

A TALK WITH ANNIE MAE (MOONEY) FOSTER

“Nestled in An Old Tree Stump”

Written by Jackie Layne Partin

Annie Mae (Mooney) Foster is ninety-two plus years of age. She was born 25 October 1916, near “Greenview,” Sewanee, Tennessee. The little house in which she was born was nestled on the mountainside underneath the Sewanee Golf Course in Franklin County, Tennessee. Annie’s mother was Flora Eva Mooney, youngest daughter of Richard Charles Mooney and Sarah Catherine (Sutherland) Mooney. On 27 January 2009, I sat down with Annie in her Monteagle home for the purpose of letting her tell her story. She is a kind, courteous, happy lady with a pleasant smile—a lady one would be proud to have as a mother or a granny.

Years ago in my job at the Tracy City Elementary School, I enjoyed so much working on the many bulletin boards scattered throughout the building. One Valentine’s Day, my friend Edwene Johnson and I decided to put the words “Love is....” In the center of a large board and then pass out small paper hearts to folks around the building. We requested that they finish the statement above and write it on their paper hearts that would then be placed on the board. We got all kinds of completions, “Love is bluebirds, turnip greens in the spring, grandchildren, payday, God, Jesus....”. While talking with Annie, I thought of that board; if she had been given a paper heart to write on, it would have read, “Love is my Granny.” She would have written it without hesitation, and with all the love she could muster in her heart.

Annie was born out of wedlock, so she was from birth, and some years after that, living in her Granny Catherine’s house. A bond was made between the two that could never be broken, not even by her grandmother’s death. The house is no longer standing; the weather and time took its toll on the old house, and it crumpled. Annie recalled the three rooms in the house: a “big room” that she called the living room, a kitchen that was entered by stepping down into it, and a bedroom off from that room. The heat came from a fireplace in the living room and from the wood cook stove in the kitchen. Annie loved that old house.



If the inside of the house seemed comforting and warming to Annie, then the outside was just as big a part of her life. She loved the two huge, room-size boulders that the mountainside and weather, many years before, had carved out just for her pleasure. Nature had placed one in her grandmother's front yard, and the other one, Annie's favorite, had been so generously positioned at the back of the house. It was on this one that she "played house" as a little girl. All we older females had those little niches where we built our playhouses, using pieces of broken glass as our dishes and small tin cans as our pots and pans. The huge outcroppings of roots from the large oak trees in our yard were the furniture for my playhouses. Annie, like me, conjured up furnishings for a whole house without ever going shopping or spending a penny. Near her playhouse rock, the water ran out from under the bluff in a steady stream. The family had harnessed the water into a pipe on which an empty bucket could be hung, and not long afterwards, it would be filled to the brim. "Oh, the water was so good," Annie said smilingly, "But I hated to see washday come." There was always so much work to be done.

Annie's grandmother always had a garden where crops were raised and preserved for meals served during the long winter months. She recalls the piles of compost made throughout the winter from "manure" and other organic material; in the

spring it was spread out over the garden plot to enrich the soil. We talked about “bugging” the “taters” and beans; the beans especially had to be kept free from the little pests. We both remembered carrying cans with a small amount of “coal oil” in them; we picked off the bugs one by one and dropped them into the can which was better than “squashing” (*mountain talk for squashing*) them between our fingers. Near the garden was a trellis with a beautiful rose bush wandering in and out of its form as though each stem with its buds was looking for just the right place to position itself. It was through the garden area that the path meandered, coming up from the cove below, enabling its inhabitants to have a shortcut to the plateau above. Annie recalled that the Garners were frequent travelers on the path. They would stop at the water bucket, drink the cold water, and “rest a spell” before finishing the climb to the top.

Hog killing days were indelibly etched into her memory. She raised her hands to cover her ears tightly; this was to let me know just what she didn’t like about those days. The squealing of the pigs was more than the small child wanted to hear. Strangely enough, I could fully understand the feelings she was having. My grandfather was the assigned “hog killer” when I was a child. He had a barn in Monteagle across 2nd Street from our backyard, and this was where the event took place. I, too, did not like to hear the pigs beg for their lives. But Annie and I also remembered how wonderfully satisfying the fresh, fried pork smelled and looked when a full platter was placed on the table before us. Once we placed the first bite into our mouths, the squeals of the poor hogs seemed muted by hunger, then enjoyment.

Annie was about three and a half years old when her grandfather Richard Mooney died, so she really doesn’t remember him. She, her mother Flora, her grandmother Catherine and a cousin Preston Mooney were living at the old home site in 1920. Life was not easy for Catherine, but Annie said that her grandmother was a worker. One thing Catherine did to earn money for her family was baking goods and selling them to the Sewanee Military Academy’s young men and later to Saint Andrews’ students. She was an excellent baker. The schools furnished her with tables to display her baked goods, and the boys could hardly wait to get their turn to buy her fried apple pies, cupcakes and various other sweets. Another means for earning much needed monies to help keep her granddaughter clothed and fed, was picking up lost golf balls around the golf course. It wasn’t an easy job, for the balls were well hidden in all kinds of settings. They particularly liked to hide under the dried leaves. Catherine, being the caregiver for her young granddaughter, would take Annie on the searches with her. She had a special hollow stump near the golf

course that she used as a playpen. With the little girl in hand and a quilt for her comfort, she would make her journey from the side of the mountain up the path to the golf course. When she came to the stump, she lined it with the quilt and placed her beloved Annie inside the stump for safekeeping. With her eye constantly on Annie and the stump, Catherine filled her pockets and aprons with old golf balls that would be sold back to the golfers.

At first, Annie's grandmother took her to school in Sewanee, but as time went on, she can remember living with her mother Flora in a large building which had several other families in it. This may have come about when her grandmother married Andrew J. Lawson in 1926 bringing about a change at home. She thinks maybe she and her mother were living near the "Negro quarters" since she recalled playing with the little black children and having so much fun. A pleasant memory, but one of a child's wonderment, was of an elderly black lady who was baking; soon she placed a large pan on top of her head and walked away. That was an unusual sight for Annie.

When Flora Mooney moved to Coalmont in Grundy County and married Garvin Morgan, a coal miner, Annie went with her mother. She wanted so badly to be with her grandmother throughout all the things that were happening in her life, but she made the best of new surroundings. The Morgans lived near the Bonnie Oak Cemetery. Annie remembered playing around the old Dick Sanders School. For fun, she and her friends pulled the rotten lumber from the outside of the building. Some of her best friends were the Phipps children who lived near her mother's home. I asked her if she attended high school, and she laughingly said, "One day, and I didn't go back! I wanted to be with Granny." I asked her why she didn't like high school, and she answered, "It was so different."

In 1934, at the age of eighteen, Annie Mooney and James Foster walked up the road a "little ways" in the Midway community and got married. They both worked at Saint Andrews School. For a little while, they lived with her beloved grandmother who was getting on up in years by this time. Granny Mooney, a hard working, determined and caring woman, died in 1936. Annie didn't recall this sad event; maybe it was because she didn't want to admit that it had happened. She and James had three children: Wanda, Jimmy and Sue. Jimmy and Wanda live near her, but Sue lives in North Carolina. Her children are wonderful caregivers and are there for her at all times. Annie worked at Saint Andrews School for nearly forty years as a baker; she had an excellent teacher, her granny, and learned her trade

well. Her husband James passed away and was buried in Winchester. “I wanted him in a place where he would be taken care of,” she said.

Some years ago, Annie’s son Jim found a smaller, more suitable house for her in Monteagle, a town she dearly loves. I enjoyed every minute of my visit with her. Although she had a little trouble with her memory, it didn’t affect her graciousness. What a friendly, happy soul! If “laughter is the best medicine,” then Annie and I were feeling great that day.



Annie Mae (Mooney) Foster today.