The Story of a Triplet, Three's Better Than One!

The triplets: Willie, Martha (r.), and Mary Browning

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Article by Jo Ann Ormond and Annasue Benfield

Introduction

With great anticipation, Dr. Roy Armstrong, Annasue Benfield, and I, Jo Ann Ormond, made an afternoon visit to Mrs. Martha Smith, my grandmother. This gracious lady of 89 years told us of her life as a triplet and also of her early childhood and marriage in the early years of the 20th century. Mrs. Smith's sense of humor, optimistic attitude, and strong character were evident in her reliving of memorable experiences.

A lady of small stature but great character, she welcomed us into the living room. Despite her years, she radiated a kind of impish, girlish vivaciousness. Sitting there with her for the next hour, we were enthralled with her stories of being a triplet, of misadventures driving an early auto, and of the hard but good life on an early 20th century farm.

Life: You've lived in this area most of your life?

Mrs. Smith: I was born in Martin County, just on the line and went to church in Washington County, just on the line.

Life: What did your family do?
Mrs. Smith: They farmed.

Life: Did you work on the farm helping?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: What were some of the things you would do?

Mrs. Smith: Well, I'd chop cotton, peanuts, anything I could do, and helped in the garden.

Life: What were the main crops you grew?

Mrs. Smith: The money crops were cotton and peanuts.

Life: Didn't grow tobacco?

Mrs. Smith: No, nobody down there grew tobacco in those days.

Life: Did you start working chopping cotton and so forth when you were real young?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: Did you pick cotton?

Mrs. Smith: Yes, once in a while when I wasn't working at home, I worked off, in the neighborhood.

Life: Did you have a real long bag and did you drag it along?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: Do you remember how many pounds you could pick?

Mrs. Smith: Sometimes I'd pick 80 or 90. I couldn't ever get 100, I was so slow, I reckon.

Life: Would they have something set up to weigh it?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. An old-timey old scale?

Life: Would you take the bag up there and hang it up?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: I guess you would get paid by the weight?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: Do you remember how much you would get paid? Was it so much a pound?

Mrs. Smith: Sometimes I'd make 50 cents or 75 cents a day.

Life: A day!

Mrs. Smith: Yes, you couldn't make much. They didn't pay anyone anything in those days. Not like they do now.

Life: How many hours would you work for 50 cents or 75 cents? All day?

Mrs. Smith: Pretty near all day.
Life: After reflecting on the hard work in the cotton fields, Mrs. Smith told of the closeness of her family, of the strength of her mother.

Mrs. Smith: Mama had twelve children. She had seven boys and one died. I didn't even see him. She had eleven to live, and my daddy died when I was seven years old. Mama had to take [the] lead then. We had a mighty good family. We all hung together. Mighty close.

Life: Your mother must have been a very strong lady.

Mrs. Smith: Yes, she was. She took us to church every Sunday that came if she was able to go.

Life: Moving from a discussion of her mother, we asked Mrs. Smith about the food they had to eat on the farm when she was young. What about the meat you had? Did you raise your own?

Mrs. Smith: We raised everything we ate. We had sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, rutabagas and banked them up in the straw and dirt.

Life: Where did you have them? Under the house?

Mrs. Smith: No. We had banks of them out under the shelter.

Life: Did you raise hogs?

Mrs. Smith: We had meat in the smokehouse from one year to the next. We had barrels of pork, ham, shoulders hanging up the whole year around until time to kill hogs again. We had about thirty cows. We didn't have to buy milk or butter or anything like it. We didn't have to buy anything to eat unless we wanted some cheese or something like that, or sugar. We had honey bees. I don't know how many gums of honey. Mama raised cane and made molasses and we had honey and molasses and raised rice.

Life: You raised rice?

Mrs. Smith: Yes, rice! We had anything we wanted to eat and a nice garden the whole year 'round.

Life: Did you make butter?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: Tell us how you made butter?

Mrs. Smith: Well, we'd shake it in a jar until it would come to butter.

Life: You'd just put it in a jar and shake it until it became butter?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. I mean that was good!

Life: How did you keep things cool or cold? How did you go about that?

Mrs. Smith: We had to salt up eve-
rything, meats and all, because we didn't have a refrigerator, no electricity at all. We had lamps to give us light.

Life: What about the milk? Would you have to get the milk you needed just for one day since you had no way of keeping it?

Mrs. Smith: We would keep it till it soured, and we'd make up biscuits with sour milk. That make good biscuits! We would skim the cream; it would be an inch thick on it.

Life: Did you learn how to cook from your mother?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: What did you like to cook the most? What were some of the things you could make that were real good?

Mrs. Smith: Mama would tell us how to cook it. We cooked most anything that came along: collards, turnips, rutabagas, meat, fish; and she used to buy herrings by the thousands and salt them up.

Life: How did you make those biscuits you were talking about? I bet she had to make a lot for eleven children.

Mrs. Smith: As soon as they got grown, they went off, the boys did, and got them a job. My oldest brother--his name was Warren; we called him Buddy--went off to college and worked himself through college!

Life: Where did he go to college?

Mrs. Smith: Ayden. He worked with J. R. Smith in Ayden and worked in log woods at night. He kept books for them. He would keep us in flour. He would send us a barrel of flour at a time. We had plenty of something to eat. He looked after us as if he was our daddy.

Life: And he was your oldest brother?

Mrs. Smith: Oldest brother and after he died--he died when he was 31--my next brother took over the farm. Louis didn't ever get married. He said he didn't have a chance to get married; he had to wait on mama after we girls left.

Life: Was Louis one of the triplets?

Mrs. Smith: No. Willie was his [the triplet's] name.

Life: How long did you stay on with your family before you got married. Did you stay there until you got married?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. We all stayed home, mostly, until we got married.

Life: When you got married, where
did you live?

Mrs. Smith: All the girls stayed home until they got married.

Life: When did you get married? Do you remember what year?

Mrs. Smith: No. I forgot.

Life: You were 21; you were born in '97. So it was around 1918 or 1917. Where did you live after you got married?

Mrs. Smith: We first stayed in the house with his mother and daddy in Hamilton, close to Robersonville [in Martin County].

Life: Did he farm?

Mrs. Smith: He had a nice big farm with two houses on it. We stayed in the house with his mother and daddy, three months, I believe. Then we moved to Old Ford. That's the first place we ever kept house.

Life: What size farm did you have?

Mrs. Smith: We had a two horse farm.

Life: You mean that's really how many horses you had? Did you have horses or mules?

Mrs. Smith: We had a horse and a mule.

Life: You had a one horse and a one mule farm. Did you plow any with the horse or mule, or did your husband do all that?

Mrs. Smith: My husband did it. I didn't ever plow because I was scared of horses.

Life: Is that the most he ever had, two?

Mrs. Smith: Yes, and after we quit farming, we moved to Washington [N. C.]. He started selling horses, cows, and hogs. He was a livestock dealer.

Life: Did he raise them?

Mrs. Smith: No. He went all over the county buying cows and hogs.

Life: Then he would sell them?

Mrs. Smith: He would sell them to the dairy or anybody that wanted to buy cows.

Life: Did he stop farming when he did that?

Mrs. Smith: Yes, he stopped farming.

Life: How long was he in that business?

Mrs. Smith: Until he died.

Life: He was in that a long time,
then. What did he say about a cow one time? A cow was one of the prettiest things he had ever seen?

Mrs. Smith: He liked cows. He would see them out in fields and stop driving to look at the cows.

Life: What about hogs?

Mrs. Smith: He liked hogs too.

Life: Didn't he work in Chocowinity?

Mrs. Smith: He'd go over there. His brother kept slaughter pens and worked near Chocowinity. That's where Frank would go to buy hogs or anything like that.

Life: When you were growing up, where did you go to school before you got married?

Mrs. Smith: It was called Angetown. Everybody that lived there were Anges. Mama's brothers and their children, all my cousins. Mama was an Ange before she got married. She married a Browning.

Life: How was the school? Was it stricter than now?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. We had prayer in the school. It isn't like it is now.

Life: Do you remember a typical day at school? What would be the first
Lewis Browning, Mrs. Smith's older brother
thing you would do?

Mrs. Smith: It seems like we would read first. Then we had first grade and second. We had history, arithmetic and writing.

Life: When would you say the prayer? Would that be at the beginning of school?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. When we first started.

Life: What was your best subject?

Mrs. Smith: Reading and writing.

Life: How many years did you go to school? Do you know?

Mrs. Smith: I didn't have much chance to go to school. I don't remember how many years--off and on, I reckon until I was 13 or 14.

Life: Did you go when you could?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. After all the sisters got married, we had to stop one day to the week to do the washing.

Life: How did you do the washing?

Mrs. Smith: On a board. We boiled clothes out in an iron pot--a wash pot.

Life: You had one of those corrugated scrub boards? I bet that was a job!

Mrs. Smith: It was. I started washing before I could get my hands around the sheet to wring it out.

Life: That was an all-day job, wasn't it?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. It would take just about all day.

Life: Did you buy soap or make your own?

Mrs. Smith: We made our own soap to wash with. Mama would buy sweet soap to take a bath.

Life: How would you make the soap? Do you remember that?

Mrs. Smith: I made soap after I got married with boxed lye. Put grease in these. We stirred it until it thickened up. We took it out, let it cool, and then cut it in big chunks, just like bars of soap.

Life: Wasn't that hard on your hands when you were washing clothes?

Mrs. Smith: I guess it was, but it cleaned the clothes.

Life: How many people would be doing the washing? You and your sisters?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. After a while we got so we made our own clothes. I
could make anything I wanted to make. We made suits of clothes.

Life: Did you have a sewing machine? When did you get that?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. It was an old-timey Singer sewing machine. Pedal kind. One of my brothers bought mama one.

Life: Oh, is that right? Jo Ann, do you have that machine?

Life: I have sewn on that machine. Wait, my brother's got it. You have to do some pedaling too!

Mrs. Smith: It sews as good as it ever did. It broke down one time; you couldn't thread the bobbin. I had a brother who worked on sewing machines and sold sewing machines. He fixed it. It never gave any more trouble.

Life: Did you sew with a needle and thread before you got the machine?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: Who taught you to sew on the machine?

Mrs. Smith: Mama had an old-time sewing machine what she didn't let it down. It stayed up all the time.

Life: Was your mother good at sewing?

Mrs. Smith: She couldn't sew as good as her daughters. We learned quick. We had an old-time organ. Mama sent my oldest sister to music school, and she learned how to play and she wrote down notes and taught all of the rest of we girls how to play on the organ.

Life: Did you spend a lot of time singing and playing the organ?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. We would all get around the organ at night. One of us would play. We didn't go off at night those days like they do now. We stayed at home.

Life: What were some of the songs you would play and sing?


Life: Did you dance any?

Mrs. Smith: No, I never did. Mama wouldn't let us play songs--had to be hymns. She didn't want us to play songs.

Life: What church did you go to?

Mrs. Smith: Free Will Baptist.

Life: Would you just go on Sunday? Did you have prayer meeting?

Mrs. Smith: We had prayer meeting, Sunday school, church, just like
they do now. Didn't have it but once a month at our church. When we didn't have it at our church, we would go somewhere else.

Life: When you were still young at home with your mother, what kind of transportation did you have?

Mrs. Smith: We would go in a cart drawn by horses. After a while one of my brothers bought a buggy. We thought we were something then!

Life: Did you drive the horse?

Mrs. Smith: No, I was always scared of horses. I don't know how come.

Life: Tell them about the first time you drove a car.

Mrs. Smith: My husband, Frank, taught me how to drive a car. Old Model T. He taught me how to drive it. One day his mama wanted to go off to Hamilton—to town for something. I thought she meant to drive the horse and buggy. No, she wanted to drive the car. I told Frank to go get the car out from under the shelter. He said no, that if I couldn't get the car out from under the shelter, I couldn't drive it. But he went and got it out though.

I forgot just because he wasn't with me. I forgot what I was doing. I never put my foot on the stopping gear. He jumped up on the running board till I got to the gate, and he jumped off so he could open the
Mrs. Smith's brothers Walter and John Browning, in WWI uniforms
gate. I didn't stop for the gate. I went right on, knocked it down, went right on over it and I looked back at him and laughed 'cause I saw he got off and was all right. I didn't stop, just kept right on going.

Life: You didn't hit him, did you?

Mrs. Smith: No. He jumped off before I stopped—to open the gate.

Life: You didn't need the gate opened?

Mrs. Smith: No. I knocked it down. When I got back, he had put it up. I reckon he put it up so his daddy wouldn't see it.

Life: Did he let you drive any after that?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. I kept right on driving. When he was with me, I wasn't scared. He said I drove too fast. After Deward [Mrs. Smith's son] was born, I drove. He nursed the baby, and I'd drive.

Life: Did you like to drive?

Mrs. Smith: Yes, I enjoyed it. It didn't scare me. I had a nerve then; I wasn't scarey like I am now.

Life: How long did you drive? Did you keep right on going?

Mrs. Smith: For a right good while.

I never got a driver's license. You didn't have to have driver's licenses then. Even after Deward got old enough to drive, you didn't have to have a driver's license. He drove at 14.

Life: You had a Model T?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. After that we got a Model A.

Life: How did you like the Model A?

Mrs. Smith: We thought it was fine.

Life: The Model T and the Model A—I guess you would have to crank it?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: What all would you have to do to start the car?

Mrs. Smith: You would just crank it up. You would get up front and go just like that [turning her arm].

Life: Could you do it?

Mrs. Smith: No, I couldn't do it. [When] we got to Hamilton, Frank told the storekeeper to crank it when I got ready to leave. He did.

Life: My daddy told me that you had to be careful with the crank or you could break your arm.

Mrs. Smith: Yes.
Life: Did anybody ever get hurt doing it?

Mrs. Smith: If it ran [turned] backwards or something.

Life: Mrs. Smith recalled that when she was a girl, she had a rather dramatic encounter with a rooster.

Mrs. Smith: After my daddy died, I was eight or nine years old. Me and Mary and Willy, we saw the big rooster in the stable. We got him and run him around and around. Having a big time. We run him to death. He fell down and died and we were scared to death to tell mama. So we said let's not tell mama we run him to death. So we told mama there was a rooster dead in the stable but we didn't tell her how we run him to death. Scared we'd get a whipping, I guess.

Life: Did she ever find out that you had run him?

Mrs. Smith: No. We didn't never tell her.

Life: I bet you ate him.

Mrs. Smith: No, we didn't. Mama threw him away.

Life: She didn't know what had killed him?

Mrs. Smith: She didn't know we'd run him to death. We should have been ashamed of ourselves. But it was fun for me.

Life: Mrs. Smith, were you ever in on killing hogs?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: How did you go about doing this? Would you use a gun?

Mrs. Smith: The men folks would shoot them.

Life: Then, would they string them up and bleed them?

Mrs. Smith: [First] They would pick all the hair off them. Then scrap them good.

Life: Did you put them in barrels of hot water?

Mrs. Smith: Yes, to soften hair, I reckon.

Life: At some point would they string them up and let them bleed?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: Did you have one person that was good at butchering them, come in and do that, or did you do that?

Mrs. Smith: We did all that--my brothers did.

Life: Would all the neighbors get together and do it, or would you do
Mrs. Smith: We would all do it. Sometimes we'd have somebody. We never had to buy beef. Mama had a yearling, she called it. When it got old enough to butcher and since we didn't have any way to put it up or save it—we didn't have a freezer—we would give some to all the neighbors.

Life: You said when you went to school, you had to come home and work. I guess you worked in farming too.

Mrs. Smith: We didn't have such long [school years]. We had six months, I think, of school. They didn't teach school like they do now.

Life: Do you remember when you first saw automobiles? I've talked with people who said they really scared horses.

Mrs. Smith: The horses were scared to death. They would run away if they saw a car coming, and some people would.

Life: Is that right?

Mrs. Smith: I had a girlfriend right next door to us—

Life: She was afraid of them?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. First time Frank went down on his car, she was on the road going home. She went off a running. She was scared to death of a car. Didn't stop to open the gate! She jumped over it!

Life: Do you remember the first time you ever saw an airplane?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: What did you think of that?

Mrs. Smith: We had a place up here where the old-timey fair ground used to be. They had an airplane that would go up and take people out to ride. That's the first one I ever saw.

Life: Did you ride it?

Mrs. Smith: No. We didn't want to go. I've always been afraid of an airplane.

Life: What did you think of it when you saw it?

Mrs. Smith: I thought it was a great thing. A funny looking thing to go up in the air.

Life: Did your husband go up on it?

Mrs. Smith: No. My son went up on a airplane in New York. After he got to selling cars. Boy he worked with got killed. The airplane crashed at the airport in Washington.
Life: When you were younger, what would you say is the main difference in the way things were back then, say in your teens, and the way they are now?

Mrs. Smith: There's so much difference now. The way young folks are doing. I never had gone to a show in my life, not till I was married.

Life: I guess people stayed at home more and worked more?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. We had something to do all the time.

Life: Do you think things were better or worse than they are now?

Mrs. Smith: I think people were better then. Now they don't care what they do. They don't think anymore about killing anybody than they do a hog now. You didn't hardly ever hear talk of anything like that those days.

Life: Why do you think that is?

Mrs. Smith: I don't know. The Bible fulfilling, I guess. You read it in the Bible, about people getting weaker and wiser. I think that's right here with us.

Life: Do you remember some of the ministers that preached—any of them in particular that were impressive speakers?

Mrs. Smith: Preacher Bass, he was a good preacher. E. B. Joyner. When I went to Everetts, Mary and I, I had a sister that got married and lived at Everetts. We'd go to see her. We had a whole lot of boyfriends because we were strange girls in the neighborhood. I went with some boy or another—Chester Harris, I believe. The church had run down, couldn't get anybody to go. Mrs. Smith, Frank's mother, was trying to build up the church, so Mary played the organ and I did the singing. We couldn't get anybody to sing in the choir with us. We tried to, but nobody would go. I stood up there and sung, and Mary played. That's the first time Frank ever saw me; I met him in the church. He asked preacher, after church was over, what girls was that doing the singing. He said, "They are my girls." Frank said, "I know that's not so." Because he knew the preacher.

Life: Was this preacher E. B. Joyner?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: How was his preaching? Was he loud?

Mrs. Smith: He was right good and loud; he was a good preacher. He preached the Bible.

Life: How do you like TV?

Mrs. Smith: I like it. Some things
Charlie and Mamie Ange, older sister of Mrs. Smith

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on there I don't care anything about. I look at preaching.

Life: Grandmother, tell us about when you were born, about being one of triplets.

Mrs. Smith: When we were born, nobody ever heard of three being born at a time in them days. People would come to see us who mama didn't even know.

Life: Did you ever try to fool people because you and your sister were identical?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. Mary had a little heart on her chain; I had a little cross on mine. A lot of times our boyfriends would go by that and we switched chains one time. We were out on the porch, and they looked and looked at us. They knew something was wrong. Till I stood there as long as I wanted to and I said, "Let's go." I was tired of standing there.

Life: Did you go off with your boyfriend or your sister's?

Mrs. Smith: I went off with the one I had the date with.

Life: Did you ever try to fool your mother?

Mrs. Smith: No.

Life: You couldn't fool her?
Mrs. Smith: No. She could tell us apart. Neighbors made out like they couldn't tell us apart. That would make us so mad. If they saw one of us, they would say, "Hey, Martha and Mary," so they would get the right one.

Life: When you were born, I guess your mother didn't have help from outside. Did your older brothers and sisters help?

Mrs. Smith: Yes, they did. She had plenty of help.

Life: How many days did babies have to stay in a dark room?

Mrs. Smith: Nine days.

Life: Did you and your sister have similar personalities? Did you act the same way, or were you different?

Mrs. Smith: There wasn't much difference. Mama dressed us just alike.

Life: Did you stay together a lot?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: Did you get along real well?

Mrs. Smith: Yes, all of us got along good.

Life: Were you born in a hospital?

Mrs. Smith: Mama never went to a hospital in her life. She stayed home at last days. I dreamed about it. I believe that was a sign. I dreamed I choked my baby to death and threw it at the end of the steps. The next day mama came and fell on the bottom step where I had thrown my baby and broke her leg. But she didn't go to the hospital then. We had the doctor to her. We put her on the bed with a flatiron hanging to her foot for a weight--so she couldn't move it--to try to keep it in shape.

Life: Did she ever get up after that?

Mrs. Smith: Yes, she lived five years after that. Everytime she got up, some of us would go to her and help her. We were scared she would fall.

Life: Do you remember how old she was when she died?

Mrs. Smith: Seventy-three or 74.

Life: Did a doctor come and deliver the babies?

Mrs. Smith: No, she had a granny woman.

Life: Did the granny woman go from house to house?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. She tended to the whole neighborhood.

Life: Well, she was almost like a
doctor herself.

Mrs. Smith: Yes. She went to see mama as long as she lived. I remember her.

Life: Your mother never went to a hospital?

Mrs. Smith: Never in her life.

Life: She did a lot of her doctoring herself?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. She planted something in the garden for medicine.

Life: I guess they used herbs.

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: How about the time you woke up and the snake was wrapped around your bed post?

Mrs. Smith: I was grown then. Me and Mary were sleeping in what we called a shed room. One morning I woke up and there was a snake wrapped around the bedpost at the head of the bed. I was getting ready to get up. I said, "Mary, there is a snake wrapped around the bedpost." We got out of there running. The snake went too. He uncurled and went out where he came in. There was a knothole and that's where he came in. We tore everything up in that room looking for him.

Life: I bet you covered up the knothole.

Mrs. Smith: We did. Mama said he was a chicken-eater snake.

Life: What color was this snake?

Mrs. Smith: He was kind of a speckled-looking snake.

Life: Did you know the difference in the snake, whether he was a chicken-eater or not?

Mrs. Smith: No, I didn't know.

Life: It didn't make any difference to you, did it?

Mrs. Smith: No. I'm scared of snakes anyhow.

Life: When you took your lunch to school, what did you take to eat?

Mrs. Smith: Most anything we had left over from breakfast. Fish, biscuits, meat, sausage--anything we had. We took it in a gallon bucket. Some of the kids would go in our bucket and eat about half of it.

Life: Did you take milk? How did you keep it?

Mrs. Smith: We didn't take milk because we were scared it would sour.

Life: Did all of your brothers and sisters eat together at school?
Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: Did you have someone that brought ice around to your house?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. Mama would buy ice once in a while. Wrap it up in a tow sack and put it under the house. It would last nearly a week.

Life: What would you use it for?

Mrs. Smith: We had tea once in a while. Sassafras tea.

Life: That your mother grew?

Mrs. Smith: Yes.

Life: Where did you have this picture taken of you and your brother and sister?

Mrs. Smith: In Greenville. Frank carried Mary and me both there, and Willie went on the train, I think.

Conclusion

Visiting Mrs. Smith was a pleasure we don't often have. A lady with such an optimistic outlook and with such a strong character is indeed an asset in this day and time.

Mrs. Smith's first-hand experiences and knowledgeable facts about the past were indeed informative and refreshing.
We listened attentively as Mrs. Smith told of the closeness of her family and the part the church played in her life as she grew up. This principle, a strong belief in God, on which our country was founded makes us wonder if we at this point in history have forgotten where we came from.

Our thanks go to Mrs. Smith for telling us about her way of life.

Jo Ann with her grandmother