

The Autobiography of Flonnie Webb Stephens

From Rough Draft of June 29, 1998, with additional information included in April 2003 and June 2004

I was born near Oneida, Tennessee, to Richard and Mary Etta Terry Smith on January 22, 1909. I don't know who delivered me. Mamma said there was a big snow on the ground. I was the third child — the third of five girls and one boy: Cassie (1905), Zona (1907), me (1909), Alta (1911), Cornelia (1923) and Ralph Espy (1922). We have no picture of me until I presume I was almost two years old, the one with Cassie and Zona, where I had snowball flowers in my hand. Mom said my lip was swollen, so she assumed that something had bitten me. Now that we know so much more about allergies, I wonder if it could have been an allergic reaction to something.



Figure 1 - Flonnie on the road to work in 1935



Figure 2 - Esau and Flonnie Webb wedding – December 25, 1935

In September 1911, six-year-old Cassie, the oldest child, took bad sick with diphtheria. The doctor was out of town, and Cassie couldn't even swallow food. Mom would put biscuit and gravy in her mouth, and she'd spit it back out. Mom could never again eat that food because Cassie liked it and couldn't swallow it. She lived about three weeks and died. During her illness, Daddy was milking, because Cassie was so sick and Alta was only three months old, and I was running after a calf, and it kicked me on the forehead.

Another time, Zona, the second daughter, was going around a picket fence with a bucket on her arm, and Daddy was coming around the corner from the opposite direction with his wagon and horse team. He ran over little Zona, breaking her collarbone. Mom always said that the bucket on her arm probably saved her life. Our big house was near the Smith grandparents (Ewell and Luvanie Marcum Smith), so Zona would frequently slip off and go there. Our two aunts (Lillie and Nevada) petted her and taught her to chew tobacco, which she did all her life. Once, when Mom found Zona at Grandpa's, she raised the foot of the bed, tucked her dress under the bed leg to keep her from running off. Zona asked if she could eat, and Mom said, "No, I won't give you anything," and I said, "I will, Zona."

Our house was located north of present-day Oneida, about where Tobe's restaurant or Northtown Shopping Center is now. In April 1914, when I was five, we moved by wagon to a log house at Williams Creek, about seven miles in the country (you turned at Red Rock, past Woodrow Marcum's house, and went another one-to-two miles). One of Daddy's sisters, Aunt Tilda (John Alvis and Matilda Smith Slaven.) lived there before we did, but it wasn't her farm. (I think some company owned the timberland. I don't know whether the company or Aunt Tilda built the log house.) The first year was extremely difficult. Until they made a crop that year, we had it really hard — not enough food. There were many different apple trees, plums, etc., on the place. Daddy hauled lumber daily, which was the reason we moved there.

The log house was one huge room that served as both living and sleeping quarters, with a kitchen built on one end of the porch. The two windows were covered by wooden shutters and the two doors were fastened with latches. The big room was heated by a fireplace made of rocks and daubed with mud. I liked to lick the dried mud on the outside of the house; I must have needed some minerals. We slept on homemade mattresses, and you'd never believe what they were made of: ticking fabric that we filled with oat straw or corn husks shredded by hand after the stiff outer husks had been removed and discarded. We took baths in a washtub in the rinse water where Mom had washed the laundry. The water was from a nearby creek. We usually had two cows that grazed in the woodland and drank from mud puddles. We had no outhouse — we used the woodland nearby (and that was true at school, too.)

We had no refrigerator, of course, so milk and butter were kept cool in a spring dug out in a huge rock. The spring was a dishpan-like hole dug out in a rock and water from the hill ran into it. A plum thicket surrounded the spring. If we had a rainy thunderstorm, the milk would spoil. Supposedly, the lightning or the storm ruined the milk, but of course, it was really the warmer, humid weather. The spring was near our house, but often in summer it went dry, and water had to be carried about a mile up ivy thicket road. Mom strung two jugs of water across her shoulders and carried a bucket in her hand, but the ivy thicket was hard to carry a bucket though. Sometimes I would go with her and carry water in an eight-pound lard bucket.

The nearby cliffs had icicles in the winter. Mom would get them, beat them fine, and put them around the churn in a tub. Inside the churn would be milk, sugar, vanilla flavor, which she churned to make ice cream!



Figure 3 - T. E. and Flonnie Stephens (1970s)



Figure 4 - Flonnie in Arizona (1991)

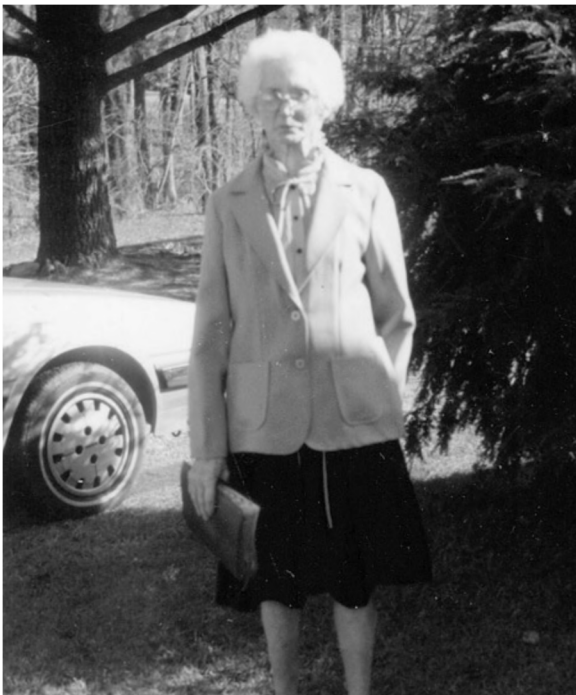


Figure 5 - Flonnie in the 1980s



Figure 6 - Flonnie on her 90th birthday

I never drank milk or ate meat. I liked green beans or fodder beans with a biscuit for breakfast. My family raised crops of beans, then later in the year made sorghum. Also, we canned jars of fruit, beans, and pickles. We cooked beans by hanging the pot from a rod over the fireplace. I tended the beans and washed dishes when I was still so little I had to stand on a little stool to reach them. We had apple trees of different varieties. We had corn huskings, where people would come and help us remove the husks from ears of corn. Mom would have sticks of cane to dip in sorghum and much more for the helpers.



Figure 7 - Flonnie and daughters Lynna Ruth, Mary Lou, Etta Jane, and Ella Mae

We raised cane and made molasses in the fall. Cane stalks were stripped of fodder, and the seed heads were cut off. A cane-grinding machine was borrowed, and a mule was hitched to a long pole attached to the machine. One person would sit there and feed cane stalks into the machine, which crushed the juice out of the cane and into a tub. The juice was then emptied into a vat hanging over a fire to cook until it changed into a thick, sticky semi-liquid called molasses. It had to have foam skimmed off it continually during the cooking process. Neighbors would gather for the stir-off — that time when the molasses was finally ready to “come off.” They would eat the foam and molasses with homemade wooden paddles or cane stalks. Sometimes some young men would be drinking and would get too rowdy or not be polite.

Sometimes we'd also have "raisings" and "corn huskings" — that was when people would gather to help husk cribs of corn. Mom would have good eats prepared, such as stack cakes, chicken and dumplings, etc. One idiot I recall would fill his pockets with goodies! I knew nothing of music at this time, except singing religious songs at Sunday School and church.

Daddy and Zona got the flu, which struck one winter while we lived on Williams Creek. They were so bad that Dr. Phillips rode a horse through a big snowfall to doctor them. Another year, there was an outbreak of measles and I got them at a baptizing from a Slaven guy.

A Payne family with girls our age lived a mile or so below us. The Payne girls and we Smith girls played housekeeping. We made mud pies, used alder tags (what's left after the blossoms fall) for beans, and sliced up dead wood for bacon. We also used the seed from dock plumes (weeds) for oatmeal and pokeberries for ink. The Payne girls stayed at our house quite often, even spent the night there, but we wouldn't stay away from home at night. I sometimes had nightmares and would sleepwalk. One night I "woke," unlatched the door, and was standing on the porch when my parents found me. So, they put the latch so high that I couldn't reach it. Once Alta and Zona went to spend the night with the Payne girls, but Dewey Payne (the only Payne boy) had to bring them home after dark!

Zona and I also had a china doll. I kept mine hid, as I was afraid she would break it. I had a 35-cent doll hanging on the wall when a cyclone hit one night and lifted the roof, then let it back down so that it caught my doll by the waistline, leaving its head hanging down. The storm blew windows and doors open, blew our socks and shoes into the fireplace. Daddy kept trying to get up to close the door, but he would be blown back each time. It blew bee gums over, rail fences down, and picked up the roof of the barn and set it down several feet away.

When I was about nine years old, I remember going through a pasture on my way to school. I was running some, and suddenly I thought a mule was after me and Alta, so I started running faster and faster and faster. But the faster I ran, the faster the mule seemed to run. I was scared to death. But it turned out to be my heart beating, not a mule running!

Christmas was the only holiday I knew about. My parents would take eggs to town to sell so they could buy us coconuts, peppermint candy logs, and oranges. Mama would also make popcorn balls. For these, she would popcorn, boil molasses until near the hardshell stage, add soda, and pour this over the popped corn. Then she would put butter on her hands to prevent sticking while rolling the sticky combination into balls. She also made parched corn by putting a small amount of grease into a skillet, heating it, then adding the shelled corn. For Christmas "dinner" (our mid-day meal), we had stack fruitcake, which consisted of five cakes made of dried apples, spices, sugar, water, and flour. We also had stewed chicken and dumplings, cornbread, some canned beans, and potatoes from the "hole." Our Christmas tree was either a small white pine or cedar tree from nearby woods. We decorated it with chains of popcorn and holly berries, strung together using a sewing needle and thread.



Figure 8 - Mary Jane Webb (1956)



Figure 9 - George Webb



Figure 10 - Webb family in 1950

Mama and Daddy would go to the store in their wagon, six to seven miles in each direction, to buy fabric for making dresses for us girls. Mama sold eggs and Daddy hauled lumber for the little cash that was needed for the few things we had to buy. (By the way, there were no taxes in those days!) Sometimes she also made dresses for the Payne girls. One year she made all six of us red dresses, and we were called Red Birds! I recall a red dress with a yoke that was gathered and fell loose. Later (1940s and 1950s), sometimes we got animal feed in fabric bags instead of hemp bags, and the women and girls went along to pick out which prints we wanted for our dresses. This was like getting a “free” dress! For socks, Mama would spin sheep’s wool on her spinning wheel and then use that yarn to knit our socks. The socks were scratchy! Mom always had needles, and she also had knitting needles to make yarn socks. I cannot remember her not having a sewing machine and cards to fix wool, so that it was ready to spin thread. To iron our clothes, we heated really heavy irons on the fireplace coals. One fall I had no shoes, and Mom gave hers to me for the school year. Men in those days wore denim overalls and a jump jacket, not too different from what you see these days.

Sometimes Mom would leave us at Uncle Williams’s (William and Kizzie Smith) when she went to town to shop. Inman, our first cousin, was older than us girls and also a lot rougher. He had a rope swing attached to a tree, and he would swing us as high as the top of those tall oak trees! If Mom had known about it, she would have been afraid to leave us there. She also took us to Grandma Terry’s (Leonard and Lucy Anna West Terry, who lived down at Grave Hill) about once a week. We had a little feisty dog that wanted to take care of us. If we met other dogs, he would stay near us, and no other dogs would come near. If the Payne girls were playing, running, and yelling, he would stop them. Our dog died of mange at the age of 13 years.

I recall many bad storms and lots of snow during my younger years. In the 1930s, my family lived on Litton Road, and I was working two to three miles away at the Telephone Office on Main Street in Oneida. I wore my overshoes to the office (the roads were not paved then and were muddy). The day was beautiful, so I left the overshoes there and went to spend the night at my Aunt Nancy’s (Leland and Nancy Terry Thomas) home on Vine Street. That night, we had a terrible snow, and I had no overshoes to wear when I walked to work. Then, walking home from work, I’d go in drifts where the snow was up to my crotch — about 30 inches deep!

Uncle Crawford (Terry), Mama’s brother, visited us quite often. He was of the Holiness religious faith and believed in talking in unknown “tongues.” When we’d go to bed, he’d start praying aloud in his unintelligible “tongue,” and we girls would all cover our heads, as he frightened us. He would go fishing with Mama and us at Jack’s Crossing. I always kept Mama busy, baiting my hook with worms!

Mom would make game boards, similar to the checkerboard, and we would play “Fox and Geese” (all white except two foxes who would catch the geese.) Also, Indians and White, where the same number of people were used and would jump each other like checkers. We played “Ring Around the Roses, Pocket Full of Posies, Squat by Josie.” Another game we played was “marbles.” Then we would shoot a marble with our thumb, forcing the marble into a hole — like you knock a golf ball into a hole. When we were older, we also pitched horseshoes and played

“handkerchief.” We would all get into a circle except for one person who was “it.” “It” would walk around behind the circle and eventually drop the handkerchief behind someone. Whoever could get the handkerchief first is the new “it.” Another favorite pastime was “Grapevine Rope,” where two people would swing a rope while others jumped over it. Still later, in middle school, we played Town Ball, in which we had a pitcher, batter, catcher, three bases and home. There were 10 players on each side. I got chosen first because I could run so fast. I made lots of home runs.

After my sixth birthday, Mother suggested I go to school, and I became sick at the mere thought of leaving home to go to school. So, she waited another year and would take us to get with the Paynes and we all would go on to school together. Hazel Payne (who later married a Hancock), was four days older than me. We were in the same grade. I completed the third grade that first year under Ike King. We would have spelling bees on Friday afternoon, and I would never have to sit down — I was always the only one left standing. We did have books and homework, and we used the blackboard, writing on it with chalk. I got my lessons at home by a kerosene lamp or from a pine knot in the fireplace. One year the teacher had to go into military service, and we had school only five weeks. Otherwise, the school term was five months long. The last year at that school, the building burned two weeks after school started.

The next year after the school burned, we three girls started attending Grave Hill School, three to four miles across the mountain. The Slaven children and the Foster kids went part of the same road that we did. The Slavens were good to us and would give us big cucumbers from their garden that we would pass by. We played ball at the noon hour at school. We carried our lunch in an eight-pound lard bucket or a basket and ate in the nearby woodlands. I had pipe-stem legs and could outrun a fox! The captain of each team wanted me on that team. Florence West (later Blevins) was my best friend. One day we went to the spring and got water. When school reconvened, she came holding a lizard under her clothes and wanted me to go with her to get it off. Of course, I refused because I was afraid of lizards. Mom got a lizard on her shoulder and wanted me to knock it off with a broom. She was running after me with the broom, screaming to knock the lizard off, and I was running just as fast to get away from her!

In the winter, we ate food that had been preserved be either being “holed up” or dried. Our parents would dig a hole a few feet into the ground, line it with layers of straw, and put potatoes in, then cover them with a mound of dirt and put lumber or something over it to help protect it from the weather. Cabbage was done the same way, except that this plant was pulled up root and all, and the heads turned down in the hole. Holed-up vegetables were our “refrigerated vegetables!”) Beans were planted in cornfields and allowed to dry before picking and then they were shelled to be used for soup beans in the winter. Or fodder beans would be strung and hung to dry. To do this, we used a needle and about 30 inches of string thread that we had to put through the middle of the beans, leaving a little space between each two beans. Then we’d tie the two thread ends together to make a circle that we hung on a nail in the wall. Pumpkin was cut into rings, then the rings were hung on a pole that was suspended on large nails in the kitchen walls or angled across a corner between two logs.

We all had to learn how to grow our own food. To grow sweet potatoes, Daddy would make a potato-slip bed by putting down a layer of warm manure from the barn, adding a layer of dirt, laying down some sweet potatoes, covering them with another layer of dirt, then covering with extra manure, then with hemp bags. He would then wet the potato bed and wait for the potatoes to sprout leaves. The heat from the manure helps make the potatoes sprout. After the leaves are sprouted and are extended a few inches out of the dirt, you “slip” these off and plant them one by one in the garden. To grow Irish potatoes, we would cut them into pieces, making sure that each piece had one to two eyes (dimple-like spots), as this is where the potato sprouts its new plant. Each piece is then planted where you want the new potato plant to grow.

My brother was born in May 1922. I was past 13-year-old, and Mom’s pregnancy was kept secret from us girls. We found a drawer filled with baby clothing. When the time came for his delivery, we were sent to Grandma Terry’s while Grandma and Aunt Sally were with Mom. Aunt Nevada gave him a girlish white dress, and one afternoon when we came home from school, Mom had him dressed in it, standing in the wagon. He was our pride and joy.

In the spring of 1924, we moved on Daddy’s sister’s (Virgil and Lillie Smith Litton) farm near Oneida. The area was known as Deep Hollow,, or more recently Litton Road, and lies near where my sister Alta has lived for about 30 years. We moved there so we could further our education. I had to take the eighth grade again because I had no certificate from the eighth grade. I averaged 97 that year and entered Oneida High School in 1925. I didn’t miss a day of school all four years. Mom took in laundry to enable us to go to school. We would help with the washing before school started, and if I heard the first bell ring, I’d run like a fox to be on time. We attended Bethlehem Baptist Church. We three girls all professed during a revival by Ped Trammel in 1926 and were baptized on a cold raining Sunday in October. We sang in the choir and also attended B.Y.P.U. on Sunday nights.

In the fall after we moved from the country, we went back to the old homeplace to get cabbage, apples, etc. A mule had died near them, and the odor was so terrible we didn’t get the food!

We lived on the Litton Road for about six years, and then it was sold. We then moved into Leland Thomas’ house, which was also on Litton Road but back toward town. That house was near where Grandpa had lived. (Grandpa was Ewell Smith, who lived at the corner of what is now Litton Road and Smith Lane. He died in 1921, while we were living on Williams Creek.) We only lived in Leland’s house about a year, and then he suddenly showed up and moved in on us. We had nowhere to go. We found a house near where the B&Z used to be, just below the hospital. At that time, there was just a house and a barn there, none of the stores or houses that you see there now. About 1930, we moved to Pine Creek to what later became the Bill Pennycuff house.

I graduated from high school on May 29, 1929. We girls dressed in blue-checked gingham dresses, but I was so poor that I had to borrow a dress to wear to the prom. The prom was as nearly nothing as could be — I remember appearing on the stage and maybe the three high grades were there. The boys probably wore blue jeans and a white shirt. I let another student talk

me into a decision I have always regretted. I should have given the valedictorian speech, but he didn't want me to get credit for being the valedictorian.

After graduation, I started to work at the Telephone Office, where I worked off and on until 1936. I would work full-time until a new lineman would move in. If the lineman had family who could work the switchboard, then I would be without a job for a while until that lineman would move on or needed an operator.

I never dated much until I met Esau (E.S.) Webb at Pine Creek Church, where he was a deacon. I had met Ennis Posey at C. Cross's store while working at the Telephone Company and dating Esau. Ennis would bring candy, watermelon, etc. to me at the Telephone Office. He even bought me a watch. He and I would get a catalog and pick out furnishings for my dream house with him. He and his sister were raised by their daddy; their mother died when they were young. I quit seeing Ennis partly because Esau was so hurt.

I dated Esau three years and we married on Christmas Day, 1935. We got married on the way home by Preacher Garrett at his store on the curve of Stumptown Road. We then went to my parents' home and ate supper. My parents never said anything against our marriage, but Esau's mother did not want us to marry. I think she was afraid she would be turned out.

Esau and his brother Crusoe had already bought the 90-acre farm about 1926-27, and had built the house, in order to move their parents off Smith Creek near Buffalo. I moved in with him and his aged mother (his father had died in February 1935). My sister Alta had married Esau's brother Crusoe two years earlier (May 1934). We all started a dairy in 1936 in the Pine Hill community.

In the Spring of 1936, right after we were married, Esau went to Cincinnati to help his sister Clarise's husband (Hayes Gregory) in his lawn maintenance business. He did it to get money to run the farm. He would send the money back to Crusoe to get supplies to plant crops. I remember how hard it was working in the cornfield after having worked in the telephone office. In the winter of 1936-1937, Esau and Crusoe worked the stave woods down at Verdun. They lived in a tent and slept on the ground, which must have been very cold and difficult to do.

My sister Alta and their first child, Paul T. (who was six months old), came and lived with me and Mrs. Webb while Esau and Crusoe were gone. Mrs. Webb lived with us until about 1950, when she started drawing a pension and immediately went to live with her daughter Maggie (who married Henry Terry). Mrs. Webb went to Cincinnati for a year to live with her daughter Clarise. She was supposed to leave on Thanksgiving Day, but the biggest snow I ever saw came on Thanksgiving and she was delayed.

I went with Esau to Cincinnati twice. Once, before we married, we went in the spring. That was my first train ride. He took me to visit the zoo. I remember that because the llamas were mating, and it seemed so strange that the female laid down on her belly. The next time we went was probably in the winter of 1940. Clarise's husband was dying of cancer. We took our daughter Mary Lou on the train to visit Clarise and Hayes just before he died. I don't remember much about the train rides.

I knew little about World War I. My Uncle Calvin (Terry) was in it and Mom was so worried about him. I remember when the war ceased, we were working in the cornfield. Trains were blowing and Mom was shouting, praising the Lord for her brother's safe return. Of course, I remember World War II because my brother Espy was in it. He got stabbed in the thigh by a Japanese soldier. He never talked much about it, but he apparently killed several Japanese soldiers after being wounded, carried his buddy to safety and earned several medals. I also remember nothing about politics, except Daddy was a devout Democrat and wouldn't vote for a Republican whatsoever. Mom believed women should not be political.

Esau and I had four girls — Mary Lou, Etta Jane, Ella Maye, and Lynna Ruth. Crusoe and Alta had three boys — Paul Thomas, Richard Henry (R.H.), and David Espy. Esau drowned in 1955 at Leatherwood Ford while we were having a picnic with my parents, brother and sisters and their families. We were saving for the girls to go to college because Esau wanted them all to go. We had saved about \$3,600 when he died. I stayed on with Alta and Crusoe in the dairy until 1964, when I took a job at the Scott County Hospital.

While working at the hospital, I met T.E. Stephens, a patient who was recuperating from a car wreck. In 1970, I transferred to the Scott County Nursing Home. Eddie Stephens and I married in November 1972. I continued to work at the Nursing Home until I retired in 1977. Eddie was a wonderful grandfather to my grandchildren until he died in 1990, just short of his 90th birthday.

As to our daughters, Mary Lou married Larry Clark and moved to Muncie, Indiana. They have three sons and seven grandchildren. She has been active in local politics in Farmland, Indiana, for a number of years. Etta Jane graduated from Tennessee Tech, completed her Master's Degree, and became a teacher in Scott County. She married Donald Vawter, then Bill Price, and raised Bill's daughter, Darla. Ella Maye graduated from Tennessee Tech and U.T., completed a Ph.D. and married David Van Fleet of Oak Ridge. They have a son and a daughter and live in Scottsdale, Arizona. Lynna Ruth graduated from UT-Chattanooga with a Master's Degree and married John Standridge, a physician in Chattanooga. They have two sons and two grandchildren.