

From the Cradle to the Grave Our Legacy of Love and Hope

Cleothia Comage, 78, mother of 14, devoted spouse, and community icon

By Steve Campbell

To put in flatly, Cleothia Comage was a busy woman.

The Brownsville, Tenn. native constantly cooked, cleaned and made clothes for her 14 children. She attended New Hope M.B. Church faithfully, serving on the Mother's Board and the choir.

Comage was often strict, said her fourth oldest, Bobbie Thompson, now of Detroit. "Receiving company" from boys at age 16 was forbidden, so she had to periodically sneak out when she could.

Thompson said, however, that she respected her mother for her devotion to making sure her children understood respect and hard work.

"She was strict at times," Thompson said, alluding to the no-boys rule, the frequent church outings and the stressed importance on hard work on the family farm as well as school. "She always made sure we had done our homework."

"She was a good parent," Thompson said. "She did the best she could for us. We never went hungry."

The Comage house worked like a team, Thompson recalled. The children shared responsibilities, such as cooking the peas and corn grown on the farm, as well as tending to the hogs and cows. Comage's husband, Johnie, made sugar molasses and shared domestic duties.

The respect Comage generated didn't stop with her family, Thompson said.

“She was very well-liked by the community,” she said. “A lot of people knew her in church. We were a large family, so most everybody knew us some way.”

Comage was involved with her children’s’ schools, attending parent-teacher conferences on top of pushing her kids to succeed.

Voting used to be a chore in Brownsville, Thompson said.

Elections were held uptown in the courthouse, sometimes in the heat of summer, a situation that would necessitate use of fans to keep temperatures tolerable.

Some, however, weren’t happy about blacks voting, so black pepper was strewn about the courthouse. The wind from the fans would make the pepper airborne, irritating the allergies of the blacks trying to vote, sending some away, Thompson said.

“We would stand in line trying to vote, but some would turn away because the pepper was making them sneeze,” she said.

“My mother believed that we were God’s people, too,” Thompson said.

Thompson agreed the voting rights have improved since she and her mother voted in Brownsville, which upsets her to see people not bother on Election Day.

“Our situation was really bad,” Thompson said. “That’s why it troubles me to see people, young people especially, not vote.”

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After the last tearful goodbye, after the last hymn is sung and the final prayer is said, mourners leave a funeral with a final record of the life just passed – the program. The documents give the order of service and a brief obituary, but there is always so much more that they don't reveal.

Her funeral program tells us that her name was Beatrice Porter Dotson, but everybody knew her as Miss Febbie.

"She was a real sweet lady, and she loved children," said her daughter, Evelyn Jones of Brownsville, Tenn.

Her program tells us Miss Febbie had her beginnings in Mason, Tenn., the daughter of Dora Douglass and Dennis Porter. What it doesn't tell you is that her parents died when she was very young, and so Miss Febbie was raised by her aunt and uncle. They had five boys in the house, but Beatrice was the only girl.

"She learned how to cook standing on a box in the kitchen," said Jones.

Miss Febbie's program tells us that she was married to Willie "Noot" Dotson. What it doesn't tell you is that she married him when she was 20, and they lived happily together for 71 years. Miss Febbie died in May 1989, only five months after Noot.

The program says she had three sons and two daughters, but what it doesn't tell you is that she cared for all of the children in the community.

"She took my clothes and gave them to others," said Jones. "She loved children."

Children loved her, too. While listening to Jones, you form a picture in your mind of a bright, smiling woman surrounded by active, adoring children.

"She was sweet, but she'd make them mind."

She worked tirelessly to provide for her children. In the 1960s she worked as a picker for local farmers. She picked okra in the summer, and in the fall she would switch to cotton. She worked at the cotton compress in Brownsville and was able to raise enough money to help buy her house.

"She told her boss that she wanted him to take out Social Security, and he finally agreed and she was able to draw on it for three years," said Jones.

Miss Febbie went to school so she could write her own name.

Miss Febbie also grew her own produce in a little garden she had out behind her house in Brownsville.

"When she picked it she'd put it in a little deep-freeze for the winter. She'd always cook Thanksgiving and Christmas for all of the children. She'd always cook the old-time stuff, and she would hardly have to go to the store for anything because she had everything she needed."

She was active in her church, the program tells you that, too. But what it doesn't tell you is that she was a member of St. John Missionary Baptist Church for 78 years and went regularly until three months before her death. She was a member

of the Mothers' Board and was an usher at the church, and church activities were her specialty.

Miss Febbie was also a longtime member of the NAACP. She went to all of the meetings in Brownsville and was active in voter registration drives. She even received awards for her outstanding work with the organization.

"She worked hard (for the NAACP)," said Jones. "She was old, but she was one of the first to register to vote."

Miss Febbie never hesitated to give to others, even when she was stretched tight. During the 1940s, when things were rationed for World War II, people had to use stamps to buy even daily needs. Miss Febbie would give money to others when they ran out of stamps so they could get what they needed. Jones remembers how her mother raised a few chickens, too, and sold them to people in the neighborhood. That isn't in her program, either.

"She was always going out and doing something," said Jones. "I always had to carry her where she needed to go."

Miss Febbie went to all of the community's annual parades and marches, to be there for the children and participate in her community. She never missed a Christmas parade. People would always ask her why she was standing out there in the cold, but she loved to do it.

"She really was a true person," said Jones. "Everybody who knew her loved her."

Her funeral program doesn't have to tell you that.