



A TALK WITH MISS OMA

by Dee Van Asdale

Oma Olive Ann Jenkins was born on the second day of March in 1921. She was told that she was named for her Cherokee grandmother but in those days, many people didn't have birth certificates so Oma never really knew how her middle name was spelled. She just knew she was "Oma." She had two brothers, Pat and Jack. She was the baby of the family. They lost their mother when Oma was only two and were raised by their grandparents, Mary and Monroe Smith.

By the time Oma was ten years old she was working, digging sweet potatoes from the ground which is now the site of the Telliquah Resort on the Cherohala Skyway. Everyone worked hard in the family. They had to. Life wasn't easy back then. Her grandpa hunted and planted. They ate what he could bring home from the woods or what they could grow in the garden. Oma told me that they ate 'possum and were glad to get it. She remembers one time when she "helped" him by pulling up the new corn. She thought it was Johnson grass.

When she was about sixteen she told a "little white lie" about her age and was hired by the Stokely factory. One of her jobs was to peel big bushels of tomatoes, for which she was paid 8 cents a basket. Then she would pick beans in the Stokley fields. They were worth thirty-five cents a bushel. It takes a long time to pick a bushel of beans. "You had to crawl down those rows on your hands and knees. You couldn't step on the plants and you couldn't bend over all that time. When the whistle would blow we had to back over the river and work in the factory."

She also worked for two years in sewing factories. I wondered what her sewing job was, but she was an Inspector. "I thought I was high up there but I didn't make any more money than anybody else". She said people just worked wherever they could find work. I wanted her to remember some funny story from the sewing factory days. She didn't mean to, but she made me laugh when she said, "There wasn't anything funny about it....you just got out of there as quick as you could!"

Oma's daughter Mary was born in 1942. Oma kept on working the way she has done her whole life. She worked in Tellico Plains at Tallant's Grocery and Dry Goods Store for thirty-two years. I asked her when that was and she smiled and shrugged, "I don't know.....way back yonder."

Oma joined Center Presbyterian Church on April 23, 1961. That was when she started working

for the Lord. She taught Sunday School for thirty-five years. Tim Childress is forty-seven now, and six foot four inches tall, but the first time he was brought to church he came wrapped in a blanket and was put in Oma Roberts' arms. Probably half the adult members of Center Church were taught their Bible Stories by Miss Oma. She can't even remember all the children she taught with such love and caring but I'm sure they all remember her..... with love and caring. She served as a Deacon for three, three-year terms.

She has served her church and she has served our forest land. I believe she is a personal friend of Smokey Bear. For the last fifteen years you would be able to find Oma at the Ranger Station in her little green uniform, directing tourists, answering questions over the phone and in her own small way, generally helping to manage our National Forest. Her Cherokee grandmother would be proud.

Oma still lives right there on the Tellico River Road where she was born eighty-five years ago. The hoe, the tomato peeling knife, the bean bucket, the store counters, the telephone and all the other tools she has used through her long years of hard work will be just memories. However, Center Church will see her every Sunday morning, bringing her breakfast contribution of doughnuts or cookies....even though her diabetes won't let her eat them. She is always there "looking pretty as a picture" according to Beecher Cardin. She has a smile for everyone and a twinkle in her eye and makes us all hope we can be just like her when we are eighty-five.

Everyone will agree that Oma Roberts is one of God's major blessings to our Church Family.