

Family Visit Yields Genealogy Discoveries of the Kelley, McGee and Bowen Families

By: Gary E. Gray

Saturday, July 20, 2013 was not only the 44th anniversary of Neil Armstrong's famous first step onto the moon, it was also a day of family genealogy discovery and wonderful story telling from Thelma (Puddin) McGee Kelley, a lifelong resident of Bernice, Louisiana. Along for the visit were out of town guests from Houston, Texas, Puddin's niece, Dean and her son, Gary Gray. Also in attendance for the visit were niece's Barbara Talbot and Tawana Bennett. I had been wanting to visit Puddin for some time as I knew she was not well and she had asked us to come so she could share old family photographs and memories.

At 91 years young, Puddin is a burst of sunshine and energy. Despite several health problems, her mind was as bright as ever and her cheerful wit and charm came across just like it always had. I asked her how she got the nickname, "Puddin" and she said after she was born, her father said that; "She is so sweet, we are going to call her 'Puddin'" and the name stuck for a lifetime. Later in life after she became a grandmother, Puddin said that the grandchildren started calling her "Puddin" (pronounced kind of like "Put-On"), so to all the grandkids, she was their "Puddin". She said one of the very young grandkids could not pronounce "Puddin" and started calling her "Puddin" instead! She loved being called that by the grandchildren!

Puddin loves to tell a good story and share old family photos. Puddin told how she and her husband, Major Charles Kelley, (US Army, Retired) first met and started dating. She said Charles had a convertible and he, along with his fancy car were the envy of girls all over the Parish. However, she said Mr. Kelley had an eye for her as she showed us pictures of themselves in their younger days. Kelley looked like a movie star of his day with dark hair and debonair features while Puddin looked right at home by his side, rivaling any Hollywood actress of her day. Together, they made a most handsome couple and the two soon fell in love and married, she said. Puddin said she felt so special riding in Mr. Kelley's convertible and those experiences are some of the most memorable and fun of her life, she said. They were young people having fun!

After WWII started, Kelley joined the US Army and served in the US Army Air Corps. After the war, Major Kelley remained in the Army for a while and they would ultimately live in various countries around the world, including Africa and she said she loved those experiences. However, eventually they came back from abroad and settled down and began to start a family. They would have 4 children, Pete, Kim, Kathy and Kasey.

She also shared her early life as a child and her memories of her parents and grandparents. Her parents were Dink Barnett McGee and Willie Belle Bowen. She said her father owned a butcher shop for a while when she was a young girl and life was pretty good until he left them to move to Mississippi after he was caught making moonshine whiskey during the prohibition years. Apparently he owned a moonshine still and the local Sheriff caught on to what he was doing. Instead of being arrested however, he left town and lived out of state for several years. She said those were hard years for the family because during her father's absence, he started another family out of state, leaving their mother to support the 4

children without any financial help from their father.

Before Dink left however, Puddin's oldest sister, Hazel, eloped and married Cecil Tubbs when Hazel was only 15 years old. Puddin said her father was so upset that he gathered all of Hazel's belongings, carried them out to the front yard, poured gasoline on them and burned them with the exception of a favorite hat that Hazel had received as a Christmas present. Puddin said she hid the hat, hoping to save it for herself! She smiled as she told that story, and said that she loved that hat! This was a sad, yet funny story of how an angry day turned into saving something special from her beloved sister. As time passed, she said her mother and father eventually loved Cecil and found out first hand what a good man he was. Cecil and Hazel would have 6 children, 3 boys, Larry, Jimmy and Hugh and 3 girls, Dean, Tawana and Barbara. Hazel and Cecil had a long happy life together, staying together until Cecil passed away in 1984 from heart failure.

Her mother was a good, yet strong woman, she said. After Dink left and divorced Puddin's mother, Willie Belle had to care for and support the four kids by herself. She said some years were very lean, and even food was hard to come by. The Bowen grandparents built them a four room house for \$300 but it did not have a fireplace. Puddin said they almost "froze to death" during the winter months each year but that they were happy to have a home to call their own. The Bowens would also bring food to them to help them as some years, the crops did not do well. The first year after her father left, a \$400 loan was called in to be repaid on the crop and her mother did not have the money, so she had to surrender the entire crop with the exception of the turnips. Puddin said she got so sick of eating turnips, but that was mostly all that had that year. Willie Belle never remarried, instead, focusing her time on her children.

Regarding her grandparents, the McGee's and the Bowen's, Puddin said she did not know much about the Bowen side of the family, other than the fact that they were good Christian people who helped found the Baptist Childrens Orphanage in northwest Louisiana and did help provide for the family when needed. Willie Belle's brother, James Howard Bowen, gave the first dollar in 1898 to help found the children's home. A dollar in those days is roughly equivalent to what \$60 would buy today and money was much harder to come by in the late 1800's. As such, it might not sound like a lot, but a dollar in 1898 could buy enough food to feed the family for perhaps a week or longer. James died young though at age 23 in 1901, so that part of the story is very sad. Puddin could not remember why or how he died, but thought it was some sort of illness that he caught and never recovered from.

Puddin was close to her McGee grandmother though, Leticia Jane Reedy McGee. She said Grandmother Leticia was great fun and loved to play games with the kids and was always keeping the children laughing and having fun. Leticia was so beloved that her name carries down to this very day in the names of her descendants.

Puddin also showed pictures of her Bowen and McGee grandparents and these were pictures not yet documented in the family tree. Looking into their faces for the first time, I saw my past as well as family resemblances of people still living today. Like Neil

Armstrong who bravely explored the surface of the moon all those years ago in 1969, I felt like I was on new unexplored territory, discovering my roots. And, there is so much more yet to be found!

All in all, I was able to document and photograph over 300 old pictures for the family tree project. This family tree can be found on WikiTree.com, the "Wikipedia" of genealogy. It is free and open to everyone to use and please feel free to look up the McGee's, Bowen's, Tubbs', Autrey's and Kelley's, amongst other family lines. My goal is to build a family tree that is accessible at no cost to the entire family via the Internet. I am preserving old family photos by scanning or photographing them and then uploading the scanned images to the WikiTree family tree. I encourage family and friends to contact me if they have old family photographs they wish to be included in the family tree. These are family treasures that should be enjoyed by the entire family!

Sadly, not long after our visit, Puddin passed away on August 8th, 2013. She knew she did not have long and she wanted to tell her family stories and share the photos she had of her life and her family. Knowing her through my own life, I can say with all certainty that she loved God first and

then her family and friends with a kind and loving heart. She will be missed by all who knew her.

About the author: Gary Eugene Gray was born to parents Ronald Eugene Gray and Melba Dean Tubbs Gray ("Dean") in 1960. Dean's mother, Hazel, was Thelma McGee Kelley's older sister. Gary lives in Spring, Texas and is married to his beautiful and loving wife, Paula and they have one child, Connor, who is 11 years old. Gary can be contacted via email at garyegray@gmail.com Major Charles Kelley



Major Charles Kelley and Thelma McGee Kelley - "Puddin"



Cecil and Hazel McGee Tubbs Family circa 1952 in or near Bernice, Louisiana. From left to right: Unknown Lady, Tawana Jean Tubbs, Barbara Cecile Tubbs (on bicycle), Melba Dean Tubbs, Hazel Dean McGee Tubbs, Cecil Henry Tubbs, Mary Pearl Autrey Tubbs (Cecil's mother) and an unknown couple.



Circa 1901 - McGee Family. Front Row - from left to right: Elizabeth "Betty" Bush Autrey McGee, baby being held by Betty is Glynn Frank McGee, James Franklin McGee, girl in front of James is Gerie McGee, Marion Newton McGee, Leticia Jane Reedy McGee, Nettie Lou McGee, Claiborn Ralph McGee or Marion Gus McGee.

Second Row - from left to right: Unknown Male, Unknown Female, Emma Pearl McGee, Wilber Newton McGee, Dink Barnett McGee, Marion Gus McGee or Claiborn Ralph McGee.

Picture taken near Bernice, Louisiana