Miss Millie, Beaufort County Sheriff

Lenora Perry interviews the charming Mrs. Mary Ella Jarman.

By Lenora Perry and Brandon Barnette

Introduction

By Lenora Perry

No one today would be surprised to read that a woman held the position as deputy sheriff, but suppose it was 1932. Mrs. Fenner
Bradford Cutler finished her husband’s term as interim sheriff, the only woman to ever hold that position in Beaufort County.

Known in the county as “Miss Millie,” she was a woman of many interests. She was a farmer who owned and operated the family farm following the death of her husband in 1932 until her death in 1989. She was an active Democrat and also a very prominent and influential member of First Christian Church, Washington, NC, from 1918 until her death. She was a dedicated wife and mother. With little formal education and growing up in a time when public schools were still in the formative years, “She was the kind that learned by living,” said her daughter, Mrs. Mary Ella Jarman.

Mr. Armstrong, fellow journalism student Brandon Barnette, and I had the opportunity to relive the life of Miss Millie one cold afternoon in January, 1998, at the home of her daughter, Mrs. Mary Ella Jarman, in Washington Park. Mrs. Jarman’s home is surrounded with plants and flowers that her mother had so lovingly tended in her later years. She was a very delightful interviewee whose love and admiration for her mother was revealed as she entertained us with stories and information about her mother, close family members, and friends. Mrs. Millie’s love for people and for her church was evident through the expressions of her daughter. Mrs. Jarman expressed a gratitude for her upbringing and said, “We were church going people. We loved God and wanted to do good for folks, and I’m grateful for that.” Throughout the interview, we were aware of the lasting effects of this very important, influential woman through the words of her daughter, the pictures that she shared with us, and the memorabilia in her home.

Life: Your mother was a sheriff?

Mrs. Jarman: Actually, my mother was not sheriff. My daddy had been elected sheriff, and he was sick and did not get to finish his last term of his last year. When he died, the Beaufort County commissioners told mother to come in there and finish the remainder of his term. Now, Captain Jim Harris, who had been sheriff before Daddy, came in, worked in there and helped her out. She was acting sheriff. She got the salary for it.

Life: When was your father elected sheriff?

Mrs. Jarman: Daddy died in 1932, and he had been elected for two years, I think, before he died. He had been a deputy sheriff for many years, but he was sheriff only this one time. This was a two-year thing. And he died in May, I think it was. And mother stayed in there from May, whenever she went in, until December, the end of the year.

Life: Do you remember some activities he was involved in as a deputy sheriff?

Mrs. Jarman: Well, that’s the way he was hurt. He was shot one Saturday night. He and Mr. Marslender, another deputy sheriff, and two federal officers were looking for an escaped convict, and they got word he was down in Pinetown. Daddy loved everybody in the county, and he thought everybody loved him too. He said not a person in the county that would harm him.

Life: Was the convict local?
F.B. Cutler, who later became sheriff, is pictured with his young wife Millie, who followed him as sheriff at his death.
Mrs. Jarman: No. But they got word some way that he was hiding out down in Pinetown, and so the four of them went down there. Daddy was going in the front door, had the pistol in his hand, and was pushing the door open. Mr. Marslender was going in the back. The light came on Daddy, and the man shot his arm and hand. As a result of that, he was very ill and he died in May, two years later.

Life: Was he able to work any at all from the time he was shot until he died?

Mrs. Jarman: Yes, he went down there. I can’t remember when he was shot. It was in the fall sometime, the year before, I guess, because I was in college. I was home then, but he was in the hospital for months or longer. I can’t remember how long. Oh, it was a terrible thing to me! I don’t know that I blotted it out, but I know I didn’t teach my first year because I stayed home because Mother was helping Daddy.

Life: After he passed away, then your mother became the acting sheriff?

Mrs. Jarman: Mother went in there. The commissioners had a meeting and voted to do that. See, then they didn’t have any insurance for people that worked for them at all. I guess they wanted to do that to help Mama because, you know, she had never worked at anything. They probably wanted to do that to see that he got his money for the rest of that year.

Life: When your mother became sheriff, did she have some adventures?
Mrs. Jarman: All she did was stay in the office. She did the taxes. We had the collection of taxes in there. That was before they elected a tax man.

Life: Did she wear a gun?

The Cutler daughters, Mary Ella and Mildred, spent their youth at the old family homeplace at Midway.

Mrs. Jarman: NO! Neither did Capt. Jim. He was sitting over there. They had deputies that did that.

Life: I guess the same deputies continued on?

Mrs. Jarman: Well, no. Capt. Jim Harris was sheriff when Daddy worked with him, and his son also worked with him. I forgot what his name was, George Harris, I believe, and he ran for sheriff when Daddy did. Capt. Jim was retiring, but he did not win, so
he went somewhere else and worked. He did not work with Daddy, but Mr. Hodges, I believe that man’s name was, did, and Mr. D. W. Lupton. I know Mr. D. W. Lupton that we thought so much of was a deputy. He was a friend of Daddy’s.

*Life:* How did the community take to your mother being sheriff?

*Mrs. Jarman:* You know, that is funny. I don’t remember at all. As far as I know, they though it was fine. I never heard anybody say anything about it.

*Life:* What did she think of being sheriff?

*Mrs. Jarman:* Well, she wanted to get the money. She didn’t like bookkeeping at all. That was really hard for Mother. She had never done anything like that. She was married at 17. She had never had any responsibility like that. I think everybody respected Mother. I don’t think that was any problem at all.

*Life:* When you father was deputy sheriff before he was wounded, do you remember any other exciting things that happened?

*Mrs. Jarman:* See, I was young, and every time he had to go out anywhere at night, I always remember how scared I was, and I couldn’t go to sleep till I would hear him come in. He never got hurt anymore. See, Daddy lived in the county since he was a child. He knew everybody. He never was afraid, and he thought everybody loved him just like he loved everybody else.

*Life:* He was never wounded or harmed?
Mrs. Jarman: No! Except that one time.

Life: Do you remember if he ever had to arrest any of his friends or anything like that?

Mrs. Jarman: No. One thing I remember Mama telling me, the only thing I ever remember Mildred telling me about. See, I was away at school a lot of that time. Daddy brought a little girl home to stay with us. It was one night or two nights. Her father was being tried for being the father of her child. That was in court. And she had to go to court, and Daddy brought the little girl home to stay at our house. He told Mother, "You know, it's just she doesn't have anywhere to go, and she is just a child." That really impressed me.

Life: That was a very kind act.

Mrs. Jarman: Daddy was a very, very good-conscience man.

Life: So he really took sympathy on this girl?

Mrs. Jarman: Yes. He always did. But I remember that. That impressed me.

Life: Have you always lived in Beaufort County?

Mrs. Jarman: I've always lived in Beaufort County. Our farm is down there on the Belhaven Road after the Bath-Belhaven junction. It's about a half-mile down there on the left. We moved to town when I was a little girl. My daddy wanted to be where we
Miss Millie was very active with the Christian Woman’s Fellowship, pictured here in 1932 at the First Christian Church of Washington, N.C.

[Mary Ella and her sister Mildred] had school. See, we didn’t have public schools then like we do now; they had elementary schools and that’s all. And he wanted to move to town, work part time, and be able to run the farm too. And so first he was in real estate, and then later on he worked with Captain Jim in the sheriff’s office and served papers; they had taxes and everything in that office. All that time he ran the farm. Then when Daddy died in 1932, my mother ran the farm. We had tenants, and my mother furnished the things that they worked with. Mama didn’t really
know anything about the farm. But Mama didn’t let anyone know she didn’t!
She was a very independent somebody, and I’ve said time and
again, you can’t believe the things that she did. I remember after
I was a grown girl and was married, Mama would get up at five
o’clock in the morning and fix coffee and a piece of toast and
take her car out there in Washington. And anybody she saw not
working, she would say, “Are you going to work today? Would
you like to work in tobacco today?” And she would carry, some-
times, five people down there to work in tobacco or cotton or
whatever they were working in, right by herself. Can you imag-
ine! And she would go back in the afternoon and pick them back
up and bring them back home.

Life: So she was a very independent, strong woman?

Mrs. Jarman: Independent and very determined. She didn’t want
anyone to think she couldn’t do anything that she tried. And she
was successful at what she did. I mean by that, mother always
knew somebody to talk to about various farm operations. When
she got ready to sell some timber, she knew Tomp Litchfield here
in town. She called up Tomp and said, “Tomp, I want you to
come talk to me. I want to sell some timber.” See, he ran Moss
Planing Mill, and he had been in our home a lot. She knew him
well enough; she said, “I want you to come tell me somebody to
come look after my timber for me. You know I don’t know too
much about it. I want somebody that’s real reliable.” Mr. Smith
took charge of it and did that for mother. She ran the farm even
though she was blind.

Life: She was blind?

Mrs. Jarman: Mother was completely blind the last seven years
of her life. She lost the sight in one eye about two years before
that. When we had her birthday party on her 90th birthday, we
had it at home. We went back home, opened up everything, and
had her birthday party. She could see with one eye then, but she
was blind from about 90 until she died in 1997. But she never let
go of anything. Her mind was always very good, I mean, a lot
better than mine. She didn’t forget anything. She kept her check-
book and everything she had in her room and in her pocketbook.
When she would want me to write a check, she said, “Mary Ella,
get my pocketbook and write a check.” And we did those things
for her. When she got ready to have her income tax done, I would
take it to the fellow who did it. He would laugh about Mama and
say, “I had better do this exactly right. I better cut down a little
right here or do something ‘cause Miss Millie will raise the cane
[laughing]!” But she looked after everything. She did not want to
turn loose of anything. She did not rent her house. She came over
here and lived with me from 1972 until she died in 1989, 17
years. After Daddy died, I was away at school, and Mildred [Mary
Ella’s sister] was away at school. She didn’t like to stay by her-
self, so she fixed the little apartment downstairs, and she rented
that out always. But she never let her house go. I’d say, “Mother
let’s go ahead and move our stuff out and rent that house out.”
And she’d say, “No, we might go back sometime.”

Life: What year did you leave the farm and come up here and
build that house on Charlotte Street?

Mrs. Jarman: Oh, we didn’t live there first. When I was seven,
we moved to town in 1918. That’s when Daddy would [laugh-
ning] bring me to school mornings when it would rain down there
Miss Millie Cutler is shown here with her grown daughters, Mary Ella Jarman (center) and Mildred Daughtridge.
at Woodards Pond. He decided he wanted to move to Washington where we both would be in school – the same school. That’s when we came to town in 1918. We lived in the house two doors from where the other one is. And Daddy bought that house and then my granddaddy finally came from the farm where he lived with Mama and Daddy, or Mama and Daddy lived with him until we moved to town. He didn’t want to come to town with us. He stayed in the house, and we got some people to tend the farm and move into the house, but he didn’t like it, so he came up here to live. He bought that lot where Mama and Daddy built that house (Mama’s house now) and gave it to Daddy. Then Daddy built that house [in town] when I was 10 years old in 1921.

Life: Did she continue to run the farm while she was the sheriff?

Mrs. Jarman: Yes. She kept that going. But, you see, everybody that lived there tended the farm. I remember Daddy telling Mother while he was sick in bed one day, I remember hearing this, “Now, Mama, you be sure to tell them to get that tobacco planted before May the something.” I don’t remember when it was. It was a time that everybody said that they had to have their tobacco planted. And he told her things like that, you know, when he was living. And she had very good people living there always.

Life: So while she was sheriff she was also operating the farm?

Mrs. Jarman: Yes, but she didn’t have to go down there [the farm] everyday or anything like that. It was not like you paid people to work for you by the day. The tenants paid people to work for them in the tobacco, and then they would settle with Mother. I don’t know how they did it. I have no idea how they did
it, but the tenants paid people to work for them on the farm. They picked cotton, or they primed tobacco. Anything that they did, they paid for that themselves. Then they sold the tobacco and got the money and Mama got a certain percent of it, I think.

*Life:* Was this share cropping?

*Mrs. Jarman:* Yes, it was. Now, after Woodrow Perry gave up farming, he bought a place on our farm and built a home, as did Ollie Cutler, who also farmed with her.

*Life:* After your Mother left her position as sheriff, how long did she operate this farm?

*Mrs. Jarman:* Until the day she died.

*Life:* Oh, really!

*Mrs. Jarman:* Yes, she did. You see, Mother was not really down sick except she might get up to go to bathroom and fall, and then she would have to be in the hospital two or three days or a week. In 1972 she had three heart attacks during that year and never had another heart attack as far as I know. It was in 1972, I think it was, and she died in 1989. Now, she had angina, but as far as I know, Mother was never in the hospital again with a heart attack. She managed everything; but, you know, when you rent out your farm to somebody, they tend the farm. You don’t even have to go down there to look at it.

*Life:* Yes, ma’am.

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*Mrs. Jarman:* But as long as people lived on our farm and tenanted the farm, Mama went down there. She would go talk to them. She would tell them whatever she wanted, and they would answer her. Mama always got along real well with all of them and loved them all just like they were her brothers.

*Life:* You said that your parents moved so you could go to school. Where did you go to school?

*Mrs. Jarman:* I went up there at the high school. See, the high school was the only school in Washington. I was living here in town then and could go to school here. They had a public school here from one through twelve or one through eleven. I only went one through eleven.

*Life:* Where was Washington High School when you went to school?

*Mrs. Jarman:* Washington High School was on the corner of Bridge and Second Street. That building has not been torn down so long.

*Life:* When did you graduate?

*Mrs. Jarman:* I graduated in 1927.

*Life:* What do you remember high school being like?

*Mrs. Jarman:* You mean discipline and that kind of thing?
Miss Millie was famous for her stylish hats, shown here in Nov. 1974.

Life: Yes ma’am.

Mrs. Jarman: It was very, very good and very quiet. There were
boys who misbehaved. They would shoot paper clips on a rubber band, you know, but it was not like it is now! See, I taught school too.

*Life:* Here?

*Mrs. Jarman:* Yes. My husband died in 1951. My husband died one month before he was 40 and I had been 40 the month before. I was not teaching. I had a little boy seven, and we were building this house. So I started teaching the next year, and I taught until I retired in 1972.

*Life:* And you said you started when you were 40.

*Mrs. Jarman:* Yes, I started back when I was 40. So I was very fortunate. I always had a job.

*Life:* Any well known local people you remember teaching?

*Mrs. Jarman:* I’ll tell you somebody I did teach. Do you know Howard Chapin?

*Life:* Yes, ma’am.

*Mrs. Jarman:* I taught him down in Aurora when I was teaching down there.

*Life:* Looking back at your mother, you mentioned that she was a very strong, independent woman. What would you say were the major influences that she had on you?
Mrs. Jarman: Well, I just don’t know how to say. You know, I’m not a bit like my Mother. Mother was always very active. When she was a young married woman, when we moved to Washington, she became a member of the older women’s [Sunday school] class. It was not older women then; it was younger women then in Sunday school. Mother worked all the time for that Sunday school class. We were building our church, and I can remember when Mother and Mrs. Rosa Roberson and some of the other women would go to the tobacco warehouse when it opened in the morning. They would stand at the door and beg tobacco from the people that would bring their tobacco in. The warehouse man would give them some baskets to put the tobacco in. They would put it in the basket and then go get another basket. They would put it on the floor and sell it, and that would go to the church. I also remember when I was a little girl, we had cards that were marked off like bricks, and mother would get me two or three and put me out in the street to sell the bricks for ten cents apiece, and that money went to build the church.

Life: Which church is this?

Mrs. Jarman: That’s First Christian Church here. Mother was a strong, very strong person in helping build the church.

Life: Your mother sounds as if she were a strong figure in your home?

Mrs. Jarman: Mother was the lady of the house, I tell you! She kept her checkbook, you know, until she had that stroke. She had a stroke standing right up here. She went to church that day and went to Mildred’s to eat lunch. She was not sick, but she had a stroke, a massive stroke.

Life: She sounds like a lady that has a very strong sense of what is right and wrong.

Mrs. Jarman: She did, but Mother was very strong about what she wanted to do and what she wanted done, and everybody kind of did that. My husband and I lived in the house with my mother in a little apartment upstairs, and my sister had that apartment downstairs, and we all lived together after we got married. For a long time Mother told all of us what to do [laughing]!

Life: It was her house, huh?

Mrs. Jarman: Mother just ran the house. She always told everybody around there what to do. I don’t mean she was domineering, but she did it in such a way that you knew what was what! Now, she didn’t twist Daddy around. I don’t remember that she twisted Daddy around, but, you see, Daddy was 28 when he got married and Mother was 17, and he thought she was just the prettiest thing he had ever seen. He was very proud of Mother. He always was. She was a good looking woman, and she always dressed well. I thought she loved to dress well. She was one of the first ladies in Washington to bob her hair and one of the last to stop wearing hats. She loved her hats. Her personal weakness was HATS! In her older years she took art with “the seniors” and learned to play bridge, which she enjoyed with her friends. She also loved yard flowers and shrubs and had a “green thumb,” as her yard showed.
*Life:* Did she continue to be active in the church throughout her life?

*Mrs. Jarman:* She went every Sunday. She went to church every Sunday except when she was in the hospital or some special thing, you know.

*Life:* So she went to Sunday school also?

*Mrs. Jarman:* She went to Sunday school as long as their class lasted. It was called the Hope Circle Class, but they were all dying. Mother lived longer than any of them in that class if I’m not badly mistaken. The Hope Circle Class was a very big part of Mother’s life. Those women were all close. When you work together, you get close. They helped build the church.

*Life:* Was she also active in the Christian Women’s Fellowship [CWF]?

*Mrs. Jarman:* Always, always. And you know that not many of your age [forties] joined the CWF. Younger people just haven’t. But when I got married, there was no question. Mama said it’s time for you to join CWF, and all of us did that. These younger people all work. Of course, I worked, but I worked at home; and then when I went to school, I was a member of the night group. We were always church people. We were there. We used to have church at night you know, Sunday night, and we always went to church, always. I thank the Lord for my heritage because we were church-going people. We loved God and wanted to do good for folks, and I’m grateful for that. We tried to teach our children the same thing. Mother was a strong influence on our children. I had
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Miss Millie's matriarchal strength was still strong in her latter years.
one son, and my sister had a daughter. Mother always was a very strong influence. They both built a very strong relationship with Mother, and she was always real liberal with them. I mean, when she had any money, she always would give them some, and when they were in school, she helped buy the first automobile either one of them had. Mother did things like that.

Life: How long did you mother live after your father died?

Mrs. Jarman: Daddy died in 1932. That was the year after I finished college and Mama died in 1989, so that was almost sixty years.

Life: She didn’t remarry?

Mrs. Jarman: Mother never seemed to be interested in remarrying. She had married so young herself. My sister [Mildred] was 15. Mother actually had a good time growing up with Mildred, because, you see, I was gone to college and teaching. She and Mildred went together. Mother always went to the dances and chaperoned and things like that. When Mildred was coming along, Mother actually had a real good time with her growing up.

Life: Besides the church, what other influences did your mother have on your family?

Mrs. Jarman: She was a very strong Democratic. There are three things we should stress about Mother. She was a very active person in the Democratic Party, active in her church, and thirdly she was a good farmer and always had the respect of the people who worked for her. As long as her health permitted, she was also active in civic affairs. She worked with Edmund Harding one season for the tobacco market. I remember, too, that she volunteered as a hostess in the Bonner House at Bath in the summer.

Life: She will always be remembered as the first woman sheriff.

Mrs. Jarman: Well, not many people living now remember that. That was way back then.

Life: Where was your mother from? Did she tell you about her early life?

Mrs. Jarman: Mother was born in 1892, and when she was a little girl, they had no school around. She was from Hobucken. Have you ever been to Hobucken?

Life: I haven’t that I know of.

Mrs. Jarman: It’s an island, I guess. [Hobucken is a small community, not an island, east of Aurora on the Pamlico Sound.] Well, anyway, the way they went to school was the parents would get together and pool money and hire somebody to come and work with their children about three months at the time, and whoever they hired would stay with the people in the neighborhood. They would have school about three to four months at the time. That’s the way my mama went to school. Her daddy died when Mother was about 13, I think, and one year I know Mother’s sister sent her to Kinston to a boarding school. I guess it was through high school. Mama was probably in the eighth grade or ninth grade or something like that. She was about 14, I guess, or 15. I really don’t remember how old she was, but that’s all the formal school that Mother had. Mother was self-taught.
Life: Do you think she was well educated?

Mrs. Jarman: I don’t know if you call it educated or not, but I never asked Mother a word to spell that she couldn’t spell it. I mean, she was the kind that learned by living. She took advantage of everything that would be any help to her. In running the farm if she had a problem, she always had somebody she would talk to that would get her straight on what she wanted to know, and she was lucky enough that she held onto it during the depression. We still own it now although we have somebody that rents it. She did not want to let go!

Life: Do you have some pictures?

Life: [Mrs. Jarman showed us some pictures of her mother.]

Mrs. Jarman: I told her this was the reason why she always wanted to go to church late so everyone could see her [laughing]! Mother was about the first woman in this town to cut her hair!
Students Lenora Perry and Brandon Barnette were enthralled with the stories of the only woman sheriff of Beaufort County.

Conclusion

By Brandon Barnette

Mrs. Jarman, as you can tell, was very proud of her mother. She gave us interesting insight into a young woman suddenly placed in a position of demanding responsibility, especially filling the position of sheriff at the death of her husband. The enormity of running the farm and making sure it ran smoothly was another challenge she had to deal with. But she showed her mettle and also assumed the responsibility of being the head of her family. Being an integral part of their lives gave her great pleasure and satisfaction. A very faithful member of the church, she played a role in developing the Washington Christian Church into what
you can see today on Second Street. Her religious commitment showed up in strong ethics concerning work on the farm. She treated everyone fairly, regardless of social position. She helped with Democratic Party political efforts in any way that she could. We here at Life on the Pamlico want to thank Mrs. Jarman for inviting us into her home to relive the life of her mother, Mrs. Millie Cutler. She was a great woman, who was successful during her life, even after the tragic death of her husband, Sheriff Cutler. Christ was on her side through many a trying time during her life, enabling Mrs. Millie Cutler to lead by example.