

Reflections From the Past: Hidden History from Southeast Tennessee

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This article was originally written and published in January, 2009 by Joe Guy. Joe D. Guy is a nationally published author, newspaper columnist, and historian residing in McMinn County, TN. Permission received to reprint this article and photograph of Myrtle Webb.

MISS MYRTLE

Miss Myrtle Webb bounced over miles and miles of rutted dirt roads, first in a horse-drawn carriage, then in a T-model Ford and still later, a Desoto. She traveled through nearly every McMinn County community she could, going from house to house to offer her services. She always spoke with the woman, the wife, the mother. She made observations of the family's quality of life, how clean the yard and house was, if there was a garden spot, if there were some livestock, and she offered helpful suggestions.



"I can show you some things," she would say. "Things you can do to make your life better, and maybe even make you some extra money."

Sometimes, her offer was refused. "This is the way we live, and we're happy with it," some of the women would say. But most were curious, especially when it came to the possibility of making some extra money.

Oftentimes a neighbor would be called over, and Myrtle would talk to both women at the same time. She gave them books and brochures, if they could read. But always she demonstrated, showed them how to clean, how to take a little paint and spruce things up a bit. "You have to know how to cook and sew," she would say in her shy way. And when she talked about making money, many times she started with chickens. Chickens were cheap, were easy to care for, and they laid eggs. Extra eggs could be sold, and people would trade things for them. If the poor farm wife was already marketing her eggs to local neighbors, then Myrtle would smile through her round glasses and make other suggestions. They could plant flowers, and learn to arrange and sell them. They could learn to make little gardens for their families and sell the extra produce, learn to use a sewing machine to make and repair clothing, or how to better bake or can goods. If the family had a milk cow, she told them where they could sell their freshly churned cream and butter. A woman could provide for her family and make money, Myrtle said with her toothy grin, brushing back her unruly brown hair. She can earn her own money for things for her family, and things for herself. It was a novel idea, a rural woman making things, and making her own money. In the 1920's, a little money could go a long way, especially for a poor farm woman.

Myrtle would stay as long as necessary, answering questions, making suggestions, doing her job as the County Home Demonstration Agent, part of a national project to improve the lives of rural families during the first half of the Twentieth Century. The project focused on an underused resource: hungry, hardworking, rural wives with time on their hands and a desire to better themselves. Every year, she petitioned the McMinn County Court to give her additional funds to operate and to buy the supplies she needed to get the women started. Sometimes she taught groups of women things like how to make a cotton mattress, rather than straw or feather ticks, and after sleeping on the cotton people said they thought they had "died and gone to heaven". She organized ladies into "Home Demonstration Clubs" so that their skills could be practiced and passed on. Other times she coordinated sessions presented by instructors from the University of Tennessee. Not only were the women learning and doing, they were meeting each other, and growing out of the old expectations of a rural farm wife: of only cooking and cleaning, having babies, and hauling wood.

When the Great Depression came, Myrtle was both an educator and a savior. She taught families the skill they could use to get by and to survive: how to grow their own food, make and mend their own clothing and other necessities, how to repair things, to re-use and recycle

items so as not to waste anything, and how to get what they could spare off the farm and to market for a small profit.

With the coming of the Tennessee Valley Authority and electricity, Myrtle adapted her demonstrations to include advice on cooking with an electric stove, how to use a refrigerator or an electric iron. County Demonstration Agents like Myrtle organized community markets where the women would gather and offer their products for sale, a "Women's Farm Market". People came to buy and trade, and wives were able to provide additional income to their families. Homes improved, lives improved, and all the while there was Myrtle, from 1919 until 1954, traveling over every hill, through every valley, every road in the county, teaching, demonstrating, and encouraging. By the time she retired, after 35 years of work, she had driven over 280,000 miles and improved the lives of thousands of men, women, and children. She had nurtured and established 4-H clubs for children, and for the adults, 23 Home Demonstration Clubs were meeting in McMinn County. Her outstanding work was met with high honors from the State of Tennessee and the National Home Demonstration Agent's Association.

She never married, and lived in her later years with a niece in Knoxville. She died in May of 1980 and was buried in Newport, but her work in McMinn County with her easy smile and her glasses dusty from the roads, should not be forgotten. Miss Myrtle Webb's dedication allowed her to personally change people's lives for the better, and she remains one of those special people whose quiet work made McMinn County what it is today.

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