Miss Ella Bonner, Schoolteacher

Article by Bea Coward and Betty Ange

Introduction

On a beautiful spring day on May 1, 1985, we were truly privileged to meet with the most gracious Miss Ella Bonner, who resides at the Beaufort County Nursing Home in Washington, North Carolina. Ninety years old, Miss Bonner was born on January 1, 1895, in a small community called Bonneron.

She greeted us with a warm, friendly smile and excitedly invited us into her cozy little room, which was adorned with several of her beautiful hand paintings. As we listened, we were fascinated and delighted to learn about many of her childhood memories and teaching experiences since she was a former teacher for 44 years. It was evident from our talk with her that her dedication and loyalty marked a truly wonderful teacher.

Bea, who works at this nursing home, began our visit by giving Miss Ella, who is legally blind, a copy of LIFE ON THE PAMLICO.
MISS ELLA: I'm sure I'll enjoy it, and I'm sure she'll [Bea] enjoy reading it to me!

LIFE: We explained to Miss Ella the purpose of our visit—to record her story in her own words for posterity—and she graciously responded. Were you born in this area?

MISS ELLA: Oh, yes! I was born in a little community called Bonnerton.

LIFE: And you have lived here all your life?

MISS ELLA: I've lived in Beaufort County all my life.

LIFE: When you were a young girl, what would you say was the most different about the way your life was from the way it is today?
MISS ELLA: Well, I would say lack of conveniences. I lived in the country.

LIFE: How did you get around?

MISS ELLA: Horse and buggy.

LIFE: Living in the country on a farm as a girl, Miss Ella remembered picking cotton.

MISS ELLA: I was a very slow picker.

LIFE: Oh, really! Did you carry a big, long sack?

MISS ELLA: Yes.

LIFE: And it would be weighed?

MISS ELLA: Yes, but, really, I think I did it more for fun.

LIFE: What was the food like back then?

MISS ELLA: As I remember it, we ate mostly what we raised, vegetables; and, of course, we had hogs.

LIFE: Did you slaughter your own hogs?

MISS ELLA: O, yes, we had what they call hog killings.

LIFE: Did other people from the community come in and help?

MISS ELLA: Yes, they did. Neighbors helped.

LIFE: Miss Ella went on to describe a hog killing.
MISS ELLA: Well, first they killed the hogs, of course, and then they immersed them in boiling water and scraped all the hair off. And they butchered them, and then they hung them up [to drain].

LIFE: After the hogs were cut up, Miss Ella explained what happened next.

MISS ELLA: They salted them [hams] and then they smoked them [in a smoke house]. They made lard and they cut up fat of the hog and boiled it down and made what they call cracklings. Have you ever heard of cracklings? Now, they are little bits of fat meat that are cooked right down, and they make delicious cornbread.

LIFE: Oh, is that right?

MISS ELLA: Oh, yes

LIFE: You mentioned vegetables. What particular ones do you remember as being real good?

MISS ELLA: Well, I love collards. That's my favorite. Collards, cabbage, rutabagas. Am I going too fast?

LIFE: No, no. We got it all on the recorder.

MISS ELLA: turnips, radishes, onions, okra, corn.

LIFE: You're making me hungry! What about milk? Now, wasn't that a problem because you couldn't keep it cold?

MISS ELLA: We had a cow.

LIFE: Was there any way to keep the milk cold?

MISS ELLA: Well, we had those old what they called ice boxes, and people brought around ice and filled their ice boxes with ice. And then some people had a cool spring or something; they would put it in bottles and put it in the water.

LIFE: How was school when you were growing up?

MISS ELLA: Well, the terms were real short, and down here at Bonnerton we had all the grades in one room. And then later on we had two teachers.

LIFE: Were your teachers pretty strict?

MISS ELLA: Well, I liked all my teachers, but one I was very afraid of. She was real strict—extremely so. She would throw books at the pupils.

LIFE: Is that right? My word! She was strict! What did she teach?

MISS ELLA: She taught all the grades. I recall, she had one boy stand on his tiptoes. She made a ring on the blackboard, and he had to put his nose in that ring. And to get his nose in that ring, he had to stand on tiptoes.

LIFE: Ugh!

MISS ELLA: If he had to stand there a right good while, that was really bad.

LIFE: Oh, I see. You later became a teacher yourself?
MISS ELLA: Right.

LIFE: Where did you go on to college?

MISS ELLA: At E. C. U. Then I attended the University of Chapel Hill.

LIFE: Where have you taught?

MISS ELLA: I started out in Beaufort County. Then I taught outside of Greensboro, then I taught in Nash County, then I came to Washington. And I taught in Washington 33 years. I taught 44 years in all. I've always loved teaching. I loved every minute of it. Wherever I taught, I enjoyed it.

LIFE: Were the students mainly farming children?

MISS ELLA: When I was teaching in the country, they were.

LIFE: Were they good students?

MISS ELLA: Oh, yes!

LIFE: What grades did you teach?

MISS ELLA: When I started out, I taught the first three grades, and then I ended up teaching second grade; that was my favorite. I taught second grade out here at John Small 33 years. Loved every minute of it!

LIFE: Miss Ella told us that she used several methods to teach reading but considered the old phonetic system to be the most effective—also with spelling. Did you teach math to them also?

MISS ELLA: Simpler math in the second grade, adding, subtraction and the beginning of the multiplication table and a little bit of simple division. Of course, we had public school music and art.

LIFE: Did you teach that?

MISS ELLA: Oh, yes! The singing, the room singing!

LIFE: Did the students enjoy the room singing?

MISS ELLA: Very much.

LIFE: What kind of songs would they sing?

MISS ELLA: Well, according to the seasons. Christmas songs, Easter songs, and when summer would come, we would have songs that would fit summer.

LIFE: Did your school have to adjust for the farming season?

MISS ELLA: Yes, especially after people began to grow so much tobacco. They'd have an early schedule. They would begin early in the morning, and sometimes they would be late opening school in the fall.

LIFE: What kind of games would the students play at recess?

MISS ELLA: A certain number of teachers would be supervising the games on the playground. They played different kinds of games—singing games.
LIFE: Oh, really! What were some of those? Do you remember?

MISS ELLA: Like "Drop the Hankerchief," "Farmer in the Dell."

LIFE: Did they play hopscotch?

MISS ELLA: Oh, yes! And for several years we had a May Day program and had the May Pole dance.

LIFE: Did they play jacks?

MISS ELLA: Oh, yes! And they played shoot the marbles.

LIFE: Oh, my father, who passed away last year, he used to talk about the marbles, that some of the boys could really shoot.

MISS ELLA: Oh, yes! They would draw a circle and put marbles in the middle. And they would have a special marble they shot with. They kept the marbles that they shot out [of the circle]. Some of the little boys were quite expert. And another thing the boys liked: they would bring these little toy soldiers to school. They would play with them on their desks.

LIFE: Oh, really. [Laughter.] How many of those did you take away, Miss Ella?

MISS ELLA: Well I would take them, but I would give them back to them.

LIFE: How, over the years of teaching, have you noticed how teaching has changed?
LIFE: That's something!

MISS ELLA: One of my nephews got it for me. I didn't even know there was such an organization!

LIFE: Noticing several attractive paintings hanging on the wall, we asked her about them.

MISS ELLA: Now I did these two pictures up here.

LIFE: O, you paint! They look beautiful! When did you take up painting?

MISS ELLA: I had primary art in college, and I had art one summer--regular art--at Chapel Hill. We have it here [at the nursing home] every Thursday morning.

One of Miss Ella's paintings
LIFE: Well those are beautiful.

MISS ELLA: I can't see well enough to do much now, though.

LIFE: We asked Miss Ella to confirm some dates for us. But she said that she couldn't remember dates since she is 90 years old. Well, you don't look it!

MISS ELLA: Well, I am!

LIFE: Well, that's wonderful. I hope I can live to be that old.

MISS ELLA: Oh, I have some lovely nephews and nieces. They are mighty good to me.

LIFE: They come to see you a lot?

MISS ELLA: Right much, and bring me things.

LIFE: How do you think life has changed since you were young? What would you say was the most remarkable change that you've seen?

MISS ELLA: People hurry so. They rush.

LIFE: And back years ago people took it easy more?

MISS ELLA: Much easier. I mean, their life was slower.

LIFE: Do you think it was better slower than it is fast?

MISS ELLA: Well, I don't know about that. We had to have progress, and I guess moving faster brought more pro-
LIFE: Do you remember the first automobile you saw?

MISS ELLA: First automobile, first train.

LIFE: What did you think of the automobile?
bile?

MISS ELLA: I just thought it was marvelous.

LIFE: I've talked to several older people about the first time they saw an automobile, and it seems all of them talked about how it scared the horses.

MISS ELLA: Oh, it did scare the horses! The horses would just take off and run. And trains also scared horses.

LIFE: A lot of these younger folks don't remember what it was like before television and radio. How did you and your family entertain yourselves?

MISS ELLA: Well, they had what they called gramophones. And they had these round disks and then others had the cylinders and we thought they were marvelous. Now, I can remember the first radio I heard. You had to put something in your ears to listen.

LIFE: Your family, before you and the radio and things like that, did you play games like cards?

MISS ELLA: Oh, yes! Oh, yes! The children would gather at different homes and play games.

LIFE: Remember what some of them were?

MISS ELLA: Baseball and hide-and-seek.

LIFE: Did you play cards like Old Maid and things like that?
MISS ELLA: Oh, yes! Old Maid and something called Flinch, I believe it was. I'm not sure.

LIFE: Did you and your family and friends do much singing and playing the piano?

MISS ELLA: Yes. At that time mostly they had organs, you know, the ones you pedalled.

LIFE: How about the church? Was that an important part of your life?

MISS ELLA: It played a right important part when I was growing up. I didn't know there was anything except Methodist and Episcopalian.

LIFE: Is that right?

MISS ELLA: They were the only two churches we had in our little community and we would go to Sunday School at the Episcopal Sunday morning and Sunday school at the Methodist Sunday afternoon. That was social, and the preacher would come about once a month at each church.

LIFE: Miss Ella pointed out that the church played a social as well as a religious role in people's lives.

MISS ELLA: It was sort of a social affair. People didn't have other things to go to. There weren't movies. They didn't have movies, shows and different things to go to, and really it was the social life.

LIFE: You mentioned that the church offered social and entertaining activities before things like movies. Do you remember the earlier movies—the silent movies?

MISS ELLA: Oh, yes!

LIFE: My daddy, Roy Armstrong, would be eight—one now if he were alive. He told me that one of the great things about silent movies was that people had to learn how to read because they couldn't understand what was going on if they couldn't read the titles on them.

MISS ELLA: You know, I haven't ever thought about that, but they would have to. But you know the thing that I remember about silent movies? Somebody played the piano all the time.

LIFE: Would that be a local person?

MISS ELLA: Oh, yes! One little town I taught in, the person played "Stars and Stripes Forever" all the time!

LIFE: During the whole movie?

MISS ELLA: Oh, yes, during the whole movie!

LIFE: Miss Ella, you say that the biggest change you've seen in life is that people are in a hurry now and that they took things at a slower pace in the past?

MISS ELLA: That's right, and that's why I like towns the size of Washington because people don't rush so like they do in Atlanta and New York and all those
LIFE: Yes, Ma'am!

LIFE: After taking pictures of Miss Ella, we asked her how long she had been at the home.

MISS ELLA: Five years, four months. Seems like I've been here forever!

LIFE: Well, it seems like a really nice place to be.

MISS ELLA: Well, it is. If you can't stay at home, I don't know of a place I'd rather be!

Conclusion

Miss Bonner's love of life showed through during our conversation with her. She assured us that if she had to relive her former life, she would not make any changes. We admired her for her dedication and accomplishments. Our interview with Miss Ella was very inspirational.
Bea Coward and Betty Ange with Miss Ella Bonner