

A Heavenly Salute

Thunder boomed, rattling the windows of the small chapel, lightning flashed and knocked off the power but lit up the darkness as a crowd of more than 100 people gathered to say goodbye to the oldest living person in Tennessee on Saturday. Perhaps it was a heavenly salute to the lady whose body lay in the casket.

The preacher, Bro. Rodger McCann, unshaken by nature's fireworks and the loss of the public address system, calmly said, "That's all right; I'll just speak a little louder." And he proceeded to officiate at the funeral for Nyleptha Matilda Bryant Shell Roberts, 112, who died peacefully, although unexpectedly, in her sleep of natural causes just after midnight on May 5, 2010.



One woman said later that the darkness brought on by the passing storm was symbolic. "She came into a world without electricity, and she's going out without electricity." And Mrs. Roberts, who loved a good story and telling jokes, would have seen humor in the events at such a solemn time. In the audience were family members, associates from Life Care, including Regional Vice President Paul Zani and his wife, Tammy, and Matthew Cummings, executive director of Life Care Center of Sparta, and a broad array of community citizens, young and old.



Nyleptha Bryant was born in White County, Tenn., on March 12, 1898. She was the oldest daughter of John Douglas Bryant Sr. (1871 – 1932) and Molly Victoria Whitaker (1879 – 1957), and was the second of 12 children. Nyleptha was named after the good queen in Henry Rider Haggard's adventure novels. She attended a small, country school, and remembered seeing her first automobile in 1907, when she was nine years old. During her professional life, she worked in a clothing store, and managed a grocery store and a laundry service. Most of her work, however, was as a homemaker for her family.

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At the age of 10, her mother taught her to sew, and she would make patterns and sew many of her own clothes for many years. An array of buttons she preferred, and a quilt she had made, were on display at the funeral, along with a huge replica of a soap fish – a hobby she turned into a money-making venture at Life Care Center of Sparta, where she lived since she was 107. Despite her years, she kept busy producing small statues of aquatic creatures made with a bar of soap, cloth, beads and other craft materials, and passed time by serving as the facility librarian.



But back to the funeral. Bro. Freddie Copeland opened the service by pointing out that Mrs. Roberts "attributed her long life to the blessings of God. She learned about another life – a life in Christ – that was more important."



Bro. McCann said Life Care Center of Sparta "had given her a nickname – Tennessee Treasure – and that she was. She was an example of how we ought to conduct ourselves and live our lives ... Whether we live to be 12 or 112, one day we must give an accounting for the lives we have lived, and what we have done."

TOMORROW'S PERSPECTIVE: Nyleptha Roberts' advance notice of her death, and the treasures she laid up in heaven.

– Beecher Hunter