life as a child? Was there any one person?

ME: I guess it was just caring neighbors.

KV: Well, you were growing up during the Depression.

ME: Everybody faced the same circumstances. We didn't know it was hard. We'd sit down at the table every night and we'd have milk and corn muffins, and that was all right. It was good. I didn't miss anything.

KV: Did you have your own cows?

ME: We had cows. I was never very good at milking, though. Mama would start the cooking and I'd start the milking, but I could never get much results from the milking, so Mama would come out and milk and I'd go finish the cooking.

KV: You had a garden, I bet. What did you grow?

ME: Yes, yes, we had a garden. Green beans, and peppers and corn. I remember picking beetles off of?

KV: Or potatoes?

ME: We grew potatoes, too, but it was green beans that I picked those beetles off of. We'd have an old pop bottle and fill it with kerosene and put the beetles in and that would kill them. We didn't have spray. And somehow or other we got meat bugs and on Saturdays it was my job to pick them off the mattress and kill them.

KV: How'd you kill them? Drop them in kerosene?

ME: You know, I can't remember that! I can remember turning the mattress around and turning the piping inside out. And every so often in the summer time when the weather was right, we'd take the mattress outside and rub kerosene on it and that would kill them.

KV: Hmmm, I wonder if they're trying that now?

ME: (laughing) Yes, they've had a mess of them, haven't they, in New York and other cities.

KV: In the motels. I've heard of this even in Dayton, OH.

ME: Yes, given all the traveling people are doing nowadays, things spread a lot faster than they did when I was growing up.

KV: What values did you see while growing up that you'd like to see transmitted to kids growing up now?

ME: I guess we were taught the right way, because we didn't have stealing and meanness going on, so the standard of living was good, and people cared.

KV: And tho' there wasn't much money, people were not stealing from each other.

ME: In fact they were looking out for each other, and being sure they had what they needed. And of course at church, there would be community hymn singing, so music would have been one of the things that tied people together. My daddy's family was musical; there were guitar players and banjo pickers. Daddy played the banjo, and so they were instrumental in the music for the community. It's so different now, as I think about it. I come home and go in my house, and I don't go back out and visit with the neighbors as I did 20 years ago. You know they're there and they'll be supportive if you need them, but I guess we've become more self-supportive nowadays; you think, 'I can get by without that'.

KV: There used to be that time when people would come by and ask for a cup of sugar and things like that.

ME: Yes! Yes! How long's it been since you borrowed something from somebody? We don't borrow anymore, do we? [actually said in tone of a statement, not a question.] We go to the store instead.

KV: It's too easy to get in the car and go to the store.
END, Side 1.

Beginning of Side 2, Marie is showing me some of her ceramic work, which includes painting and making the models she paints.

ME: I got this plain ceramic block from Lowes' and painted these.

KV: These are gorgeous. How do you protect them from rain?

ME: I use the same waterproofing you put on your decks.

KV: These are really gorgeous! A scene of daffodils, and one of red poppies; one of strawberries with something [indistinguishable] hiding in it ; a butterfly on some coreopsis, hyacinths, lilac blossoms, daisies, pansies. Have you done everything in your house? Even the molding?

ME: Not that one; I bought it at a church yard sale and brought it home and painted it the way I wanted. My students I see here at home want to come and learn some of this. They want to do some of the dolls like I do. I cast these (legs and arms and heads) of these. I've taken different classes and have learned how to do these things (including how to get the cast head on the doll that gets stuffed and then dressed). I hardly ever been into a house in Woodfin that does not have [For years, she has had a job with Asheville's Parks and Rec. Dept. that had paid her to teach ceramics and painting at Harvest House in Kenilworth 2 days /week, but that was cut back due to City budget cuts this year.] So I've enjoyed passing this along. Things I've made are all over this area.

And another thing I've enjoyed is praying for everyone who has one of my ceramic pieces, one I've made or one I've helped people make, so I think I've touched a lot of people through prayer. And I think prayer makes a difference. I should pray more. And here's an example of how God works: I teach 2 classes each T. in my home here down in the basement, and ordinarily when the students are here the TV down there is on but it's broken. The Charter man was here and said the "Problem is not with Charter--it's with the TV. You need a new TV. " Well I don't have money for a new TV. And one of the girls [students] said, "Well, you've got a new TV; my grandmother just got a new TV and she was wondering what to do with her old one, so it's yours now." That's an example of how God will take care of your needs and you don't even have to articulate it in a prayer for Him. I hadn't even prayed for that.

KV: Where do you sell your ceramics?

ME: I don't sell much anymore.

(Now Marie is flipping through a photo album to show pictures of family members.)
This is my husband. We were in an accident in OK: [they used the bus for at least 2 years when they were home-schooling their children, traveling around the U.S. and built lessons around the geography and local history of the different areas they visited]; a lady hit us head on in 1985, and he died as a result of it That's our son. That's my mother and that the rest of the family. This is Christmas when we were opening packages. This is Adrian's wife (Adrian is deceased, diabetes related). That's Adrian's son-in-law, and that's his daughter. There were 25 on that bus to Dillsboro to celebrate her birthday at the Dillsboro Inn, and rented a Young's bus to get there. The ride itself was lots of fun. I took a beauty course when I finished high school, and we had to do hair and use those big old hair dryers. . We'd set the perm, and put it under the hair dryer and the total price for a perm and trim was \$3. We'd cut the hair, shampoo it, set the perm and brush it out. Course that was before I got married back in '47 or '48--I can never remember which year I got married.

[Then comes discussion of which type of paints to fire and which not to fire. She is quite accomplished in painting on various surfaces, including fabric, and had taught several classes through the Asheville Parks and Rec, Dept at HarvestHouse. See some of photos attached to this interview.]

END OF INTERVIEW

Unrecorded visit on 6/29/11 when I returned to get photos of her; she is in the midst of organizing her molds in her basement, where she conducts private classes or classes for people who have taken classes with her. in the past. She has hundreds of molds for casting ceramics that she uses in her classes, and yesterday, 6/28/11, when I called she was in the midst of this process and will return to it when we're done. She wants to be able to lay her hands more quickly on a mold to do castings for a class so that they can paint and fire it for a class, or if she's doing her own work. Some students had replaced a shelf that they saw was about to fall, but in doing so, rearranged its contents, making it more difficult to find all of a casting of, for example, a nativity scene (Marie has 7-8 different ones). Marie also showed me some of the things she'd worked on or works which have won prizes in various competitions around the state.

Attachments, Photos

1. Marie Ellis at home surrounded by some of her work, which also shows her prioritized values.
- 2-5. Examples of Marie's paintings on cloth.
6. A prize winning ceramic casting and painting by Marie of St. Nicholas.
- 7, 8. Marie also has a talent for flower arrangements. Two examples of that.
9. More examples of Marie's painting on cloth.
- 10, 11. Marie paints on virtually everything. These are stepping stones she made from cinder block squares.

Remarks

Note Marie's use of "standard of living" as she uses it to describe/characterize the general atmosphere in which she grew up. They were poor, but she didn't focus on finances of that time; she is focused on moral behaviors and interpersonal relationship. (see e.g., p 10, Marie's 2nd response.)