

Q&A: 99 Years of Salley
Madeline Bailey

On a Wednesday evening, before I call Mrs. Vertie Lee, her grandson Todd tells me, “I think one of the most impressive things about my grandmother is the fact that . . . she came up from such humble upbringing and if you think about it, in the 1920s, a woman from a small town like Salley that actually got a scholarship to college is worth something. That just didn’t happen everyday.”

My great-great aunt, Vertie Lee Yon Salley, turned 99 last August. She lives in Salley, SC in the house that she has lived in for the past half century. Salley is her place. She has never left in her 99 years (except for her one year of college on scholarship). I dial her number, transporting myself to this place with her.

At first, she’s confused by my call. She asks her health aid (one of the many health aids with her around the clock) who I am. Eventually, she understands who I am, replying with the typical relative phrase: “I haven’t seen you since you were a little girl.”

Q: I called your grandson Todd last night, and he told me that you got your finger cut off when you were a little girl. Can you tell me about that?

A: [laughs] Honey, I was at my grandmother’s house. It was on a Sunday afternoon. We were small and we were out in the backyard. We would use a tree on the hill and let some one else crack the nuts. Well, he said if I hold it on the block, he would crack it. Well he threw the axe across his back and came down with the blade and got my middle finger. He went across it to the palm and then got one part of the next finger. They found the other finger but they couldn’t find the one that was partially cut off so I don’t have that finger. Everyone thought the chickens might have eaten the half of my other finger.

Q: When that happened, did a doctor come to your house, or were you taken to the hospital?

A: No, I was at my grandmamma’s honey, down in the country and the doctor was in Springfield—another town five miles away—and my uncle jumped on a horse and rode to there. There weren’t hardly cars then. Anyway, he got to Springfield and told the doctor and the doctor came. My mother sat on the back porch and held my arm up so it wasn’t bleeding. I came up there and sat on her lap and he [the doctor] sewed by finger back on. We didn’t know if he would have to come back or not because I could lose a whole hand. So, it worked out good and I’ve been happy to have it. It wasn’t a good feeling but I’m thankful to God for his help. I was maybe around five or six years old around that time.

Q: Todd told me that you played a lot of basketball in high school. Do you have any outstanding memories from that time in your life?

A: I played on the first team in high school and it was a good basketball team. And I, also, was the winner or receiver—or what ever you want to call it—of the highest average of any person to ever graduate from Salley High School, which is quite an honor for myself. On my 95th birthday, they announced it and I had a party. I didn’t know it was happening and they got on the announcements. Gene got on the announcement, your granddaddy, and said “Vertie Lee had the highest average of any student that ever graduated from high school there.”

Q: When you were growing, what did you and your friends do for fun?

A: Oh well honey, we jumped the rope and played hop the scotch and sock marbles. Also, when I was growing up, I picked cotton. It was hard work. I picked over 200 [pounds] a day and I don't know how much [money] we got but it wasn't much. We got paid by the pound and it all depended on you.

Q: Todd also told me you were appointed postmaster in Salley. Did you enjoy working as the postmaster?

A: Yeah, I got the postmaster's position and I enjoyed it. I got personal letters from President Truman. I love people. I got a good order sometimes and sometimes, they weren't so good. I worked until I retired and I enjoyed it. I was thankful to get it because back then there wasn't work to be found [for a woman] unless you worked in a sewing room. I couldn't sew but I made a good bit of money at the post office too. I'd say I was about 30 when I started working and then stopped when I retired.

Q: Todd told me that—except for a couple of years—you lived in Salley your whole life. What made you stay in Salley and what do you love about Salley?

A: Well, that's kind of hard to answer. That's where I was born and grew up and fell in love and married my childhood sweetheart. I don't know if I made too good of a choice with that but we stayed together for 60 years.

[Vertie Lee gets confused. The heath aid explains to me that her husband didn't follow Mrs. Vertie Lee's Christian morals which led to some problems in their marriage. She tells me not to include this in the paper. Hastily, she switches the subject, telling me to ask the next question.]

Q: I know you were alive during the Great Depression. How was your family directly affected?

A: Well, we had to—oh shucks, what's it called—oh yeah, we had to ration a lot of things. We only got a little bit of sugar. We tried to make what we could. We got stuff from our garden because you know, we had a garden back then. Daddy had a big garden and what ever we had, we ate. We didn't have a variety of things to eat like you would now. We killed our own livestock and everything too.

Q: Compared to now, what are some of the main differences in families today?

A: Respect, for thing one. [laughs]. I think we enjoyed home life and one another a lot better [then] too. People weren't running all over the place and all. They were more of a family than they are now. People now don't hardly spend time together. I've never seen people live together [without being married] so much as they do today.

Q: As a family, what did your family do together back then?

A: I'll tell you about all we did back then was visit people. I lived way out in the country. We always went shopping on Sunday and would catch the train to Barnwell. We didn't have a car or anything. The train came by twice a day, once in the morning time and once at night time—so we would go into town to get a bite to eat and visit.

Q: Looking back over your 99 years, how does it feel to know you will be 100 next year? How do you feel looking back on all your memories?

A: Well, some of them—looking back—I don't really care about. I could have done [some things] differently. I would have done a few things differently. There are things I wish I would have done, but it's too late now. But I thank the Lord for what I was able to do and what he gave me the ability to do with my health. That's about the sum of it.