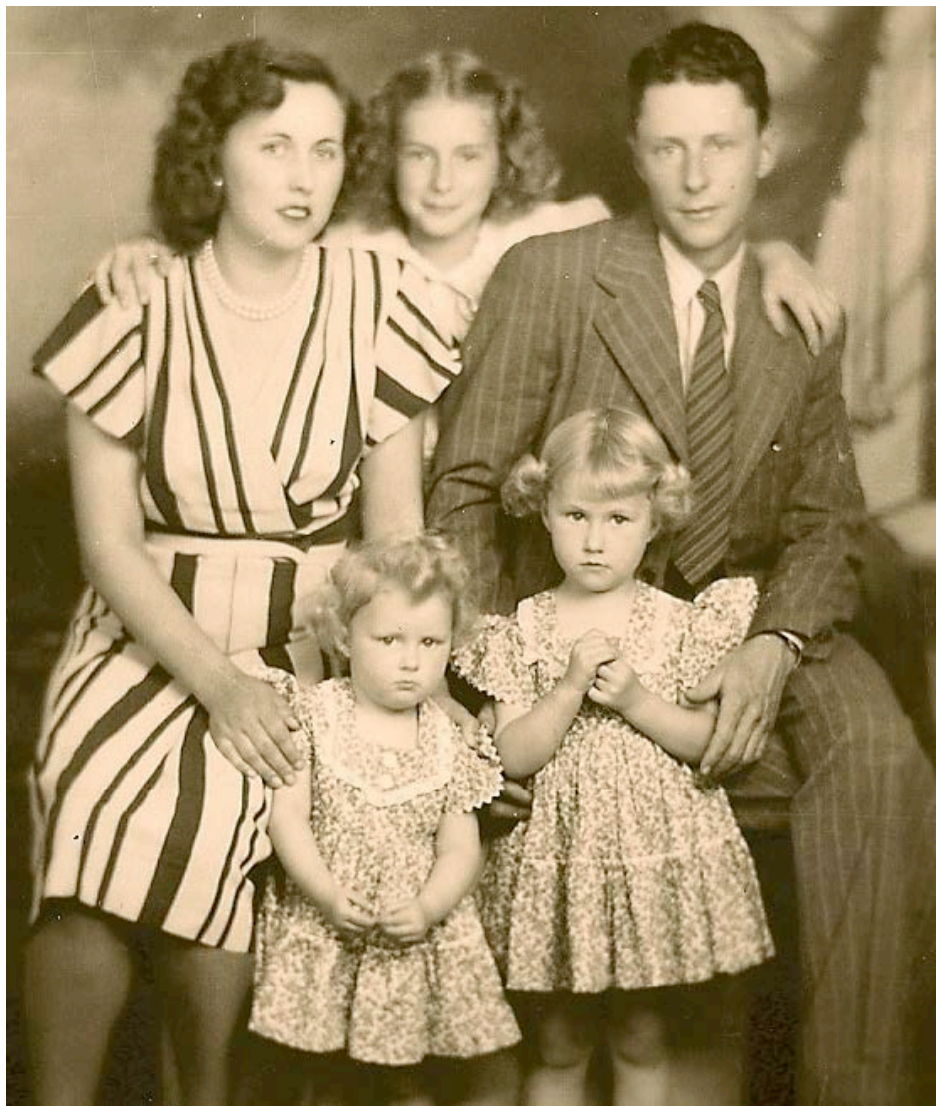


The Life of Mildred Irene Nelson

Written by

Dr. Sue (Nelson) Clifton



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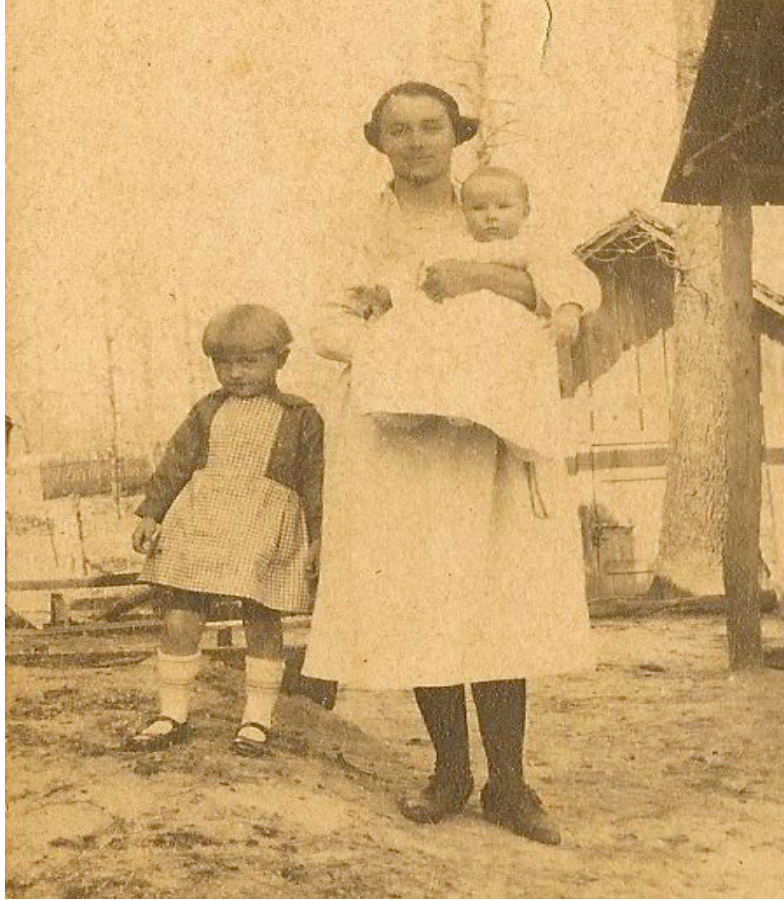
Dr. Sue (Nelson) Clifton

On December 3, 1919, in a tin-roofed, two room house, Mildred Irene Snider, our Mama, was born. “Sister,” as her siblings called her, was the oldest child, caretaker and protector of little brothers Buddy, Leon, and Edwin and little sisters Sadie and Jeannette. Mama’s growing up was like the growing up of other farm children in Mississippi in the 1920’s, a very complex way of living simply.

In the months before her first birthday, Mama soaked up the world from ground level. Her daddy, Arthur Lister Snider, Daddy Snider to us, was a sharecropper and in order to make ends meet, our grandmother, Rachel Ann Davis Snider, Mama Snider, picked cotton. From her pallet in the cotton patch, Mama watched as her mama filled the heavy sack, dragging it from row to row, instilling in her baby girl the ethics of hard work and sacrifice.

Mama’s home for the first four years of her life was in the two roomed, rusty tin-roofed house, but to Mama, none of this indicated poverty. They were just like everyone else in Lovejoy, with enough to get by, enough not to complicate life any more than the hard work necessary to sustain the simple lifestyle.

Her second childhood home was bigger and had a screened dogtrot that ran down the center of the house. The dogtrot held much-anticipated rockers for relaxing after a hard day’s work in the boiling Mississippi heat. The house had five rooms and a long front porch but no bathroom.



Mildred with Mama Snider holding Buddy

In the kitchen, Mama Snider had a big range wood cook stove with a warmer up above and a reservoir on the side always filled with warm water. The children took their baths at night in front of the fireplace in an oval shaped zinc tub. Even though the houses were often cold, the kids slept toasty at night with layers of hand-sewn blankets and quilts and with irons heated by the fireplace, wrapped in cloth, and placed at the foot of the bed by Mama Snider.

The yards of Mama's childhood homes always had rose bushes nursed by Mama Snider with the grounds hoed clean all the way to barbed wire fences that kept the cattle from interfering with childhood games of hide and seek or running snuff can cars across

powdery dirt play roads. When not in the yard, Mama and her siblings played under the house where their playground was cool and clean, marred only by a few chicken feathers left by others seeking its pleasant shade and by patterns of roly-poly holes.



Buddy, Sadie, and Mildred (Mildred was just getting over malaria in this picture)

When she was five years old, Mama's family moved east of Lovejoy Community where Daddy Snider continued farming. Mama walked to one-room Wildcat Primer School, similar to the kindergarten of today, where Mrs. Frankie Rowsey was the teacher. During her elementary years, Mama attended McCurdy School in Liberty Hill Community and Batesville School, the family moving as Daddy Snider tried making a better living for his family by working on the railroad or other jobs. But each time he tried to change directions, Daddy Snider's path somehow circled back to farming, much of it sharecropping as he anxiously waited until he could afford to buy his own place.

The day of rejoicing finally came and Daddy Snider was able to buy the McCullar Place, "good creek bottomland" as Mama called it, east of Liberty Hill Community. But the rejoicing was short-lived when, like so many other farmers during the Depression, he

lost his land. Daddy Snider tried to borrow money from a friend at the bank, but he wouldn't loan him the money to pay his taxes. Later, the so-called friend bought Daddy Snider's land for a pittance by paying off the taxes.

While living at the McCullar place, Mama contracted malarial fever. Mama Snider still had her work to do so while she was at the barn milking, the neighbors would take turns coming to stay with Mama and fan her. Not only was she hot from the fever, but the sultry, Mississippi summer sun beat down on the tin-roofed house offering no coolness to sooth the little girl's burning body. Mama Snider ordered Mama a Graphophone to help entertain her during her long illness.

Daddy Snider refused to give up his dream of owning land and his faith paid off when later he was able to buy rich river bottomland. This time Enid Dam was being built, and Daddy Snider sold his land to the reservoir and moved to Water Valley where he and Mama Snider lived on Court Street until their deaths.

Before the Depression stole Daddy Snider's dream, the Sniders experienced a happy time. Daddy Snider hauled milk for the farmers to Sardis, and Mama Snider, with the help of hired man Jessie Perry, farmed the land. The community was full of houses, families, and children and each week, blessed with hard work and a sense of having enough was celebrated by Daddy Snider taking off the milk cans and covering the bed of the truck with quilts followed by loading the truck with anyone who wanted to attend Liberty Hill Church. It was not uncommon to have fifteen people hanging on for the ride to church. Sunday afternoons were spent watching the men in the community play pasture baseball on Mr. Josey Ware's big farm, the favored form of entertainment.

It was the happiest of times; it was the hardest of times where every little blessing was appreciated more because of the effort it took to provide it. Apples were gathered from the orchards and buried in barrels of sand in the cellar to be rationed out throughout the year like the delicacies God intended them to be. Daddy Snider built a smokehouse and made sure it was always filled with ham and all kinds of good meat. Nothing was wasted. The fat was cut off and made into lard, the main ingredient for Mama Snider's heavenly biscuits and fried chicken. Mama Snider kept a machine in the backroom to separate the cream from the milk and further added to the family income by selling cream, butter, and fresh eggs to the community. Daddy Snider also raised sorghum and cooked it into molasses to top off Mama Snider's biscuits.

There was no electricity so ice was bought in 50 pound blocks, wrapped in a quilt to be calved off with an ice pick one glass at a time for the best sweet tea ever. Milk was kept cold by being lowered in a bucket into the well and kept there until mealtime.

Another of Mama Snider's delicacies was fresh-baked bread topped with homemade peanut butter. The Snider children learned quickly to tiptoe across the kitchen floor if bread was in the oven so the scrumptious loaves would not fall flat, not to mention wanting to prevent a good tongue lashing or a swat across the backside.

Schools were very different back then but Mama remembers them as fun. A school field trip at McCurdy School meant the teacher taking the students to hunt wild huckleberries at lunchtime. Dried hickory nuts and sweet gum resin for chewing gum were the pop and chips of the time and were literally priceless. From bringing in the crops to listening to Jimmy Rogers on the Graphophone; from washing clothes on a rub

board followed by boiling them in a wash pot; to attending brush arbors and church activities; the community worked together, played together and prayed together.

The Sniders had a dug well at their house that provided much more than good drinking water. At 12:00 o'clock, the well sometimes became a fortuneteller as "silly girls" as Mama called them, would shine a mirror in the well to see the reflection of the man they would marry. Perhaps if Mama had been a believer she could have seen her future husband, a handsome blue-eyed young man with curly hair and a "shit-eating grin" that usually warned of a prank or joke, the product of a dry wit and a quick mind.

Another memory, though not always a pleasant one for Mama was being around her own "Grandpa" Snider. Albert Louis Schneider remained a mystery until the day he died keeping his family history a secret even from his children. His grandmother and he got off a train in Courtland when Albert was about twelve years old. Some surmise Albert was a "woods colt," born out of wedlock to his mother who probably died in childbirth. He came from Kentucky but grew up in Panola County and as a young man Americanized his name by changing the spelling to Snider. Albert married and fathered a dozen or so children, one of whom was our Daddy Snider.

One of his younger sons, "Uncle Virby" told his daughters a secret he had kept until he himself was way up in years. When Virby was small, he accompanied his daddy Albert to Pope to the Steiner store, the store since occupied by the Pope Woman's Club and now a family restaurant. Pope (pronounced Po-pee) Steiner was known to be a Jew. During the visit, Albert carried on a very low-keyed conversation with Pope Steiner in another language, either Hebrew or possibly, German. On the way home, Virby asked his daddy why he talked funny to Mr. Steiner. Albert warned his son he must never tell

anyone he heard him speak in a foreign language. This was the only clue to the origin of Albert Snider, alias Schneider, who attended church every Sunday with his Christian family.

Albert Snider was a self-sufficient man and raised all his own food, had a grist meal, a blacksmith shop, and a general mercantile store. Being self sufficient, he hardly ever had to leave his place for anything but worked his children brutally, once even working a son sick with pneumonia and against doctor's orders resulting in the son becoming more ill and dying. Mama said she never liked her Grandpa Snider but felt sorry for him in his elder years, especially after he broke his hip. He died before Mama started high school. Albert Snider might have been a hard man on the exterior, but he went to church every Sunday and no one took a bite of food at his table until the Lord had been thanked. Mama Snider thought he was a good person.

On the Davis side, somewhere down the hall of greats was a great, great, great grandmother who was full-blooded Indian. Mama said she never knew what kind of Indian and could not remember this ancestor but felt she gave many of the Davis descendants, including her, their dark complexions. I often wondered if this ancestor didn't also give them their tendency to go on the warpath.

Grandma Davis, Lula Bankston Davis White, Mama's grandmother on Mama Snider's side, told Mama an interesting story of how her family got the Bankston name. The story goes one of her "greats", perhaps her great grandfather, was picked up from his pallet in the yard when just an infant by a large bird, possibly a crane, and was taken a long way from his home and put down on a riverbank. He was found shortly thereafter by the man who raised him and gave him the last name of Bankston since the boy was found

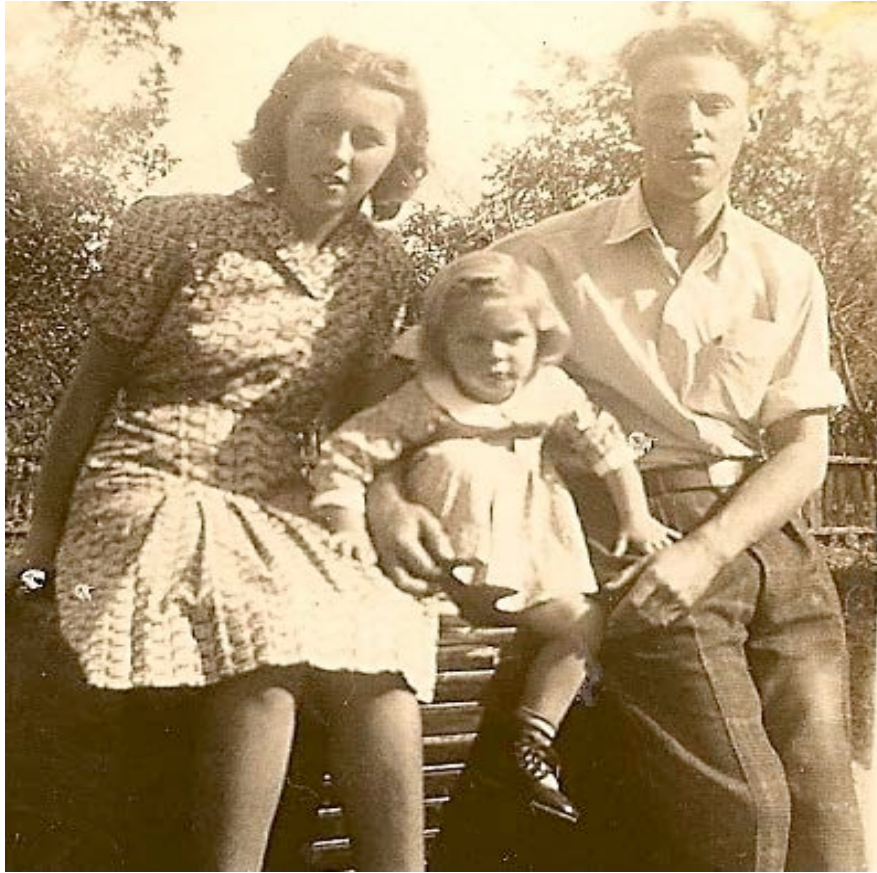
on the bank of a river. Mama said she thought it sounded farfetched, but Grandma Lula Bankston Davis swore by it since it was all she ever heard. It sounds a bit like the story of baby Moses, but I'm not sure Yalobusha County or Panola County would rate as the Promised Land. Perhaps Mama and Daddy Snider thought otherwise.

During her high school years, Mama attended Pope School. On the first day of what would have been her 11th grade year, Mama ran off with the love of her life, Hezekiah "Heck" Nelson. Mama was a fifteen-year-old Baptist who was married to an eighteen-year-old Methodist by a Presbyterian preacher of unknown age. At sixteen, Mama gave birth to her first child Minnie Lee who to Mama's delight looked just like the wee girl's daddy complete with dancing blue eyes and impish grin, but Minnie's birth bore complications. The birth cord was wrapped around her neck, but Dr. Martin saved her. At Dr. Martin's request, Mama named her beautiful little girl after Dr. Martin's nurse, Minnie Lee Williams who later in life committed suicide. Mama later felt the name carried a curse with it.

Minnie's birth was a time of happiness but was also a time of poverty for the young Nelson family. Mama did not have a coat when they first married so she sold the pig Daddy Snider gave them as a wedding present and bought herself a coat from Hub Rigby's store. Mama thought it was the most beautiful coat she'd ever seen. Later, she got her feelings hurt when she found out Miss Zella, her mother-in-law, had sold milk and eggs and saved enough money to pay for Annie Bell's coat, one with a fur collar. Annie Bell was Mama's sister-in-law and was obviously Miss Zella's favorite.

When Minnie was a baby, Mama wanted a wedding band worse than anything but knew there was no money for one. The Depression was still going on and Daddy was

making a feeble attempt at farming. Mama and some other young women picked cotton for extra money. Mama measured her finger with a string and sent the string with her wedding ring order to Sears and Roebuck for a white gold wedding ring. Soon after, Daddy bought Mama a small wedding set at a pawnshop. Mama was so proud of the rings, especially considering the sacrifice it took to get them.



Mildred, Minnie, and Heck

Mama Snider helped the young couple by making dresses and pantaloons for her first grandchild, Minnie. Soon after, the Nelsons moved to Memphis to try to earn more money. Mama worked at Walgreen's Drug Store and Daddy worked in a factory that dyed material. Mama worked all over Walgreen's and they wanted her to move to their largest drugstore in Memphis but she rejected their offer. This lasted two or three years

and then the young family moved back to Panola County when World War II started so Daddy could farm and avoid the draft. Mama milked ten cows morning and night while Daddy farmed.

In 1939, Mama and Daddy moved to Liberty Hill Community. Their house had a homemade door that was very heavy, and Minnie, who was just a toddler at the time would say, "I want me shut doe-ee," meaning she wanted the door opened. This was a lonesome time for Mama. But she kept busy with every day chores such as chopping firewood, cooking on the fireplace, washing clothes with lye soap and a rub board and then boiling them in a wash pot outside. Daddy made Mama a kitchen cabinet, and Mr. Clay, Mama's father-in-law, made them a table and bought six cane bottom chairs to go with it. Then he went to Memphis Furniture and bought them a bedroom suit and an iron bed and mattress for the other bedroom, as well as a small dish cabinet and cook stove.



Minnie at about two or three years of age...Looks like our Maggie today.

Mama milked cows, raised chickens, canned and dried apples and kept an immaculate house, be it ever so humble. When she got a new broom, she'd take the mattress out and beat and sweep it and "had the best smelling beds in Panola County."

The thing she looked forward to most was for her aunt, Margie Davis (Deaton), who was about Mama's age, to come and spend the weekend. Mama never wanted Margie to leave.



Mildred and Margie Davis Deaton

Daddy and his brother Buddy farmed for several years. Henry Clay Nelson, their daddy, owned about 300 acres cleared for farming and also ran a country store. Mr. Clay, as Mama called him, had bonds at Union Planters Bank in Memphis, and since Mama could drive and since she was his favorite daughter-in-law, he would get her to take him to Union Planters. He liked Mama because she was a hard worker and often stood on the porch and watched her work in the garden.

Mama looked forward to the chance to go shopping in downtown Memphis and would remind Pa-paw, as we called him, when it was time to clip the coupons for his bonds. He'd tell her, "Go fix my bath water and get my clothes," and then off they'd go.

Mama would leave Mr. Clay at the bank and she'd go shopping for clothes for her daughters, three of us by this time. On the way home from Memphis, Mama would stop and let Pa-paw buy his whiskey. Mama said she could get anything she wanted out of Mr. Clay's grocery store and he would never charge her for it.



Zella and Henry Clay Nelson (Daddy's Parents)

When Minnie was school age, Daddy and Pa-paw built Mama and Daddy a house out of rough lumber. The house was down the road by Cub's Texaco, just off Highway 51 that was gravel at that time. The house had front and back porches, and eventually became five rooms. The walls were rough and Mama and Lavern (Scoggins), "Coot" to the family and niece to Daddy, wallpapered many of the rooms, ceilings and all. Mama and Coot would tack up canvas and then put thick wallpaper paste on the canvas before hanging the paper. Mama's favorite was floral and in her dining room, she and Coot hung pink floral paper with ivory paper on the ceiling. Mama painted the old homemade table

and chairs black and bought pink linoleum for the floor to match. Mama and Coot were perfectionists at wallpapering and “could have been professionals.”

Coot loved coming to Mama’s and Daddy’s and would bring her clothes on the school bus on Friday and go back home on the school bus on Monday. Mama always felt Coot was more like a sister and hated to see her get on the school bus on Monday. Mama and Coot were still close after Coot married, and Mama was with Coot when her first child Rod was born and assisted Dr. Martin like a midwife when Christine was born. In fact, Christine was born at Mama and Daddy’s house on Highway 51. Mama has wonderful memories of Coot that help her cope with Coot’s death. Also, Mama knows Coot is in heaven since she was a devout Christian who studied and knew more about the Bible than almost anyone around.

When Minnie was seven years old, Nyoka was born, named for “Nyoka the Jungle Girl” by Daddy who obviously had an eye for the beautiful heroine of the serial he and Mama watched at the Eureka Theatre each Saturday night. Minnie walked to school each day and ran home anxious to rock her little sister in her child-sized red rocker and sing to her. And true to her movie star calling, Nyoka was and still is the beauty in our family. And then came me.

I was born in the middle of Interstate Highway 55, northbound, in the fast lane. But in 1945, this spot was nothing more than a ramshackled, bricksidin’ house on what today would be just under the I-55 overpass on Enid Dam Road. I, like my sisters, was born not in a hospital but in the bricksidin’ house, delivered by Dr. Martin. Entering the world on the cotton-filled mattress of my parent’s bed, I was protected from the could-have-been grime of a poor family’s environment by boiled cistern water and the every

day's scrubbing by an immaculate mother, driven with visions of bettering the life she would choose for her three girls.

Mama got my name from a tribe of Indians she heard about on the radio, the Mona Sioux Indians, but with Dr. Martin's nurse's lack of phonetic skills, she filled out my birth certificate information as Mantia Sue Nelson and Mama never got it corrected. With her intentions, Mama must have predestined me to spend many adult years in educating Native American children in Alaska and Montana.

Mama said my birth was the easiest of the three girls, probably because she had picked cotton while pregnant with me. She picked cotton so she could buy a stylish long red cashmere coat from Goldsmith's, so she would look like the person she intended to be, a business owner, a beautician, someone other than a cotton picker.

Mama could find happiness even in cotton picking. She told me about her, Edrie Lipe, Dorothy Kilgore, and Baby Taylor picking cotton so they could go to Memphis on a shopping spree. Mama, being the only one who could drive in Memphis at the time, chauffeured them to Main Street, downtown to Goldsmith's, Levy's, Three Sister's, and McClelland's ten-cent store to spend their hard-earned dollars.



Minnie at about 5 or 6 years of age



Minnie holding Nyoka



A young Nelson Family



Nyoka, Sue, and Minnie

We lived a short time in the bricksidin' house moving down the road (*Enid Dam Road now*) to Highway 51 to a better house, a new one Daddy built from lumber salvaged from a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in Como. We still had no indoor plumbing, but Mama wallpapered hers and Daddy's bedroom with elegant red Chinese wallpaper. Mama always knew what her station in life would be. Her nose was pointed toward middle class and an outhouse hidden by mimosas and honeysuckle a few feet behind the house was not going to stop her. Her girls would grow up with more than the "enough" of her childhood.

One memory Mama brought back in her reminiscing was of the many hobos that visited our house since we lived on Highway 51, the main highway of the time. Mama would always share whatever food we had with the men who were appreciative. Someone once told her tramps, as we called them, had a way of marking houses that were generous. I don't know if this was true, but we had our share of "the homeless" of the time.

The Nelson Sisters at Memphis Zoo





The Gully Climber and the Movie Star



The Cowgirl and Nyoka in front of our old home place

A few years later, after Daddy's father died, we moved into Ma-maw's house and Daddy made Ma-maw a small house out of Pa-paw's store building. Mama told Ma-maw she would take care of her and "if we had bread, she'd have bread." Ma-maw lived beside us for many years until she was in her seventies and moved to the Delta with her daughter Olive.

During her junior year of high school, Minnie married James Robert Onkst, a very smart engineering student from Toccowa who was attending Mississippi State. When Minnie finished high school, she moved to Starkville with James Robert. Minnie and Robert had two sons, Michael and Richard, and gave us many places outside Mississippi to visit until they finally stopped in Huntsville, Alabama where Robert worked at Redstone Arsenal as a surface to air missile designer. Minnie gave us so much to look forward to each time she and Robert brought the boys for a visit. Minnie and Daddy were the Nelson Comedy act.

Daddy worked on the pipeline some as a dozer operator, and we all hated the times when Daddy worked away. In the late 1950's, Daddy went into the dirt moving business with Mitt Kilgore, and Mama quit her two jobs at Rice Sticks and Best Upholstering and began beauty school at Moler's Beauty College in Memphis. During the summer, Mamaw, Miss Zella, stayed with me during the day in the little apartment we rented from Annie Belle Nelson, and Nyoka took a manicuring course from Moler's. Mama was afraid for Nyoka to be a young teenager from Pope, loose on the big city, so made sure she kept her eye on Nyoka at Moler's. Mama and Nyoka took and passed the state boards in 1959 getting their licenses as beautician and manicurist. The lack of a high school diploma only served to make Mama more determined. She opened Mildred's Beauty Shop in 1959, a business she ran for 42 years.



Mama and the girls...Minnie clowning, as usual!

Shortly after Mama opened her beauty shop, Daddy built us a new house at Pope on Highway 51, the house where Mama still lives. Daddy went to Water Valley and tore

down a building to get much of the building materials and built the house himself with the help of a local carpenter. Mama moved her shop to the new house where she could be at home when Nyoka and I came in from school.

The happiest of Mama's years were our high school years. Mama took pride in making sure Nyoka and I had much more than she had growing up and always tried to make us the best-dressed girls at Pope School. Mama had an eye for picking clothes from not-so-expensive stores like Three Sisters and Lerner's in downtown Memphis and making us look like our clothes all came from Goldsmith's and Levy's. My favorite days were the unplanned days when Mama kept Nyoka and me out of school for a shopping trip to Memphis. Nyoka and I had Daddy's little feet so Mama would usually have to get our shoes out of the window at Levy's since they always put small shoes on display. Just before leaving Memphis with our sacks and boxes full of outfits, we'd stop at Woolworth's Diner and eat turkey and dressing with coconut pie for dessert.



The Nelsons, all grown up, at the last house Heck built

Mama still brags on our high school years, concentrating on our good points rather than those adventures better left unspoken. Nyoka was musically inclined and put her piano lessons from Miss Johnnie McCullar to good use, learning to play hymns from the Baptist Hymnal and pick out songs she heard on the radio by ear. Nyoka could always sing and still does today, often cantering at her church.

I had no musical ability and despised the piano lessons Mama made us take every Saturday morning. The lessons interfered with valuable gully-climbing time or shooting-rats-in-the-garden time with my deceased Uncle T.D.'s 22 rifle, the one I had been told never to touch. As soon as I was allowed to quit taking piano lessons, I forced myself to forget everything I had learned, even how to read music.



Mildred in her beauty shop with customer Dolly Best

Nyoka and I were not always close as sisters go. But fortunately, those days are long gone when I chased Nyoka all over the house with a butcher knife and so are the nights when Nyoka bruised my ribs punching me when I breathed too loud.



Heck with his bulldozer

There were one or two things Mama was not proud of when it came to the Nelson girls. For instance, there was Nyoka the Jungle Girl, queen of Highway 51 drag strip. Nyoka swears she always won in the sleek black Mercury, except for the one time she was forced to *let* Tommy Rowsey win when a hill came at them too fast. Mama made Daddy sell the Mercury before Nyoka got killed in it. Mama said she knew when Nyoka drove last because the radio was blasting. Probably the big black dragster was still gyrating from the racing queen's excessive speed as she hit the brake to stop. Mama says Nyoka was always a daredevil.

Then there was the time a few of my group got together to steal a school bus... during school hours...and go to Ray Brown's Store and play the pinball machine. It was

okay though since Neal “Rat” Darby drove us. Rat was a senior and drove the bus on its usual route.

Nyoka and I didn’t get everything we wanted but we came pretty darn close, especially after we entered high school. When Daddy bought us our horse Queen, we decided we needed boots, hats, shirts, and all the western accessories to make us look the cowgirl part, so we went to the feed store in Sardis and loaded up. Nyoka wrote the check on Daddy, the cowboy philosophy of “shoot first, ask questions later.” We were scared all the way home but not so scared we took any of our loot back. Daddy just laughed when we showed him what he bought us. We should have known what his reaction would be. Any daddy who could laugh when he found his old fifty something Chevy in the road ditch could laugh at just about anything. The ditch episode was another of the jungle girl’s heavy-footed-learning-to-drive exploits. Darn that sharp curve between Noah Baker’s store and our house! I slid all the way across the seat when we headed for the ditch holding an R.C. Cola in one hand and a Root Beer in the other and never spilled a drop.

I added to the learning to drive exploits when it was my turn by driving to Pope one day with my driving instructor, the Jungle Girl, riding shotgun. Not wanting to disappoint her, I pulled in at Hansen’s Store a little on the fast side just like I’d been taught, and parked right on top of Mr. Hansen’s old Chevy he swore didn’t have a scratch on it until I slammed into my “parking space.”

Once I finally got my driver’s license, I started driving the family car to school but quit doing this because I could never remember to drive it home. One day, Miss

Rosalie yelled to me just before I crossed Highway 51 walking home, “Hey, Sue, you forgot your car!”



Sue (front) and the two Queens, one the horse, the other the sister



Nyoka Pope School

FFA Sweetheart

Mama was proud of the Nelson girls’ accomplishments. Nyoka was FFA Sweetheart and won the Betty Crocker Award. I was an honor graduate and had two plays published by *Progressive Farmer Magazine* when I was sixteen. And now, Nyoka and I are trying to combine our talents and interests, Nyoka’s interest in gourmet cooking and my interest in writing mysteries, and we have co-authored a paranormal mystery, *Ingredient for Murder*. We think our creativity comes from a combination of Heck and Mildred, Daddy’s quick wit and Mama’s enjoyment of writing. Heck and Mildred made us sisters but age, mixed with a little Prozac, has made us good friends.



Nelsons at Mama and Daddy Snider's 50th Anniversary, 1967

Mama herself accomplished much and never hesitated in anything she decided to accomplish. She was a self-starter and many times took it upon herself to report community and family happenings to the *Panolian*. When Mr. Sam Vick was told he would be in the Mississippi Hall of Fame, he asked Mama to write about him and she did focusing on his spiritual side rather than the fact he was the only person to pinch-hit for Babe Ruth when he was a professional baseball player for the Yankees. Mr. Sam had been Mama and Daddy's Sunday school teacher at Chapel Hill Methodist Church where we went every Sunday until we moved to Pope. Mama and Mr. Sam had mutual respect for each other. He started the Lord's Acre Fund at Chapel Hill, a fund responsible for Chapel Hill getting a nice brick church building in later years. Mama kept the old church clean voluntarily, spending many weekends scrubbing its wood floors and polishing the simple pews and furniture as if they belonged in First Baptist at Batesville. Mr. Sam was an amateur artist and in 1957, he gave Mama and Daddy one of his oil paintings, a vase

of flowers, a painting that always adorned Mama's dining room and is one of her prized possessions.

Mama often surprised her family and town folks at the projects she undertook such as sending condolences to world dignitaries. When Gandhi was assassinated, Mama sent a sympathy card and got back a reply of thanks with the official wax stamp of India on the back. When President Reagan was shot, Mama sent a get-well card and got an official thank you reply from the White House. She also sent a card when Prime Minister Anwar Sadat of Egypt was assassinated. The reply Mama was proudest of was a card in a black lined envelope received from Prince Rainier and the royal family of Monaco, an official show of appreciation for Mama's condolences sent after the death of Princess Grace Kelly. Many people were surprised a common ordinary citizen of Pope, Mississippi could find out where to send these condolences but Mama seemed to be ahead of her time in seeking and finding information on an information highway that barely existed, if it existed at all. What could she do with Google today if she decided to try? *(See pictures of responses from dignitaries at end of biography).*

In 1966, Mama and several ladies put their heads together and formed the Pope Women's Club. Mama was the first membership chairman and for the first few years, they met in different women's houses before buying Moore's Store building in downtown Pope. When Mama was the hostess, she served them fried peach pies, ham and biscuits, party mix, dip, coffee, cake and punch. More meetings were held at Bell Lipe's and Mama's houses than anywhere. Christmas parties were held in Bell and Ray's "playhouse" and the men were invited. Mama sent the cards to dignitaries as part of her self-imposed duties as secretary of Pope Women's Club.

The club sponsored two Christmas parades in Pope and a Pope Homecoming complete with attendance by Governor Waller and First Lady Waller. Ray Lipe's famous barbecue was a main attraction with music furnished by Casey Lipe and his band. Nyoka's husband, Ben Beer, filled a picture album for Mama of the homecoming, something she still enjoys looking back on today. The Women's Club has disbanded now and the building has been sold that once housed the ladies of Pope.

Other fun events that were the result of planning by Mama and some of the other women were the dances held at the different National Guard Armories. Grover Duke and his band from Clarksdale were the musicians of choice as Pope couples two stepped, waltzed, and shuffled to tunes like "Coconut Grove" and "In the Mood." Mama's favorite dance partner was Daddy. Bell Lipe once told Mama she loved to watch her and Daddy dance.

Mama always loved to dance and taught Nyoka and me to Charleston at a very young age. We thought we were so good at it we did the Charleston and sang "Has Anybody Seen My Gal" in a talent show at Pope High School. We did not win. Nyoka said it was my fault we didn't win and I fear she was right.

Mama enjoyed traveling, too, which meant following Minnie and Robert in their moves and later following Woody and me. In the fifties, Robert was in the Air Force and was stationed in San Antonio, Texas. Mama took Nyoka, Minnie, Christine McCurdy and me to see Jessie May and Henry Benner, Daddy's cousins, in Lockhart, Texas while visiting Minnie and Robert. Henry took us to Brady, Texas to visit Daddy's Deaton cousins we had never met, Jack and Harold Deaton and their families.



*Pope Homecoming, sponsored by Pope Women's Club
Governor Waller in center shaking hands*



Mildred and Linda Harden in homecoming attire

Henry made every minute of the trip enjoyable. He was as much a joker as Jessie May was abrasive but they were an interesting duo. Henry told Nyoka and me that the

sausage we ate for breakfast was armadillo meat and we, being just children at the time, believed him.

In 1967, Mama and Daddy took the family back to see Henry and Jessie May. Henry took us sightseeing to Johnson City, Texas to see President Johnson's hometown and his ranch where he and Lady Byrd lived. We visited President Johnson's cousin, an elderly lady who had a house on the ranch. Lyndon Johnson had a special room in his cousin's house with a telephone that was a direct line to the White House. She had to unlock the room for us to see it. We also saw the Johnson family cemetery close to his house.



President Johnson's cousin who lived on his ranch in Johnson City, Texas

Both visits to the Benner home were memorable. Years later after Jessie May and then Henry died, Daddy received 1% of what was left of Henry's estate as designated in his will which was \$2500 after the couple's nursing home expenses were paid. Mama and Daddy always remembered Henry and Jessie May fondly and not just because of the money.

In the late seventies, Mama and Daddy flew for the first time when they traveled to Fort McMurray, Alberta Canada to see Woody, our kids, and me. Woody was working with Bechtel on the Tarsands Project, building a plant to extract the oil from the tarsands. We loaded Mama and Daddy and our kids, Tracy, Jeff, and Niki, into the truck with a

camper on the back and took them through the Canadian Rockies to Banff. Mama was terrified and didn't want to look down as we wound our way through the mountains. She constantly ordered Woody to "slow down." But the beautiful snowcapped mountains were not the highlight of the trip for Mama and Daddy.

Woody provided the most entertainment in the wee hours one morning after getting home from a Bechtel party where he had enjoyed himself a little too much. He became disoriented and thought he was in the bathroom. All I could do was watch in horror, unable to convince him of where he really was, as he relieved himself right into the fruit bowl on the dining room table. For the rest of his life, Daddy laughed until he cried every time we talked about Woody peeing in the fruit bowl.

In April 1981, Nyoka honored Mama with a luncheon at Nyoka and Ben's beautiful home in Countrywood in Cordova, Tennessee. Many of Mama's closest friends enjoyed Nyoka's excellent cooking and hostess skills. Attendees included Thelma Davidson, Virginia House, Marrietta Comer, Ruth McNeely, Ava McNeely, Merle McCurdy, Clara McCurdy, Marie McCachren, Agnes Hartzell, Mamyee Lee McMinn, Ruth Anthony, and myself, Sue Clifton.



Mildred and her guests at Nyoka's house in Countrywood

In 1984, Mama and Daddy took their biggest trip, the greatest distance they ever traveled, when Nyoka and I gave them an early fiftieth wedding anniversary present, a trip to New Plymouth, New Zealand where Woody, the kids, and I were living. This was another of Bechtel's enormous projects, this time a plant to change natural gas to gasoline. Mama was nervous knowing she and Daddy were flying over the Pacific Ocean, a trip that lasted more than twenty hours in flying time. They changed planes in Hawaii but would not leave the airport to sightsee even though it was one of Mama's dreams to go to this beautiful island paradise.

Even though it was July when Mama and Daddy arrived, it was midwinter in New Zealand since the Southern Hemisphere has seasons in reverse from the Northern Hemisphere. We celebrated Christmas in July complete with a small, decorated tree and gifts, mostly warm clothes for Mama and Daddy, who still nearly froze in the "mild" New Zealand winter.

Mama and Daddy were in awe of New Zealand's beautiful countryside, and we ended up with more pictures of sheep on luscious green hillsides than anything. Daddy trout fished with Woody from his boat on Lake Taupo, and we all visited the tea kiosks and indulged ourselves in the wonderful cream-filled pastries for which New Zealand is famous. We also visited the New Zealand Agri-Center and watched a shepherding and sheering demonstration. Mama left with a white sheepskin rug and a brown one for her house, compliments of the Cliftons.



Mildred and the "Lost Shepherd" at the Agri-Center



*Jeff, Pa-paw, Tracy, Niki, and Nanny:
The Tasman Sea and Sugarloaf Islands
New Plymouth, New Zealand*



Heck, Jeff and Woody trout fishing at Lake Taupo



Mildred posing at Pukekura Park, New Plymouth, New Zealand



Jeff, Pa-paw, Niki and Nanny at a Pukekura Park outside New Plymouth, New Zealand



*Mt. Egmont, dormant volcano in New Plymouth
Sue climbed to the top with a group one summer and walked across the crater...
Awesome and terrifying!*

In 1985, Mama and Daddy celebrated their real 50th Anniversary at their house at Pope. One hundred twenty-five guests registered for Mama and Daddy's celebration.

Mr. and Mrs. Nelson celebrate anniversary

Mr. and Mrs. Heck Nelson celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary on Sunday, September 8, at a reception hosted by their daughters Nyoka (Mrs. Ben) Beer and Sue (Mrs. Woody) Clifton, at the Nelson home on Highway 51 at Pope. The Nelsons were married on September 2, 1935.

More than 120 friends and relatives joined in the celebration. Serving at the reception were Cagalee Pugh, Mrs. Agnes Hartzell, Mrs. Ruby Waldrup, Mrs. Hubert Fisher, all of Pope, and Mrs. Iris

Deaton Stewart of Morton. The couple's granddaughter Niki Clifton of Pope registered the guests.

The Nelsons also have five grandsons, Mike Onkst, who with his wife Laura lives in Huntsville, Ala.; Richard Onkst also of Huntsville; J. Benedict Beer II of Cordova, Tenn.; Tracy Clifton of Morton, La.; and Jeffrey Clay Gentry of Pope. They have one great granddaughter, Jennifer Lee Onkst of Huntsville.

The couple were also parents of a daughter who is now deceased, Minnie Lee Onkst of Huntsville.



*Heck and Mildred, our Mama and Daddy...
Fifty years of marriage!*



*Mama's family at Golden Wedding Anniversary
 Front: Niki, Mildred, Nyoka, Laura Onkst, Sue
 2nd Row and Back: Jeff, Heck, Ben & J. Beer, Mike and Richard Onkst*

Mama's life has been blessed and full of joy but has suffered its tragedies. In 1970, after battling with depression, an illness not given the attention that it is today, Minnie took her own life. She lived for several days, long enough to make peace with her husband James Robert, and to let her sons, Mike age 14, and Richard age 10, know how much she loved them. But most important, Minnie made peace with herself. Minnie's death left a deep, un-repairable hole in all of our hearts and lives and made Nyoka and me more aware of our own potential demons, seeking help when we feel overly anxious or depressed. At the time of Minnie's death, Mama took control, hiding her sorrow under a veil of strength her trademark as the "steel magnolia" of our family. But Mama never really recuperated from losing her precious Heck-look-alike, born when Mama was just sixteen years old. She and Minnie had grown up together and Mama misses Minnie still.

Equally as great of a tragedy was losing Daddy on October 28, 2002. Daddy had been retired from running a loader for Yalobusha County only a short while when his health began to decline. With memory loss and nightly wandering, Daddy became too much for Mama to handle and she had to place him in Sardis Nursing Home.



Minnie, in her thirties, a couple of years before her death

I was working as a principal in Alaska when Daddy began to deteriorate and made two trips home that fall thinking Daddy was on his deathbed, but each time he would come back to us even showing us that wit we loved. My third trip home from Alaska was made on October 27, a last minute decision made thinking, hoping once again he would fool us and find his way back. I got off the airplane and headed to the nursing home, telling Mama I wanted to stay with Daddy that night.

Even though I was jet-lagged, I sat by Daddy's bed all night unable to sleep. I held his hand and told him everything I had neglected to tell him all these years, how he was my hero and how much I appreciated his over-protectiveness of my children and myself. I talked to him about our antiquing trips and thanked him for sitting in a lawn chair and watching as I painted the high ceilings at Parrish Oaks, the Victorian home

Woody and I bought and restored in 1989. Daddy was afraid I'd fall off the tall ladder I balanced on precariously. Daddy never opened his eyes as I talked to him, his breathing becoming more shallow and erratic, but I somehow felt he could hear me.

Early the next morning, Mama came in and knew immediately Daddy was dying. She had brought him chicken and dumplings he loved and tried to give him a taste but got no reaction from him. I called Nyoka who was on the interstate already and told her to hurry. She drove over one hundred to see Daddy before he left us. I kept telling him, "Hold on, Daddy; Noke is coming." We would think it was his last breath and then he'd take another as if waiting for Nyoka. I met my sister at the nursing home door and we ran down the hall. As soon as Nyoka spoke through her tears to Daddy, he took his last breath surrounded by Mama, Nyoka, Jeff, and me. Niki was teaching and said she almost left school just having a feeling. She has always regretted she was not there with us to say goodbye to the daddy and granddaddy we all loved to the depths of our hearts.

Mama knows Daddy is with the Lord and with Minnie and knows he's well and happy, but there is a part of him she just can't give up. She admits to "talking to Heck" many days whether he hears her or not. J. Beer, Nyoka and Ben's son, firmly believes Daddy's spirit remains in that house he built on Highway 51 and is still playing jokes on his grandchildren, such as shaking the hideaway bed where J. was sleeping one night and pulling the covers off him. One thing for sure, heaven is a lot more fun with Daddy and Minnie there together.



Christmas 1983 at the Beers' house



Daddy's 70th Birthday



Mama's 70th birthday

Everyone knows Mama for her unique personality. Hard work is her trademark, a quality she learned from her mother and one Mama feels is one of her greatest attributes. In fact, Nyoka and I had to finally put our foot down when Mama, in pain with arthritis, turned 87 but continued to try to keep her grass cut twice a week. Nyoka and I told Mama, “You will no longer cut your own grass.” We hired someone to cut it for her from then on.

We all know how Mama loves the Lord and finds no greater joy than attending Pope Baptist Church. And we all know Mama marches to her own drumbeat. She is different by choice, her own person. Being a writer, I often refer to her as novel material. But I want you to know how I will remember Mama.

Mama has more determination than any person I have ever known, much more than I could hope for myself. Even though she finished Moler's and got her beautician's license, she still felt less than she could be because she did not graduate from high school. Years after finishing Moler's, Mama went to night classes and received her GED at South Panola High School in 1972, the oldest one graduating at that time.

Mama has her values and nothing stops her when she needs to right a wrong and the stronger she feels about what is happening, the less fear she has. One day, after we girls were grown and gone, Mama came home and saw a teenage African American boy fleeing out her back door with his arms loaded. Not stopping to think of the danger she could be in, she ran after him. When she saw she couldn't catch him, she yelled for him to "Come back here this minute!" Sheepishly, the young man turned around, came back in the house and took his seat at Mama's direction to await the sheriff whom she had called after first calling the young man's mother.

My favorite Mama story is what happened before I was born. At a time in Daddy's life when he enjoyed the drink, he and his brother Buddy owned the Waterin' Hole, a tar-papered shack of a juke joint which just happened to be in the front yard of the unpainted house where he and Mama lived in the early years of their marriage with Minnie. Mama hated the Waterin' Hole.

The camel breaker came one day when an old man relieved himself out back of the juke, right in front of Mama's pride, Minnie, who was playing in the yard of the unpainted house. The next morning after Daddy went to his daytime job, Mama sneaked down to the juke armed with matches and gasoline and relieved herself of the Waterin'

Hole. It was years later before Mama told Daddy the truth and fortunately, he no longer drank and could appreciate Mama's gutsy move.

Whatever Mama does now or did in the past, she always gives 100 percent. Whether it is cleaning Chapel Hill Methodist Church or cutting her grass, whether it is organizing a Christmas party or studying her Sunday School lesson, she gives it her all and always has. But best of all, she loves us and has always worked hard and sacrificed much to give us a proper upbringing and everything we needed and most of what we wanted. We don't always agree, no parent and child do, but I always know if I need help, Mama is there for me. Mama is the person I want on my side if there is trouble, and I know I can count on her.

When I told Mama she needed to write down things about her life she would want in her biography, she began filling up yellow sheets of paper from legal pads, something she enjoyed immensely. Mama was always a writer at heart, and this was a subject she knew better than anyone. The task of deciphering her handwriting and trying to put the stack of yellow sheets in some semblance of order was daunting, but with persistence, I think I've gotten it all down. When reading through the yellow pages for the zillionth time to make sure I had not missed anything, I read a paragraph I just knew Mama would want added in her own words. Here it is:

I think I have a pretty good life style at 88 years of age. I don't mind staying here by myself, just me and the Lord. I'm glad I have my family and I ask our Lord to bless us all spiritually and any other way we need it. I'm glad I have girls to take care of me and I have two of the best son-in-laws. Woody had me a ceiling fan put in and had my furniture

upholstered. Ben had my TV and phone put on cable and bought me a new TV. My thinking is not as good as it used to be and I repeat myself a lot but who doesn't at my age.

This past April (2008), Mama gave us a real scare. After loss of appetite and energy, Dr. Ball sent Mama for a colonoscopy. Our worst fears became reality when we found out Mama had colon cancer. The surgery that necessitated removal of ten centimeters of her colon left Mama weak and the one dose of chemo she decided to take left her in worse condition. The process of healing is slow, but Mama is regaining her strength and her appetite and her will to survive are stronger than ever.

Mama has lost many of the members of her Snider family other than Mama and Daddy Snider. Mama's brother Leon died many years ago, a sad loss to the whole family. More recently, she lost both her younger sisters Sadie and Jeannette. When Mama and her sisters got together, they always had a good time and Mama misses them greatly. She enjoys being in contact with Sadie's and Jeannette's children. Most of them call her Aunt Sister.



Five Generations: Mike, Minnie, Mildred, Rachel, and Grandma Lula Davis White



The Snider Sisters: Mildred, Sadie, Jeannette



*The Snider Family, one of last pictures made before Mama Snider's death:
Mildred, Sadie, Jeannette, Mama Snider, and Buddy (Edwin not pictured)*



Arthur and Rachel Snider (Mildred's parents on their 50th Anniversary)

We hope and figure Mama will see many more good years since the women on her mother's side of the family have a propensity for longevity, but when she does join Daddy and Minnie, Mama will leave a legacy. There will be many Mama stories just as there are Daddy and Minnie stories to joyously share with children and grandchildren for generations to come. We will remember Mama's determination, her selfless work-without-ceasing ethics to provide for my sisters and me and to complete whatever endeavor she began. Mama is now and will always be a blessing to her family, and I think Mama will agree that is the greatest legacy anyone can leave on earth.

The Nelson Family Tree (1935-2008)

Felix Hezekiah "Heck" Nelson and Mildred Irene Snider

Married September 2, 1935

Heck born May 31, 1917; died October 28, 2002

Mildred born December 3, 1919

Daughter: **Minnie Lee Nelson**, born May 17, 1936; died December 12, 1970

Married to James Robert Onkst

Children: Michael Nelson Onkst (married to Laura Carter)

Richard Allen Onkst

Children: Jennifer Lee Onkst Thomas (Married to Lee Green)

Child: Ashton Connor Thomas

Robert Kyle Onkst (Married to Mary Maddux)

Child: Matalie Rose Onkst

Daughter: **Nyoka Nelson**, born November 14, 1943

Married to J. Benedict Beer, Sr.

Child: J. Benedict Beer, Jr. (married to Deanna "Dede" Humphreville)

Children: Collin Thomas Beer

Joshua Benedict Beer

Daughter: **Mantia Sue Nelson**, born February 16, 1945

Married to Woodrow Wallace "Woody" Clifton, Jr.

Children: Woodrow Wallace "Tracy" Clifton, III (Died February 2012)

Jeffrey Clay Gentry (married to Lee Bollinger)

Children: Meredith Price Gentry

Mary Clay Gentry

Margaret Ruth "Maggie" Gentry

Miki Nyoka "Niki" Clifton (*born on Minnie's birthday*)

(*married to Kevin Burchfield*)

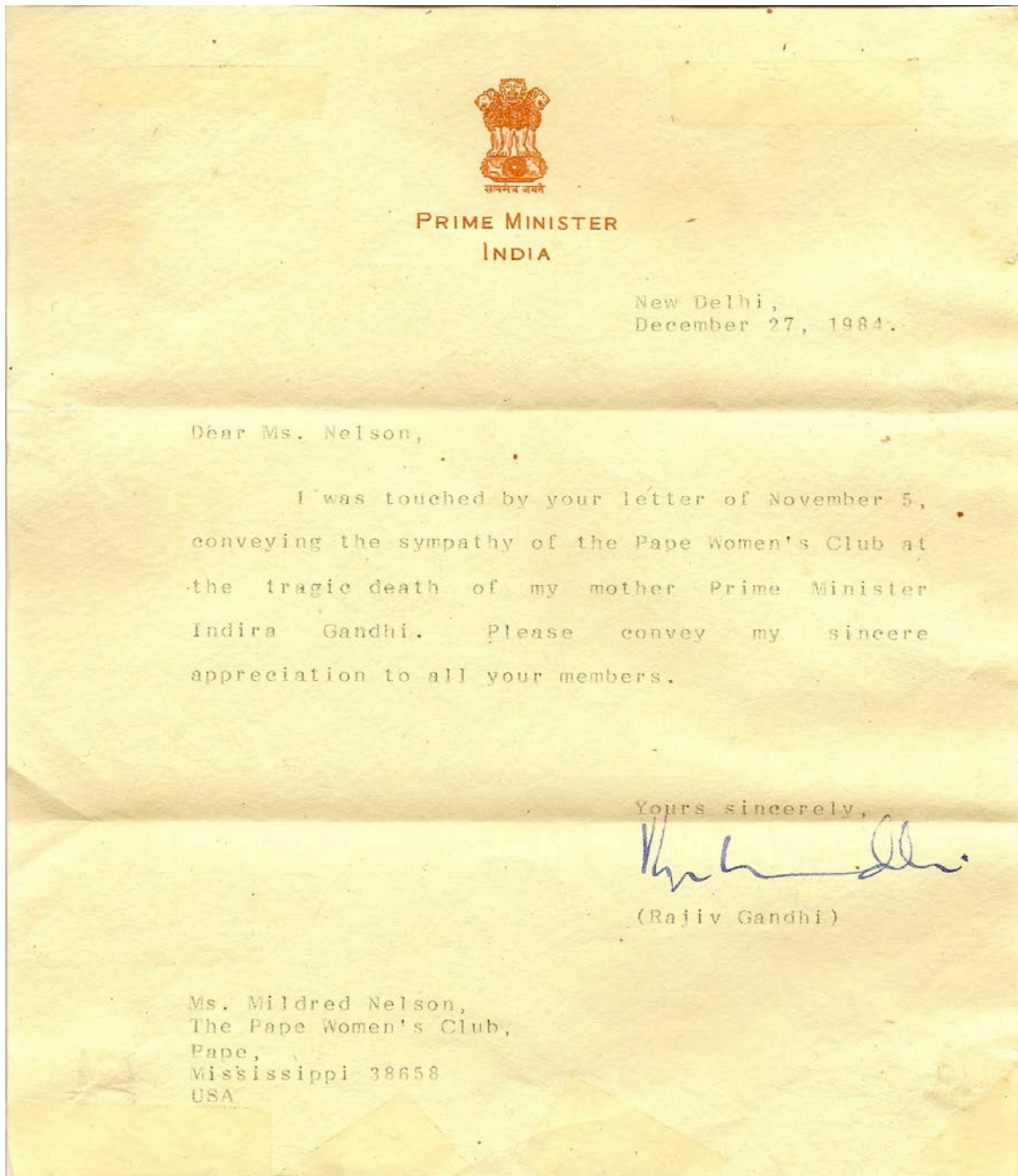
Children: Katelyn Nelson Meek

Denver Clifton Brown

McCarlie Kimbriel Burchfield

Gracie Fane Burchfield

RESPONSES TO MAMA'S LETTERS OF CONDOLENCE
TO WORLD DIGNITARIES



Letter from Indira Gandhi's daughter



Envelope showing official wax seal of India

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

September 16, 1981

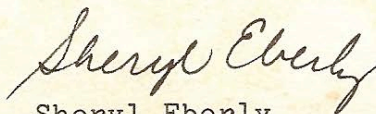
Dear Miss Nelson:

Mrs. Reagan has asked me to thank you for your thoughtful message.

The President and First Lady are grateful for the interest of individuals like you who take the time to let them know of matters of concern. Be assured that your thoughts have been noted.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,

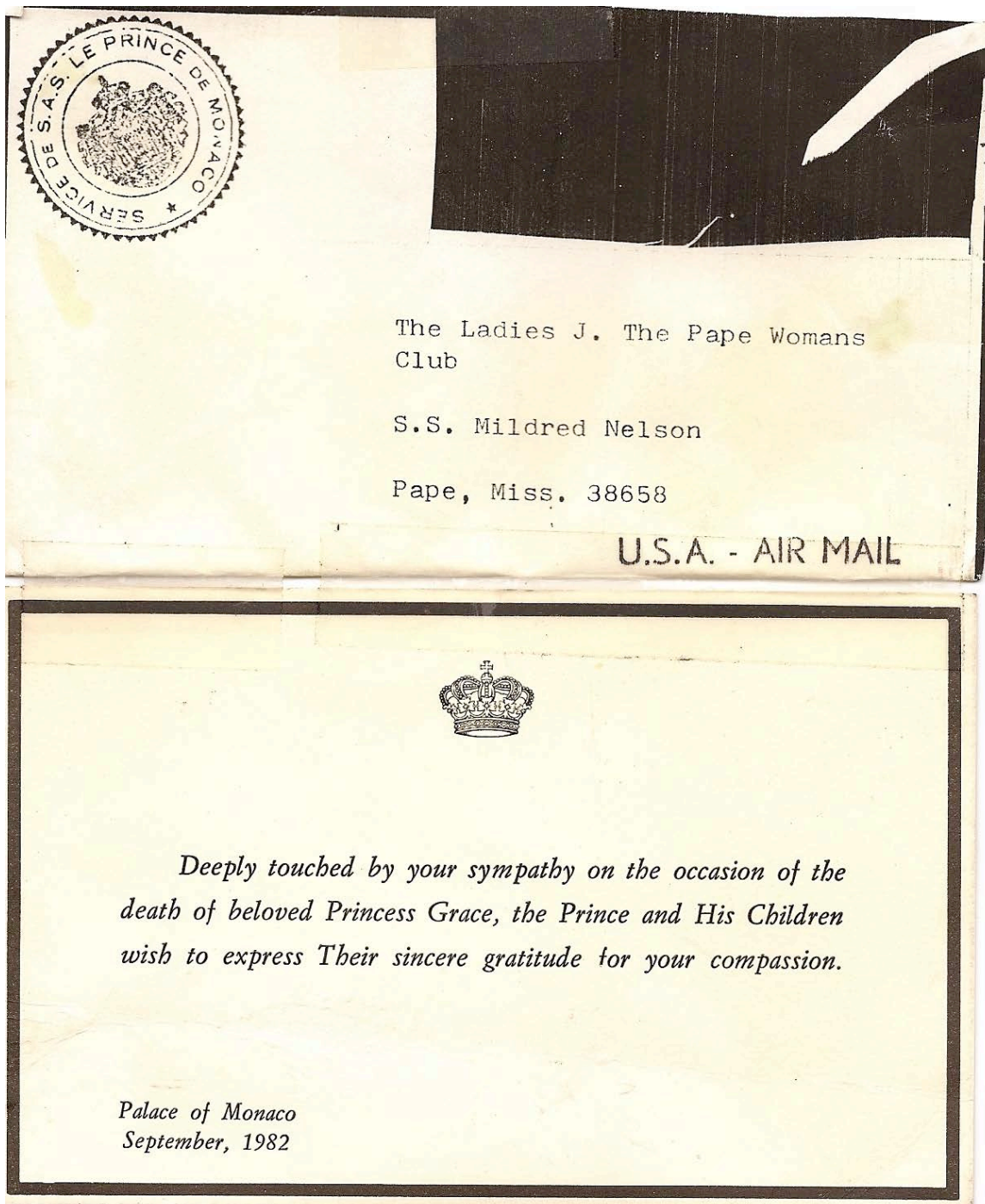


Sheryl Eberly
Deputy Director of Correspondence
Office of the First Lady

Miss Mildred Nelson

Pope, MS 38658

Response from Office of First Lady Nancy Reagan



Response from Princess Grace Kelly's family

(2008 - 2015)

On October 18, 2008, Nyoka and Sue honored their mother with a luncheon celebrating eighty-nine years of life, an early birthday celebration. Nyoka and husband Ben hosted the luncheon at their home in Cordova, Tennessee. At the luncheon, Mildred was presented with bound copies of her biography written by daughter Dr. Sue Clifton, with Mildred signing books for her guests following the luncheon. The honoree was also surprised with a DVD of her life in pictures.

Other luncheon attendees included Maurice Beatty, Pat Keigley, Angela Rowsey, Lillian Rowsey, Ramona Smith, Hilda Broome, Shelby McGovern, Niki Brown, Lee Gentry, Maggie Gentry and Denver Brown.



*Front Row: Dr. Sue Clifton, Mildred Nelson, Denver Brown
Back Row: Nyoka Beer, Niki Brown, Ramona Smith, Lee Gentry, Maggie Gentry, Maurice Beatty,
Angela Rowsey, Lillian Rowsey, Pat Keigley, and Hilda Broome*

Since 2009, Mama has recovered from colon cancer, but was left weak and less active because of the disease. A few years ago, Mama suffered a fall at her home at Pope that necessitated her moving to Providence Assisted Living in Batesville. Mama is not as spry as she used to be but is still quick-witted and loves company. Her loss of hearing has necessitated a hearing aid in one ear, and she even wears it after swearing she would not; however, she still

reads without glasses. The biggest loss for Mama in the present has been the loss of little brother Buddy whom she adored. She keeps Buddy's picture where she can see it and "talks to him daily" as well as to Daddy. Buddy called his "Sister" every day for at least the last five years of her life, and she misses their daily talk most of all.



Mildred signs bound copies of her biography for guests



Mildred's birthday cake: the cover of her Biography

On Saturday, December 1, 2012, Nyoka and I hosted another birthday party, this time honoring Mama's ninety-three years of life, and this has become a yearly tradition at Providence ever since. Nyoka and I laugh every year and ask, "Who will plan Mama's parties when we are gone?" Hopefully, and probably, considering the longevity of the women in Mama's family, many more birthday parties are in Mama's future. (*Biography was completed in September 2008 and updated July 4, 2015*).



Mildred, December 2014



Mildred and her beloved brother Buddy



*Mildred on the porch of the old home place on Leslie Rd., Pope
(On one of our outings)*



Mildred reads and writes without glasses



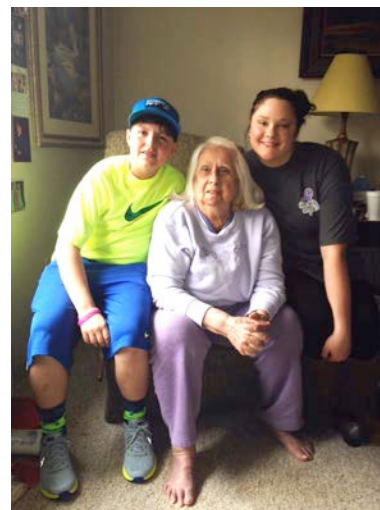
Mildred and Maybell, 2014



Sue, Mildred, & Nyoka 2014



Joshua, Nanny and Collin



Denver, Nanny and Maggie



Mama and the Providence gang with Sue's Woodie 2



Mama's beautiful hair



Sue, Mildred, Nyoka (a while ago)



Mama, July 4, 2015



Teresa, Mama, Kathy, Jimmy Dale & Kelley



Mama posing at Cub's Texaco, now a cafe

Teresa and Mildred Lookalikes

