Looking Back

With Annie Elizabeth Guthrie

Marcia asks Mrs. Guthrie about the past.

Article by Marcia Weatherington

Annie Elizabeth Guthrie, age 93, better known to her friends and relative as "Granny Lizzie," was the highlight of my day on April 26, 1983. In an interview set up by her
grand-daughter Charlene Guthrie, Dr. Armstrong and I, Marcia Weatherington, found "Granny Lizzie" to be a very delightful person. She lives in a quaint little house in Belhaven close to two of her children, who help look after her. We listened to her stories about her past, about farm life around 1900, about her married life as a farmer's wife, and later working in a crab factory in Belhaven. These stories revealed Granny Lizzie to be a very caring and charming person who cares more for others than for herself.

After Mrs. Guthrie received us into her comfortable living room, we gave her some copies of previous issues of Life on the Pamlico. But she told us that she had a difficult time reading since she had had a light stroke.

If I had a fellow, I wouldn't be able to read a letter. [It's] my eyes. I can't [read] since I had that light stroke. It hurt my head too, I think.

What we like to do in our magazine is talk to people who have lived in Belhaven, Bath, and other places around the area for a long time to try to understand how things were a long time ago.

A long time ago?

Yes, ma'am.

They were tough.

Have you lived here in Belhaven all your life?

No, not here. I lived, you might say, across the river, over to a place they call Winsteadville. Then they turned it from that
to Ransonville when they moved the post office.

When did you move to Belhaven?

In '45.

So you lived in Winsteadville most of your life?

I was born and raised there. I was born and raised on the farm.

Were your parents from there?

Yes. That's the area that they were from. All of them is gone; the family's gone but my sister, baby sister, and brother and myself. And I'm the oldest one of the whole shebang, 93 years old!

I can't half speak good; it bothers me. I've always been so active and worked and [had] movement.

When you were growing up as a young girl, did you all have electricity?

No, siree, by golly, we had to sit by the lamplight, kerosene lamps.

Like most folks around 1900, Mrs. Guthrie and her family raised all their food. This involved curing meat.

We had hog killings and had what we called a smoke house. We packed it [meat] down [in salt], cured, and stored it. The hams and all were took out when they were set, you know, cured all right and washed good and smeared in borax and molasses and hung up in the smoke house. And [we] built a fire under it; [we would] have a big square box
filled with dirt and build a fire in it, you see, and let it smoke, smoke it as long as it took to smoke it. And that was good ham.

Could you keep that ham a long time?

Yes, until we used it up! Well, a lot of times we'd get yellow cotton; that is what we used in the smoke house. I can't think of the name of it now. It was a thin material, and if we couldn't get that, we got flour sacks that we'd buy flour in; used to not buy it by the bag, you know, and wash them and wrap the ham into it and sew it around [the ham]. And to take care of it, keep a moisture to it, the molasses will. And that molasses made some good ham gravy!

When she was a girl, Mrs. Guthrie's family did not have refrigeration, so the smoke house was vital to their food supply. But they did own a cow.

So you had fresh milk everyday?

Yes.

Mrs. Guthrie described the way she, as a girl, made butter. She would pour milk into a bowl and whip it with a large wooden spoon until it turned to butter. Milk could be kept for short periods of time.

We had what we called the milk house. It was made like a little house with shelves in it. We strained the milk and put it in there. And the cool air would go, and the wind would blow through, you know, and make the air [cool]. We couldn't keep it too long when it was real hot. It would turn to clabber and sour.

In addition to making their own butter, the family made their own soap. (For a detailed description of this process see the Mamie Oden story in Life on the Pamlico, Spring, 1982.)

Did you work on the farm helping your father?

Yes, sree! I was my daddy's boy! I loaded many a log of wood down and laid it on mother's floor. Then we dug sweet potatoes and baked them, and rutabagas, pull them up and get the dirt off and put them in a bag, you might say, and bake them. And they'd be some kind of good! They keep [store] some kind of good in there [bag]. The sweet potatoes would too.

What kind of crops did you have?

Corn, cotton, and peanuts. My daddy raised peanuts and raised right many. He raised tobacco for a while, a few years. But it was so hard for poor folks that didn't have a convenient way to gather it.

What kind of transportation did you have when you were young? Did you all have a car?

Oh! No! No! When I was a young girl, we would all pile in a mule [drawn] cart, an old farm cart.

When is the first time you had a car?

I don't remember the year, but the first car I ever saw was owned by somebody and I went riding in it—by a Mr. G. A. Phillips in Washington, who's dead now. And he had a Reo. That was the name: R-E-O, Reo. That was closed-in the back, and there weren't
no more doors on the side than nothing!

He come down to see us once when he got that car. It was the first one he had got, and asked Papa if he could take us to go for a ride. Well, he wanted to take us ride, and my little sisters and brothers were anxious to ride. I wasn't crazy about riding in it because it didn't have any side doors. It felt like it was as safe as a buggy. And as we were on our drive, we went to a savanna out there, over there, a big savanna. And [in] them days the people, when they weren't using the horses, they turned the horses out, and they would feed where the grass was. And that horse saw us, and we ran him clean to that savanna! I never will forget it!

He'd never seen a car?

No! He was like me; he hadn't seen one!

Mrs. Guthrie was married on October 31, 1910. She and her husband remained in the small community of Winsteadville, where her husband worked for a man who owned a cotton gin.

The first gin he put in, the cotton had to be fed. What they called it [this process] I don't know, but it was where they separated the cotton from the seeds. And they had to feed it by the armfuls and take it and put it in the gins. And then they got better all the time. They met Mr. Frank Whitney, who built that big gin and put it in. And my husband operated it.

They got so then they'd go to people's farms and pick up cotton in a baleable wagon, a great big wagon, [which] had a side and spokes into its side all around it. And, you see, they packed a bale of cotton [into the wagon]. They'd hold a bale of cotton that was picked, and they carried it back. And they had put a pipe in, a big round pipe. And the air would suck it [cotton] up, you know, and they'd hold it right over that wagon and pull the cotton right out into the gin.

How long did your husband work there?

Oh, I don't know how long. He worked for Mr. Frank when he and I was married. They had a store, they had a saw mill, and they had a grist mill. They fixed corn meal, sawed logs and [had] the gin.

Mrs. Guthrie and her husband remained in Winsteadville from 1910 until 1945 when they moved to Beihaven. They raised their family in Winsteadville.

How many children do you have?

I have eight head of children. I've lost two. I've got five now. My oldest boy died; he is dead and raised a family too. All of my children are married. I got 21 grandchildren, 23 great grandchildren. And two more on the way!

Sewing, Mrs. Guthrie stated, was a vital responsibility of the women in the family.

We done our sewing; I didn't have but two girls and the rest was boys. And I taught my children, my girls, how to cut out and make their own things.

Who taught you, your mother?

My mother. In those days, you know, we wore
long clothes, in-step dresses. The first thing I made in my life—and I weren't very large—was my mother a apron. She cut out and made it the length of it and give it to me to fix. It wasn't exactly right, but I made it.

I used to sit down and sew for my children and make a bunch of aprons, something they could wear, in a material with checks, little tiny baby checks, blue and pink. And my husband's mother would go and spend a day or two with me and work the button holes and sew the buttons on because I had so much other stuff to do and she didn't. She was a widow and her husband died pretty early.

After moving to Belhaven in 1945, Mrs. Guthrie told us what she did when she went to work for the Blue Channel Crab House in 1946, working there for 21 years.

They had people to pick the meat out of the crabs and the bones. We had to get bones out of it after they picked it with the knife first. They put it in trays, and they had a vat that contained a solution that the meat had to be put into. And they come up on a belt, and they had to stand at that belt and finger through that meat and pick bones out.

They finally got larger belts and put it in a machine then that crushed the crab. But they had people to clean the crab and put them on a belt and conveyed to big vats and passed on up on a wide belt. It was a stainless steel belt, and it was full of tiny holes, you know. And the water run out of the meat when it run out of the vat and went on one side and not the other.

Speaking of the crab meat, Mrs. Guthrie was reminded of the good food she had when she was young, especially the vegetables.

We raised our vegetables, used to raise the prettiest butterbeans you ever saw. Collards, cucumbers, we put our pickles up in a keg and in a brine and let them shrink. Well, it would take that poison water out of them. We took them out and soaked them and put alum to them to make them crispy. Put them up in jars, and that is the way we kept our tomatoes. Put them in jars, glass jars.

Another thing they done in our neighborhood, too, was when they killed hogs, they give their neighbors a big mess of fresh meat out of every hog, to everyone, and when they killed hogs, they done us that way. That's the way it ought to be in a neighborhood too: to share with one another. But you don't see much of it now.

Why do you think things are not like they used to be? Why don't people share as much?

Oh, I don't know. Well, they's so much more to be seen, so much more entertainment and all like that. Transportation you call it. They got the planes and they got the cars and they got everything.

Charlene interrupted to point out that Mrs. Guthrie had won a Cadillac in a contest put on by Reader's Digest.

I sometimes think it is a hoax.

Have you ever driven?

No.
You never learned?

No, I never learned, but I have drove. My husband bought an old Model T and carried it home so he'd have something to go to work in. And he drove up to the house and let me [drive]. He sat in the car and made me drive it and turn it this way and put it to the end of the house. And I missed the stairs by an inch! I said if I got to worry like that, I'll never learn. Oh, we all had some good ole times!

Was the church a very important part of your life?

Yes, sir! My daddy was a Sunday school teacher I don't know how many years. And, of course, when we had church, preachings, on Sunday over there, we had a church full. And when they had children's day--what we call children's day, the first day of June--it was a family that lived at Washington taught us all sheets [of music] that would get up your programs, you know, and we would all practice on them until we learned them. And they'd have a performance on children's day.

Our organ in our church had to be pumped by hand; that was the organ in that church. And my husband was a young boy; he'd sit down and pump that organ. And the next one we bought was a second-hand organ--one without pumping it--was made like it ought to be. Was bought from the Methodist church in Washington, North Carolina.

What about the revival, what was it like?

Well, it was just the preachings we had on Sunday everyday at night. The preachers would come that had that church, you see, that had that charge, you see. They have charges. When they'd have a revival, of course, we all knew it. We all got ready for it. The preacher that would go, you could invite them to your home and feed them. I did after we were married, and Mama and Papa did too when they were going on down. My mother's friends would come on down and spend a while with me.

We're always interested in asking folks like Mrs. Guthrie to tell us what Christmas was like in the past.

Well, I was 14 years old before I even knew who Santa Claus was. And I was mad when I found out!

What would you get for Christmas?

Oh, well, now, there was some Christmases we were in such a bind that we'd get [only] candy and nuts, raisins and oranges. Mummum, oranges were really something! And apples--oh, boy!

Did your mother make toys? Did she make dolls for Christmas?

Dolls? No, she never did, but people in the neighborhood made them and gave them to the children and made their dresses and everything. I remember one night we went to church, and they had a great big tree. They put a great big tree up in the church and stringed it with some kind of a paper, colored paper, string it together like chains, a tin paper. And they put candles all over that tree and, boy, we [were] sitting there. Sister said to me, "Sissy," (she called me Sissy) "I don't see our dolls!" We had brought our
dolls and thought they would be put on the
tree, and we hadn't found them on the tree.
She said, "Oh, I don't see our dolls, do
you?" I said no, and when they called our name
we both got a pretty doll, but somebody else
made it.

Oh, I see.

Mama and Papa was gone one day and we
went in—we called it a little room—where we
had our clothes and we would climb up on the
chair and they had them in an old fashioned
valise, and we found our dolls. Boy, we
put it back just like it was! They used to
go to church at night, and they'd leave me
home with the babies. And we'd play like we
was keeping house, and sister would go off
and get one of mama's skirts and put it on and
sing. And, boy, we'd have the best time,
to be sure!

And another thing we didn't do was when
Papa was reading the paper, he didn't want
nobody a talking, and we'd sit there and
snicker. And sister would be full of laugh,
[but] we'd get up and go to bed because we
all had to go to bed.

We had two old bachelors that lived close
by, and they were just as good a cook, one
of them was, as a woman. He could make the
best lemon pie I ever tasted! And they done
d their own cooking. And they done like we all
done—farming, raised their vegetables and they
were men. They were good neighbors. One of
them made me a chair, and made a crib to put
the small ones in to sleep. It certainly was
a help.

How was it when you were young and going
to school? You remember when you started school?

Oh, my lord! We walked 2 1/2 miles to
going to school. I didn't get no further than
the 6th grade, what they called the 6th
grade.

You had to walk 2 1/2 miles?

Yes, sir. We had to walk 2 1/2 miles to
the school house and 2 1/2 miles back. Now,
that is what we had to walk.

What did you study at school?

Well, I studied spelling. After we got
through with the spelling, they put me in a
dictionary. It was a small sized dictionary,
and you had it when you learned to spell a
word and you needed to look up the definition.
I never was much in arithmetic. We studied
geography and history and Papa got me—
that was a little later that helped—books,
you know.

Papa could have been a preacher, a lawyer;
he could have been a doctor if he wanted to;
he studied right much. He read right much in
doc tor books. He'd buy 'em and study 'em.
When the children would get sick, he done most
of the doctoring.

Is that right! Did you have a doctor
in your community?

Oh, yes, we had a doctor.

Did they come to the house?

Yes. An old country doctor. But we
were so poor we didn't have a whole lot of
money to pay him. Boy, I think about the
prices of what doctors charge then and what
they do now!
A lot of difference, isn't it?

Oh, boy!

Would you ever pay the doctor with food?

When Charley and I got married, we raised some hogs, and my children, when they were up bigger, they'd have a lot of chills and things. And he raised the hogs, and the doctor would come to see them, and, then, when he settled up, he would give the doctor enough hogs to pay the bill.

The doctor would come to your house?

Oh, yes.

Did he have a buggy?

Horse and buggy. Then, when the cars come in, he got him a car. Dr. Jackson at Yeatsville.

Was he a good doctor?

Yes, sree! And my little doctor here [Belhaven] reminds me of him very much; only he isn't as large as he is, but he certainly reminds me of him.

When she was just a girl, her father had a telephone. But making a call was much more difficult than it is now. She had to ring the phone manually to contact the operator, who was in Yeatsville. She then had to tell the operator who she wanted to talk to, and the operator would ring them. Her number would be coded, for example, long-short-long, to distinguish it from other phones on the same line.

Then you would have several people on the same line?

Right smart.

Do you remember what you were doing when Pearl Harbor happened?

I weren't doing nothing, but I heard it on my radio. I had a big one, [one of] those first ones that come out, table radio. When I heard that, man, I went and sat down and listened. My son was aboard a ship then.

Your son was?

One of them. Was in the Navy.

When is the first time you remember seeing an airplane?

Well, I don't remember that, but I remember seeing a dirigible, they called it. The reason I remember that so well [was that] my oldest boy was six, and he was laying where he could look right out the window and he could see it coming this way and he hollered to me, "Mama, come here! Here's something flying in the air, and it looks like a cigar!" And there was a colored family that lived not too far from us, and their children said it was a hog up there! And it come down so close we could see people sitting in the place where they sit, the compartment.

Although she doesn't remember when she first saw an airplane, Mrs. Guthrie well remembers Charles Lindbergh's nonstop flight from New York to Paris in 1927. To her the flight was the most exciting thing that
ever happened because nobody really thought he could make it. She also sadly remembers the baby son of America's greatest hero being kidnapped and murdered.

I knowd about his child being kidnapped, you know.

Yes, ma'am. That was a horrible thing.

That was.

Mrs. Guthrie told us that most women in her day did not go to the hospital to give birth. All of her children were born at home.

Did the doctor come and help deliver?

The doctor would come once [after the baby was born]. I always had a midwife, the called them. I had some good ones.

Were they just ladies that lived in the community that helped?

Yes. And they took care of me until I was ready to get to work.

Before Mrs. Guthrie and her family moved to Belhaven in 1945, her husband worked at the cotton gin and farmed. We asked her what type of work he did in Belhaven.

He had a blood clot to form in his leg, and it swelled up bad, so he had to go to the doctor. So he went to Durham and they bandaged him up to his hip. They told him to hook the mule up and go home and go to work. And he worked [at farming]. Well, they finally told him he had to stop. He went to Washington [N. C.], and Dr. Ramsey, that was the doctor there at that time, told him (the man who carried him up there) that he had a blood clot and it was liable to travel through his heart or through his brain anytime, and to tell me about it. After that he worked at the police station in Belhaven.

He wasn't a policeman, but they gave him a job. He had to have something to do. That's why we moved because he had to get off of the farm. We come over here [so that] maybe he could get some light work he could do that he hadn't had to do too much walking.

How long have you lived in this house here?

I've been in this old house ever since I have been here, in 1945. And this old house is older than I am. It has been here a long time. It is a bad-looking old thing.

No, it's nice.

I can't do nothing with it. It did look terrible. I did right smart to it while I was aworking, and to the driveway. Out there in the yard when it gets wet through, this land here just sinks. It get so, you know, you can bear it down. And I don't want them to drive on my driveway unless it's a light car and it's not wet.

I want to get some pictures of you. Let me get my camera.

Oh, boy! I haven't got my teeth in my mouth! It looks more like me without it.

I had a fire in here, it was so cool this morning. I burned it all day yesterday.
Since I had that stroke, this leg and foot get cold and makes me feel chilly.

Have you always heated with wood? What kind of heating did you use when you were living with your father?

We used the fireplace, a brick fireplace.

Did you use that for cooking? Did you have one of those black kettles?

Oh, my lands! We'd bake potatoes, and mama used to have a contraption that'd run up the chimney a little ways to hang a pot on, you know, and let it cook. And she cooked a pot of collards and backbone. And big old meal dumplings. It was enough to make you slap your tummy!

Granny Lizzie has been an inspiration to me; I admire someone who can still enjoy life after suffering a stroke and all of the other tribulations throughout the years. I think through my years I can look back and see how inconvenient her life has been compared to mine and be thankful for the modern conveniences to help women of today to enjoy other pleasures in life. But, on the other hand, to be able to experience more closeness in the family and neighborhood, in what we call the "good ole days," may be missed more than we will ever know. Even when hard work was required to get the job done, there was always a happy tone in her voice as she told of these difficult times. Granny Lizzie's faith in God has guided her through life. Maybe this is the message she is conveying to us.
The inspirational Granny Lizzie Guthrie.