

A Biography of Altha Elizabeth (Neighbors) Couch

A BIOGRAPHY

On October 14, 1897 in Texas County, MO, near Mountain Grove, a daughter was born to William Henry and Ann Eliza Stevens Neighbors. They named her Altha Elizabeth and she joined three brothers, Maynard, Clyde and Oscar and a sister, Nellie.

In the next eight years, Carrie, Lenore, Hugh and Helen joined the family. Then, tragically, Ann Eliza died. (There is a studio portrait of the family on display that was taken shortly after her death.) Will Neighbors was determined to keep his family together and this he did, eventually marrying a woman named Florence. She brought two daughters into the family.

When Altha was about nine years old, she joined the Greenwood Church of the Brethren and was baptized in a stream near the church.

Altha went to school in a one-room school house and after completing the 8th grade and a year of high school, she went to live with her Great Aunt Sue in Weatherford, OK and attended normal school for a year. Having completed the required year, she was hired to teach school in a one-room country school with the odd name of "Freely Give". When I asked the origin of the name, Mom told me that she didn't know, but she was sure it had nothing to do with what they paid their teachers. After a year of teaching, she accepted an offer from her uncle Casimir Stevens to attend business college in Springfield, MO.

She moved to Kansas City in her early 20's and went to work as a secretary with GE. When her boss left GE to accept a job with Ajax Rubber Co., he asked her to join him. Since the job at Ajax paid a whopping \$90.00 per month, rather than the \$67.00 per month that she received at GE, she went to work with Ajax. With the exception of the first 13 or 14 years after I was born, Altha was steadily employed until she was over 80 years of age and all of her jobs, except for the first one, came looking for her, rather than the usual way. For instance, when I was about 13 and many of R. J. Gibbs' employees had joined the war effort, he persuaded her to reenter the job market and come to work in his cleaning shop. The rest of her working life was in cleaning shops where shop owners came to her and asked her to come work for them. In the last few years she had some harrowing experiences starring down the barrel of a gun while being robbed. Thank God she's still with us. But, I digress.

Back to the early years. After her move to Kansas City, she and some of her brothers and sisters lived in a bungalow at 24th and Harrison. When her older brother, Maynard, sent the church letters of her and her sister, Lenore, and urged them to start attending the local Church of the Brethren, they began to travel by streetcar from their midtown home to the church in the 6200 block of what is now 16th Terrace, but what was then Hugh St. The pastor at that time was Arthur Wyatt. I'm grateful to my Uncle Maynard, because it was at church that Altha met Herbert Markwell Couch. They dated for a couple of years, then on October 6, 1928, they were married at the home of her sister, Nellie. The officiating minister was M. R. Murray. On November 26th, their only child, Norma Lee, (that's me) was born.

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They lived at various locations in Kansas City, usually on the East side. Almost always there was someone living with them; their brothers or sisters, nieces or nephews or cousins. When I was 5, we settled at 5809 E. 16th Terr. in a house that Uncle Casimir bought and lived in with us. Mom lived in that house until July, 1986, when she moved to Nowlin Hall. She lived in Nowlin Hall for the next nine years, participating in the quilting club and Friendship club and other activities She preferred to walk the approximately quarter mile to church except in the worst weather.

The year of 1956 was one that deserves mention. Just before Easter of that year she was diagnosed with colon cancer and she had surgery. Thanks to excellent medical care, her own good physical constitution and the prayers of her friends and family, she seems to have survived. On her birthday of that year, she acquired a son-in-law, Donald Andrew Berg.

Dad died in December of 1965. Mom has carried on an active and useful life before and since then. She was slowed down a little in June of 1995 when she broke her left hip. About four months later, she broke her right hip. She likes to say that the doctor told her that her left hip had healed so well that it was better than the right hip, so that is when she broke the right hip. She has been living at Hidden Lake Care Center most of the time since leaving the hospital after the first break. We learned this week that she is the first resident of Hidden Lake to reach the age of 100.

Mom has been one of the most faithful members of this church and taught Sunday School and served in various capacities on the church board. She rarely misses attending Sunday School and Church. When she can't make it to this church, she usually attends wherever she finds herself. She has read the Bible through many times and still studies it daily. She used to walk almost everywhere she had to go at a distance of no more than a mile. She has always enjoyed quilting, reading and working puzzles. She is an expert at grammar, spelling and usage of the English language, and I still go to her as my expert source.

I feel very lucky to have had Herbert and Altha Couch for my parents.

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