

Gracie: A Mother's Day Tribute

By Bobbie Smith Bryant, Jefferson County

I vividly recall my blind great-grandmother, Gracie (Wrather) Smith, babysitting me when I was a little girl. Mama Smith had glaucoma and had lost her sight in her early teen years. Like any bratty kid, I remember testing her blindness more than once. When I was about 4, she was rocking in her chair in the living room, and I was standing quietly close by. I pulled my dress off over my head to see if she'd fuss at me to put it back on.

She didn't.

Another time, when she was baking biscuits, I moved the flour from where she had placed it. In feeling around the countertop to locate it, she knocked the can of vegetable oil over and made a huge mess on the counter and the floor. I didn't move anything away from her ever again.

When I think about how limited she was in her ability to see, I am amazed at how well she coped. Mama Smith was married to Raymon Smith, and together, they raised two sons. She was an excellent cook and always had a beautiful garden. She planted, picked, prepared, canned, froze, and put up fruits and vegetables all by herself.

Every week, she packed water to fill up her wringer-type washer and tubs to do laundry in the washhouse, which was separate from their house. She did her own cooking and house cleaning and washed dishes in the sink. She baked a pound cake in a tube pan every Saturday to have for the Sunday family dinner.

Her family dinner table was permanently altered when their youngest son, James, was killed in World War II. My Uncle James was a young man of 24 who had started a family before leaving for France, never to meet the daughter he left behind.

Mama Smith visited his grave every week until she was bedridden and couldn't. Even though she couldn't see it, his military portrait remained the focal point of her living room, a lasting reminder to our entire family of his short but significant life.

Family was the most important thing to Mama Smith. She often had us stand before her so she could feel our heads and touch our faces. She ran her hands over our

shoulders and arms, feeling for our muscles and to find out how tall we'd grown. She'd brag to everyone she spoke to about how pretty or handsome we all were.

My favorite memory of Mama Smith is from Mother's Day 1978. I was 19, and she was 82.

The sun sparkled against a cloudless sky as she made her way up the front steps of the Kirksey United Methodist Church, escorted by her eldest son, my Granddaddy Hal. Once inside, she touched each pew as she went along, finding her seat while listening for familiar voices.

Young children came clamoring into the sanctuary from Sunday school classrooms. Finally, she heard the familiar voice of her great-grandson, "Can we sit with you, Mama Smith?" he asked. "You're better," came her quick and happy reply.

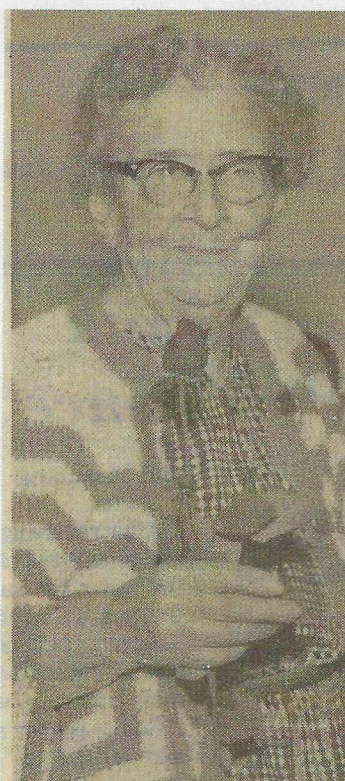
As her son, grandchildren and great-grandchildren squeezed into the pews around her, the service began. She joined the others, singing along with the small country choir. Afterward, she listened intently as the pastor gave an inspiring sermon on the virtues of womanhood.

When the service ended, the pastor noted that there were many mothers in the audience, but he wished to recognize the oldest mother in attendance, Gracie Smith. Placing her feeble hand on the pew in front of her, she slowly stood up, surprised by the cheers and applause that erupted, obviously pleased to be so honored.

We have a wonderful photograph from that day. Mama Smith has a huge smile. Holding a long-stemmed red rose,

she was clearly proud of the family crowded around her.

In her attitude, she showed us how to be brave in the face of adversity. In her grief, she showed us how to persevere after suffering a soul-crushing loss. In her actions, she shared with us the ways to honor those we love. In her blindness, she saw each of us with her heart, a spirit filled with love.



Mrs. Gracie Smith
-Oldest Mother present

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