

“My Bemis Memories”
Opal Buckingham
November 19, 2002

My first remembrance of Bemis was attending a silent movie. It had a farm scene; and I could relate to it, since I lived on a farm. We were visiting my Uncle Gavin and Aunt Sadie Pruitt. After the movie, we went to their house and heard songs on a “Victrola.”

My next visit, I remember, was a visit to Aunt Alice and Uncle Leland Taylor on the corner of 6th and Massachusetts Street. She had a baby boy. I had my first peanut butter and crackers. This was either 1930 or 1933. I thought people who lived in town were rich. I thought, “boy, this is the place to be.”

In 1930, our house burned; and we lost all of our furniture. The people of Bemis heard about it (probably from Uncle Bernard Babb, Uncle Gavin Pruitt or Uncle Paul Babb). Some of your parents or grandparents sent us a truck load of furniture. There were beds, a sewing machine, and many other useful items. This made a real impression on me and made me want to know these people.

I felt as if I knew many of you and many of your kin. I heard all about you when my cousins came to visit us. They spoke of Jerry Ward, Snooks Kelly, Wilma Hilliard, R.A. Webb, J.D. Carden, Wallace McKenzie; and they would tell of their school experiences and teachers.

Occasionally, we would visit in Bemis on Sunday afternoon. We would walk around, and I always admired the beautiful flowers and lawns. (I always got blistered on my feet.)

Once each year, I came to get a permanent from Mrs. Minnie Dulin at the “Y” Beauty Shop. The cost was \$1.00. The machine you sat under looked like you had a head full of wires attached to the overhead frame. You started out with a short hairdo and by the end of the year you had a long hairdo.

In 1943, I finished school at Bolivar. Some of my classmates came to Bemis to work. They were hiring for each shift, so I put in my application. Many young men were going into service for World War II. On July 4, Uncle Paul and Aunt Tressie came and told me I could go to work the next day. I lived with them and reported for work on July 5th to Mr. Dan Cobb. He took me to the spinning room and introduced me to Roscoe Watson who introduced me to my teacher, Mrs. Opal Young. She was very patient and kind – a real sweet lady.

A few months later, I was trained to work in the Laboratory. Mary Frances Frye taught me. She was expecting her first child. (I worked in the Lab tile and was already married and expecting my first child, less than a year later.) My last pay was \$27.67 for 48 hours of work. Annie Phillips was hired to work in the lab. The company paid over 3 billion yearly.

In January 1944, I lived with Minnie Granger for six months. On July 4, 1944, I had my first date with Robert Buckingham. We were invited to spend the day with Sue Azbill Pyles and her mother and dad. We got home in time to go to the revival in progress at the old garage building on D Street. Our courtship ended in marriage on July 22, 1944. "He was hard to get acquainted with." We began "keeping house" at 207 C Street in two rooms. Many couples started that way. We felt we had really moved up when we moved into a three-room duplex on Allen Street. You could ask for a house, and you might or might not get it. Both of our children were born while we lived there. We also lived at 5 Roberts Street and 223 North Missouri Street. When they sold the Bemis houses, we were living at 108 Allen Street and bought it.

Robert's maternal family came to Bemis in the early 1900s from McLemoresville, TN; and his paternal family came from Crockett County, TN. Robert's parents were Charley and Nell Williamson Buckingham, and they lived at 114 Roberts Street in Bemis. Nell's mother, Mary (Molly) Newbill Williamson, died when Nell was a teenager. Charley and Nell married when Nell was 15 years old. [This paragraph was edited for clarification.]

Robert and his father farmed the land on which Kroger and Walmart are located. [Editor's note: In 2002, this location was near the NC&StL Railroad where the railroad intersected Highway 45 South and was across the street from Lakeview Restaurant and Motel.] They would make a crop in the summer and work in the mill in the winter months. Robert's mom worked in the Spinning Department, and his dad in the Carpenter Shop. I remember many 'what-not's' made there. Robert worked with the carpenter crew for a few years. When World War II started, he worked in the Supply Room, since Gaylon Bridges and Harvey Butler went to service. He worked with Cleatus Wallace, Leo Atherton, and Don Harton. When the men returned from service, he went back to the carpenter crew and later to the air condition crew with Ray Long. When an opening came in the Supply Room, he returned and worked with Leo Atherton, Don Harton, J.B. Sanders, O.C. Azbill, Bobby Barger, and others. He retired in 1982. Robert was so pleased that the Historical Society was formed, and he was a charter member. He enjoyed talking about the "good old days" and about being a caddie at the Golf Course. He said Mr. Hugh Mainord played regularly and was a good tipper. He usually gave his caddie twenty-five cents. Robert's family was the third family to move into "New Town" when it was being built.

Robert's uncle, Troy Buckingham, was a Barber at the "Y." His uncle, Ben (Pee-Wee) Williamson, had a dry-cleaning business which he operated from his home. Robert was born on 2nd Street, weighing in at 12 pounds.

During World War II, people in Bemis were doing what they could on the home front to help. I remember going upstairs at the "Y" to roll bandages. We used gauze and a spatula to fold it into nice squares. People were buying war bonds, and I'm sure some of you remember the scrap metal collected by the Scouts. Many homes put emblems in their windows with a blue star on them. When a serviceman lost his life, the blue star was replaced with a gold star. I remember two gold star families - the Silers and Johnsons. James Siler and Raymond Johnson are two that I remember; there may have been more.

It always amazed me at the number of people who had nicknames: Budgie Hamilton, Snooks Kelly, Bud Kelly, Bo Templeton, Kraut Granger, Red Nesbitt, Coffee Pot Granger, Sisy Tippet, Lindberg Wheeler, Pappy Newman, Sonny Johnson, Didt Jackson, Mop Hays, Squirrel Rogers, Butch Spellings, etc.

Another incident happened for which I again thank Bemis people. In 1945, the second fall we were married, Robert was sick with asthma for six weeks. Dr. Kelly Smythe was his doctor. People in the mill gave from ten cents to five dollars each. It was a real help. I still have the list of names that gave.

Our children were both born when we lived at 111 Allen Street. They spent their early years playing "Hopscotch," ball, play school or church with the neighborhood children. They always looked forward to the ice cream man so they could get a 'Cho-Cho.' We never could get much grass to grow in our yards. Each Saturday there was a ball game on the back lawn. Now, there are trees as high as the house. On Sunday after church, especially in the fall and spring, we would walk in the woods many times looking for leaves for leaf collections at school.

Through the years, we have kept busy in our church. We were and still are blessed with good neighbors - the Kolwycks and Pressons on C Street; on Allen Street, Genola Hudson and her parents, Virdie and Lathie Jackson; on Roberts Street, the Hensleys and Mrs. Gaines; others, such as the Gibbons, Myracles, Knotts, Kings, and many more.

There were many, many good times, as well as some not so good; but with the help of the Lord, good neighbors, and a wonderful family, we got through the bad. For this, I'm very grateful and thankful. As we approach the holiday season, I hope each of you have the best ever. Thanks for the opportunity to tell of my Bemis memories and express my thanks.

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