

Bill & Betty Melear

By: Laurie Searle • January 2005

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Bill and Betty Melear are long standing members at Providence Baptist Church and mainstays in the Rico community.

Betty was born and raised in Rico, GA. Her father, James Burnett Smith, and mother, Nora Blissett Smith, owned and operated the Smith's General Store at Rico and raised seven children: Joe, John, Harold, Virginia, Estelle, Betty, and Lucy. Their family lived in a large house on the hill behind Smith's store, close to Providence.

"It was a good time growing up with a large family," Betty recalls and has fond memories of simple pleasures like boiling eggs out in the pasture or riding across the river on the ferry.

"Daddy had the first car in Rico and used to take all of us kids to the ferry and drive us across the river," she said. "I used to get so nervous and excited, all at the same time."

Betty attended Rico Elementary School, Palmetto High School in the 8th and 9th grades and Campbell High School in the 10th and 11th grades. Back then that's as far as high school went, according to Betty.

One Saturday night when Betty was a teenager she went to a party at Jones Mill. Little did she know she'd meet her future husband there.

Bill was born in Newnan, GA, and later moved to Whitesburg, GA, with his family. His father, John Virgil Melear, and mother, Ludie Louise Bennett Melear, raised eight children: Florence, Raymond, Bill, Dorothy, Marvin, Kenneth, Edna, and Harvey.

Bill attended Newnan High School and worked for the Newnan-Times Herald during school and for a while after he graduated.

One Saturday night, he and a friend decided to crash the weenie roast at Jones Mill. He met Betty at the party and they started dating.

His family moved to Rico when he was 20 years old and by that time he knew he wanted to marry Betty. Her family insisted they wait until she turned 18, so they set their wedding date for September 20, 1941.



They both laugh when they think of their marriage at the preacher's home in Newnan. "All the folks from Rico came down and were peeping in the window when we got married," they recalled.

As a young couple they both held interesting jobs. Betty used to pack peaches in Newnan during the war. "My job was to pack the prettiest peaches at the top of each basket," she said.

Bill worked in the Newnan Cotton Mill and earned \$12 a week when they first got married. From that, Betty spent \$4 a week on groceries.

Around that time Bill also tried his first business venture, using his ingenuity and a little red wagon to sell cold Cokes for a nickel a pop. "During the peach harvesting season, I'd pack some Cokes and some ice in a little red wagon and take it up to the train station to sell to the workers loading the peaches," he said. "They loaded the peaches into refrigerator cars, so any time a chunk of ice chipped off, I'd put it in my wagon. If I was lucky, I'd only have to buy ice once during the day."

Bill's next job was with the US Navy and soon after he joined, he and Betty were blessed with their first child, Nora (Bonnie). Betty recalls a precious moment when Bill came home from the Navy with a special present for his young daughter.

"Bonnie was just a baby, no more than two years old," Betty said. "She was real bashful and when Bill came up the path, she hid behind the cedar chest."

He had the biggest Hershey bar you'd ever seen and said, 'Here sugar, I bought you some candy, I hope you like it.' Bonnie said, 'I don't like that kind,' and I burst out laughing."

With Bill out of the service and two more children on the way, Linda and Carl, the couple settled into their lives in the Rico Community.

They both attended Providence Baptist Church and served in many capacities over the years: Bill was Sunday school superintendent, minister of music, and deacon; Betty was a substitute Sunday school teacher, active in the Women's Mission Society, and hospitality director, responsible for finding a place for the preacher to eat dinner each Sunday.

Bill had an interest in farming so he took a few classes and tried his hand, and mule, at the plow for several years. He farmed land down by the Chattahoochee and was somewhat successful, except for the times he planted the same crops three times in a row, only to have them fail because the river flooded.

In 1955, Bill heard about a local farm that was being auctioned and decided to stop by. Although he hadn't intended to buy the 200-plus acre farm, the bidding on the property was so low, he asked a banker who happened to be there from Douglasville if he would loan him the money if he won the bid. The banker said yes, Bill made his bid, and he was soon the proud owner of the property, which cost him only \$35 an acre.

Bill had a few more interesting jobs working for American Thread, and then for Independent Life Insurance for 13 ½ years before taking on a job that made folks hungry at the sound of his name. In 1966, Bill bought his father's barbecue stand known as Melear's Barbecue.

The "stand" was really a restaurant located on Hwy 29 in Union City. While it was well visited by locals, great reviews soon made the restaurant a popular southern icon, as attested by politicians, celebrities, and hungry bicycle riders from East Point. Bill used to say, "A lot of people like to play golf, but I hit a hole in one every time one of my customers enjoys a meal."

Betty remembers the first time they had a really big catering job in Newnan, GA. "We intended to serve 10,000 people," she said. "We had a whole school

bus just for the waitresses, two trucks for the potato chips, five trucks for the meat, and more trucks for the bread, condiments, and drinks. The crowd fell short of 10,000 but we still managed to feed more than 9,000 that day."

In 1986, Melear's Barbecue ran a promotion to celebrate its 20 year anniversary. It rolled back its prices and served everything on the menu at 1966 prices. Bill and Betty expected a crowd, but they had no idea that folks would be standing in a line that stretched around the parking lot three times. Before the day was over, they had called everyone they knew to help prepare and serve barbecue.

Bill and Betty retired in 1989 and sold the restaurant in 1997. Today they still live in the house they bought at auction nearly 50 years ago, near their family and friends in Rico. They are blessed with 3 children, 4 grandchildren, and 5 great grandchildren. They also attend Providence when they can and stay active in the church through home visitation. On a recent visit, they recalled one of their favorite memories growing up in Rico.

"On the way to church, a bunch of us would pick a watermelon from a neighbor's garden and put it in the creek to ice down. All during service we'd be thinking about how hot it was and how cool that melon would be. On the way home, we'd crack open that melon and have a big time. We really enjoyed those simple pleasures."

Bill Melear Plowing the Back 40



Bill Melear: July 8, 1921 ~ August 2, 2005