

Interview with Betty Lawrence, Long-time Area Resident and Matriarch of Large Family

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Betty Lawrence is a North Carolina native, with roots deep in the rich Southern soil. Her father and her mother and the generations before them, lived and worked and are buried in these lands. Betty doesn't know where the family came from originally. "They've just always kind of been in North Carolina, I guess." Betty says her forefathers were "big tobacco farmers, and hogs, Granddaddy had hogs." Betty's own dad, Jamie Yates Jones, grew tobacco and the family worked in the fields picking and looping with strings to stay on sticks for hanging and sheeting up for drying to prepare the harvest for market.

Mr. Jones and his wife, Alma Woolard Jones raised ten children on their farm east of Fuquay Varina off of what is now Highway 42. In fact, Betty, now eighty-five years old, lives on the land today, as do two of her daughters.

Betty has suffered great loss with the death of her husband in 19XX and later the death of her only son in a work-related accident. She is reflective, strengthened by their memories. For Betty, life is full. "Mama" as she is known to her kin, is a strong woman with a huge heart. She raised her siblings and her children to be productive and loving members of her every-growing family, and she continues to mentor and guide them today. "They come to me for advice because they know I will always be here for them. I help them find answers. We have respect for each other and confidence in that support, even if we tease or pick at one another sometimes."

She still finds time to help others less fortunate through church and visiting the sick and cooking for or helping those in need. Betty has built a lasting legacy and projects a sense of humility, joy in life, and perseverance. Looking back she says she wouldn't change a thing. "Nothing. I wouldn't change nothing," she says with the grace that comes with a life well lived.

Betty was the third in the line of offspring and was called upon to care for her seven younger siblings at home while her older sisters worked in the fields. It was during these years that Betty began to prepare herself for her future as a mother, caregiver, and eventual family matriarch.

It wasn't until 1972 or so, Betty recalls, that the process of farming tobacco was automated in the Jones family. So, by then Betty had long been married and was raising a family of her own. Years earlier as a young teenager she had fallen in love and in 1951 at the tender age of sixteen was wed to XXX Lawrence. They began a family shortly thereafter, having three daughters and a son. Betty didn't hesitate to embrace her new role. She had after all, already "raised" seven children. Her sisterly duties of preparing meals, doing laundry, and settling little disputes that arose in the household, were second nature to her as a mother.

“As a family growing up, we were very close. We had to be, had to sleep double or maybe three to a bed,” Betty said laughing.

“My goal was to be a nurse, and I guess I kind of might be, but I don’t get paid! I just enjoy what I do.”

Without formal training or a role model in the formative years, Betty adapted to changes around her. If the kids needed clothes, she would sew them, if they needed food she would cook it, if they needed a hug, she had that too.

Betty hopes she has taught her family to have faith, faith in themselves, in one another, and in their creator. She is thankful for all that she has and all that she has nurtured. The role of matriarch is well earned and well deserved and Betty’s guidance and leadership endure. “It’s what I do,” she said with a smile.