

ASH NATIVE BORN IN 1898

Josie Coleman's Called Brunswick County Home For 95 Years

BY DOUG RUTTER

To say that Josie Coleman has lived a hard life is like saying New York is a good-sized city. It's a major understatement. But through her struggles, the 95-year-old Ash native has maintained a sense of happiness that bubbles from within her like a natural spring.

"I don't have much, but the Lord tells me to be content and that's what I am," Josie said in a recent interview. "I feel like the Lord's help and hard work is the reason I'm here. I'm blessed. It's been hard, but still I'm blessed."

Born Jan. 15, 1898, Josie was the second youngest of the five daughters of Covil and Maggie Canady. "I was born right here in Brunswick County and I've been here all my life," the petite woman says proudly.

"The old house standing just across the branch over there is where I was born," Josie adds, pointing west through a brown corn field. "It's still standing."

Josie, a sharp-minded widow who lives alone and still cares for herself, has quite a story to tell about the small, faded green house she's called home since 1944.

Around the time of her husband's death, she purchased the one-story home and six acres of property from a brother-in-law. After some haggling, they settled on a price of \$800.

"It wasn't anything but a rough, lumbered-in house when I bought it," Josie recalls. "I added on the back room and the front porch later."

To pay for the house and farmland, Josie labored in nearby tobacco fields and grew and cured her own tobacco—all this at age 46. "I've had it pretty tough, but the Lord has been good to me."

Her cozy home sits off N.C. 130, just down the road from Zion Missionary Baptist Church where Josie has been a member most of her life. Outside the home are vegetable and flower gardens, which Josie still tends to herself.

The weeding and garden work isn't too much for this 95-year-old. "I've been healthy all my life," she says. "I've had some sick spells, but I've worked hard and tried to live a decent life."

For her age, Josie has a very good memory. She can't recall exactly how much formal schooling she had, but it wasn't much. She first attended school in an old house next to Zion Church and then went on to Waccamaw School.

"There weren't but six months of schooling in my growing up, and they didn't have grades then," she said. "The few of us there was, met in one little room."

Josie has early memories of her mother scrubbing the wooden floor with white sand and a brush made of corn husks. "I bet I toted 500 pounds of sand across that swamp to scrub that floor with," she said.

"Times was so hard 'til nobody didn't have anything much, just a place to live," Josie added. "It was kind of hard. There was a few people who had nice houses, but it was very few."

The Canady family's one-room house had a fireplace, with a chimney made of sticks and plugged with clay.

One time, Josie's mother was cooking backbone and rice in the fireplace and a piece of hardened clay fell down the chimney and into the open pot.

"She just spooned it out and we ate that dirty rice," she said with a laugh. "It wasn't really dirty because that clay was hard as a brick. I've seen it good and I've seen it hard in my time."

Those hard times included the Great Depression in the 1930s. "We didn't go completely hungry, but I've known my mother to get some collards and that be all we had to eat."

World War II was another difficult time for Josie, who had two sons, Clayton and Dayton, serving their country. "It was hard is all I can say. It was heartbreaking too."

Dayton worked in a kitchen as a cook, while Clayton was fighting on the front lines. "He would write me and he would say the mud made him a good bed to lay in," she remembered, fighting back tears.

Josie and her husband, Bero Coleman, raised three girls and three boys on their farm. Two of her sons are still living, and two grandchildren live in houses nearby.

When asked about changes she's seen in Brunswick County, Josie responded: "Lord have mercy. I don't think I can even answer that. There have been so many changes."

Josie remembers when Shallotte was "just a building or two" and there was no such thing as electricity. "We used a kerosene lamp. We had no refrigerators, no freezers, nothing like that." She also remembers the first automobile she ever saw—a Ford. It belonged to a country doctor from Whiteville, who came to Ash one day to treat one of Josie's sisters.

"He had the first car that ever come out I believe," she said, straining to jog her memory. "It looked like a buggy coming down the road without a horse pulling it."

Despite the many changes she's seen in Brunswick County, Josie says the Ash community isn't much different that it was when she was a young girl. "It was thick settled just as bad then as it is now."



JOSIE COLEMAN stands outside the home she purchased for \$800 in 1944. She worked in tobacco fields to pay for the house and six acres of farmland.

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