

THE JOY AND LOVE OF BEING RAISED BY MY GRANDMOTHER, ELIZA EATMAN

By Mary Harris-Robinson

This narrative is told from the unique perspective of a grandchild who was raised by a grandparent. The author honors the life of her grandmother by describing the special bond they shared.

First, I would like to explain why I was raised by my grandmother. I'm the fifth child of eight children born to Bennie Harris and Willie Pearl Hardy who are divorced. Frenchie, my oldest sister, was allowed to live with Grandma Liza until she was able to help Mom with chores around the house. Then one day Mom decided it was time for her to come home to stay. On that day Mom and Grandma agreed that the next child born would be allowed to live with her forever. *And guess what! I was the lucky one.*



Grandma Liza was my greatest inspiration in life. She taught me great family values, to love mankind, not to do anything to anyone that you wouldn't want done to yourself, and foremost and forever to always love thy self. She often said, "If you follow this path in life, you shouldn't have any problems in the future."

Although Grandma only received a 7th grade education, her knowledge and wisdom

went far beyond that. She had a strong faith in God, and we attended Hopewell Baptist Church every Sunday, which helped to keep our family strong.

As I recall, I never went to a doctor for a physical examination or a major illness. But, I don't recall being very ill, and Grandma had an herb or home remedy for any and everything that ailed us. Every morning after breakfast, I was given a tablespoonful of liquid cod liver oil to help my eyes, teeth, bones, hair, and fingernails grow strong and healthy. At the end of summer, I had to eat a bulb of fresh garlic, which grew in the corner of the front yard at my parents' house on the same property, to cleanse my body. The garlic would expel any worms that may have entered my body by my going barefoot in the summer. During the Christmas Holidays, I was given SSS Tonic (Three S Tonic) to prevent anemia, and Black Draught Syrup to cleanse and regulate my bowels. And last but not least, and the one thing that I absolutely hated, I had to swallow a tablespoonful of castor oil and be given a small stick of peppermint candy to prevent colds. If we did get a cold or slight cough, there was the old standby, Horehound Candy, to the rescue. Cold and cough were expelled overnight.

When I was five years old, Grandma and I would pick wild herbs from alongside the road and the woods on our 46-acre farm. She showed me what herbs to pick and let me carry the large brown shopping bag to put them in, a bag that I dragged on the ground because I wasn't tall enough to keep it from touching the ground. During the time we were picking herbs, Grandma would

always keep an eye out for dried sassafras root. We drank it as a tea, and it was very good in helping prevent colds. When we returned home, Grandma would wash and towel dry the herbs, lay brown shopping bags end to end on the pantry shelves, and spread the herbs out to dry away from direct sunlight because direct sunlight could affect the potency of the herbs. Once the herbs dried, she made labels for the Hellman's Sandwich Spread jars from cut strips of a small brown paper bag, put Mucilage LePage glue on the back of the label, and placed it on the jar in which the herbs were stored to keep them fresh and potent.

Grandma enrolled me in Johnson Hill Elementary School when I was five, and my teacher was a beautiful and lovely lady named Velma Goodson. This was an exciting time for me, because I would be attending school with the first grade class. Grandma had bought me new school clothes and shoes from the Spiegel, Sears & Roebuck, and J. C. Penney's catalogues, because we were not allowed to try on clothes or shoes in the department stores in town. Therefore, the school clothes that weren't purchased through the catalogues were made without patterns by Grandma and Mom from beautiful Dan Rivers solid, stripes, and plaid fabrics. Johnson Hill Elementary School was a school with one large classroom divided into 1st through 6th grade with two teachers. The other teacher's name was Mrs. Lula Thompson. We walked 2.5 miles to and from school in the sun, rain, hail, sleet, or snow. I attended this school from the 1st-6th grade where I was a straight "A" student.

Mrs. Goodson chose Herman Walker and me to compete for the A.G. Gaston Spelling Bee Contest at our school. I rushed home from school that afternoon to show the spelling bee book to Grandma and to explain what I had to do to win the competition. She looked inside the spelling bee book and said, "Those are some mighty big words in there. Grandma may not be able to pronounce them." But because it was for me, she was ready to take on the challenge. The next afternoon after school, Grandma and I sat in the swing on the front porch, she on the left

and I on the right. We started the swing in motion, going back and forth. Grandma started to pronounce the words in syllables in the spelling bee book starting with the A's, and I began spelling them. She pronounced and I spelled until dusk. We did this routine for several weeks, and then it was time for the big day. I felt great the day of the competition and had a lot of confidence in myself. I won the competition! Again, I rushed home to tell Grandma and to thank her for helping me win. She gave me a big hug, lifted me off the floor, kissed me on my cheek, and said, "I'm so proud of you. We did it!" I told her that I would have to study more and harder because I would be going to the A.G. State Competition in Eutaw, Alabama.

At the state competition, I took fifth place, and although I didn't receive an award, Grandma and I were very, very proud of my accomplishments. She had spent many long hours in the afternoons, sitting in the swing on the front porch pronouncing words from A-Z for me to spell. Also, Mrs. Goodson, my teacher, was very proud of me. She said, "Although you didn't receive an award, you gained great experience, poise, and confidence in yourself." I will never forget my feelings after I was eliminated from the competition. I walked proudly off stage with my head high and my shoulders erect. I felt I had done my best, and I felt great!

I enjoyed being raised by grandmother, because she gave me mostly anything that I asked her for and it didn't spoil me. She was always there for me. I enjoyed playing kids' games with my sisters and brothers, like jacks, paddle ball, hopscotch, jump rope, hide and seek, marbles, softball, and basketball. Life on the farm was very quiet and serene, but when I grew older there were lots of chores to be done on a daily basis: feeding the chickens, hogs, horses, mules, cows, and dogs; collecting eggs from the chicken house; milking the cows; working in the vegetable garden; weeding and hoeing the cotton and corn fields; and later, at the beginning of fall, picking cotton and pulling corn. The chores seemed endless.

When I was eleven years old and in 7th grade, Grandma enrolled me at Carver High School in Eutaw, Alabama. Grandma was a manipulator, but I didn't realize it at the time. She said, "If you continue to get good grades and be on the Honor Roll throughout high school, I will pay for you to eat in the school cafeteria every day." I agreed quick, fast, and in a hurry, because to eat in the cafeteria was a special privilege. Otherwise, I would have to carry a brown bag lunch every day.

While playing Hide and Seek in the cotton field one Friday afternoon with my brothers and sisters — Frenchie, Mary Helen, Bennie, Juanita, Thomas Clay, Leona, and Willie Lee — I got ragweed pollen deep inside my inner ear. As I was returning to Grandma's house from playing with my sisters and brothers, I lost my equilibrium and everything seemed to be going around in a circle. I was unable to balance myself when I walked. My sister, Juanita, happened to see me struggling to balance myself, and she ran and caught up with me. As I held on to her right shoulder, she was screaming at me, but I couldn't hear a word she was saying. I held on tightly to her right shoulder as she and I walked to Grandma's house. Grandma was sitting in the swing on the front porch, and Nita began to explain everything to her, but I was unable to hear any of their conversation. Nita went home and Grandma took me inside, laid a quilt across my bed, and using hand gestures asked me to lie down and go to sleep. I slept until early Saturday morning. During this time my father was working a construction job that required him to work out of town from Monday through Friday. He always returned home early every Saturday morning after working all week. Grandma arose early Saturday morning to make breakfast for her and me. After breakfast, she gave me a bath and helped me dress myself so we could be ready to go to the doctor when Daddy arrived home. When Mom gave Daddy the bad news, he immediately came to Grandma's house and took us to Dr. Joe P. Smith's office, which was only open for a half day on Saturday. The doctor checked my ears, explained the problem to my father,

wrote out a prescription, and we walked across the street to Solomon's Drug Store to get the prescription filled. I had to put three drops in each ear three times a day, and every day at lunchtime Frenchie, my oldest sister, met me in the cafeteria to put drops in my ears. On the fifth day, I regained my hearing.

Grandma always stressed the importance of being on time to catch the school bus. She said, "If you can arrive at the bus stop at 7:05 a.m., you can arrive there at 7:00 a.m."

I arose every morning at 5:00 a.m., cooked breakfast for Grandma and me, did a few chores, took a bath, and got ready for school. We had a 40-minute bus ride to school, and the bus driver picked up several kids on his route to school. When school was out in the afternoon the students had to board their bus for the ride back home. High school was fun and challenging because I had made a commitment to Grandma to be on the honor roll throughout high school. I made new friends, was on the honor roll, and learned track and field, volleyball, softball and basketball. In the 9th grade I excelled in these sports, made the varsity team, and competed against other schools in our league for four years. The sad part was Grandma or my parents never had the opportunity to watch Nita and me compete because they were busy working the farm, and my father was busy working for Southern Foundry, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, a company that made several types of piping for building houses. Little did he know at that time that this job would cause him to have asbestosis, after working in those fine dust particles for 25 years.

When I was a sophomore in high school, the summer of 1962, I returned home from school to find Grandma sick in bed and Mom sitting at the head of the bed rubbing her forehead with a cold wet towel. I kissed Grandma and Mom on their foreheads, but I knew something was wrong with Grandma because she had a slight fever and was lying down. Grandma was a very active lady. I asked Mom what happened. She said, "Grandma had some bleeding from her

vagina, and she isn't feeling well. The doctor is on his way to the house." When Dr. Frederick arrived we had to leave the room. He checked her, gave her some medicine for the temperature, and asked Mom to bring her to his office the next day.

After he examined Grandma, Dr. Fredrick asked them to meet him at the Green County Hospital so he could do a biopsy. Grandma and Mom returned home from the hospital, and she said, "The doctor will let us know as soon as he got the results back." A few days later Dr. Fredrick returned with the results. That day is a day that stands still in time. I arrived home, kissed Grandma and Mom on their foreheads, and asked Mom about the test results of the biopsy. She said, "Grandma has terminal cancer of the uterus, and she will be going to the University of Birmingham Hospital for chemotherapy treatments once a month." I was devastated. I cried for several days, and asked myself, why? I didn't understand why God was taking my Grandma away from me when she was my *rock and pillar*. These questions flashed through my mind: What will I do now? How long does she have to live? Will she survive for my graduation? Grandma asked me to come and sit beside her bed. She assured me that everything was going to be all right, that God takes the good as well as the bad, and that God is watching over us, don't worry. I kissed her cheek and went outside and sat in the swing. I prayed for God to please take care of Grandma and make her healthy so she could attend my high school graduation. The treatment seemed to be working, because Grandma was still able to take care of herself while I was off at school during the day. She was able to attend my high school graduation in May 1964, where I was an honor roll Student from the 7th through 12th grade. I had fulfilled her dream and my dream.

Grandma passed away Wednesday, June 27, 1966, from cancer of the uterus. Being raised by my Grandma was the greatest thing that could have happened to me. Between the two of us, the unconditional love, family values, and bonding, we will always be inseparable in life and in death.

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