

Mel Coffelt Remembered

By Carroll McMahan

Wearing a derby hat, Mel Coffelt would stand every Sunday along Newport Highway (now Eastgate Road) selling copies of the Knoxville News-Sentinel out of his large canvas satchel. For all the years Mel sold newspapers, it never mattered whether there was sunshine, wind, rain or snow because he would always be at the same spot at the same time, like clockwork.

A man of few words, Mel Coffelt was unlike the newspaper hawkers who exclaimed “extra, extra, read all about it!” or “get the latest news right here!” Instead, he stood stoically beside the road awaiting a potential sale. “That’ll be twenty cents” was the usual extent of his conversation with customers.

Born May 30, 1883, Melvin Coffelt was the only son of Mahalia Lanning Coffelt and James H. Coffelt, a local blacksmith who once served on the City of Sevierville Board of Aldermen.

“He had a middle name” said 94-year-old Helen Ownby, the only surviving daughter. “But, he never wanted anyone to know what his middle name was. He never used it.”

“The family owned a cabin at Seaton Springs where Daddy and my grandmother spent most of the summer, when school was not in session. Grandpa stayed in town to manage his business during the week.” Helen recalled.

In his youth, Mel was locally renowned for his ice skating exploits on the frozen river above the mill dam located behind Sevierville Milling Company on East Main Street.

More than anything else, Mel loved baseball. As a matter of fact, He continued playing for Murphy College several years beyond the time he was a student there. He was known on the baseball diamond for his superb batting ability.

Mrs. Ownby recalls hearing stories of her father having been recruited by professional baseball teams; however, he chose to remain at home to help his father after the untimely death of his mother.

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Both Coffelt and Roy H. Massey, son of Dr. Z.D. Massey, were heavily recruited at the same time. Roy accepted an offer and eventually debuted in the major league with the Boston Braves in 1918.

“My Daddy was a very quiet man.” recalled Helen “Loved to read, especially anything about baseball. I remember that he subscribed to several sports magazines when I was a child.”

On March 10, 1908, Mel Coffelt married Ann Fox, a daughter of Carroll W. Fox and Mary Katherine Newcomb Fox. They were parents of five children.

The oldest daughter, Marjorie, married Gene Atchley. Their second daughter, Evelyn, was married to Frank Catlett. The younger daughter, Helen, married S.A. Blalock, Jr., who died very young. Later, Helen married Cecil Ownby.

Their older son, Gene Coffelt, was stationed in the South Pacific in World War II. He returned home and together with his brother-in-law, Gene Atchley, the two men started an auto-body repair shop. After that business sold, he was employed by Newman and Pemberton Trucking Company for 25 years. The younger son, Jack, never married and was a recluse for most of his adult life.

On the subject of family, Helen reminisces about her grandfather and father. “Grandpa Cofflet shod horses and built buggies. Although he was never formally trained in the field, he often practiced veterinary medicine, too. So he needed Daddy to stay here and help with the business.”

The Coffelt blacksmith shop and stable was located on East Bruce Street. Broady’s Hospital was built in 1940 on part of the property which J.H. Cofflet and Son Company once occupied. By the time the automobile had replaced a horse and buggy as the primary mode of transportation, Mel’s father was old enough to retire.

With a family to support, Mel began working for Sevierville Steam Plant, located near the Court House. The steam plant provided electricity for Sevierville before

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the construction of Beason Dam. When Coffelt's shift ended at nine o'clock in the evening, there was no electric current available in the entire town until the furnace was rekindled the next morning.

After the steam plant closed, he worked at Stanley McMahan Milling Company until the business failed due to financial difficulties. In 1934, the mill was purchased by a group of businessmen and Sevier County Milling Company, Inc. was organized. John E. Temple was manager. Coffelt returned to work at the mill for Mr. Temple who later acquired ownership and changed the name to Temple Milling Company.

Coffelt held the position of bagger. He bagged the flour and meal into 1 lb., 5 lb., and 10 lb. bags, tied every bag at the top and stacked them according to size. James A. "Jimmie" Temple, son of John E. Temple remembers Mel Coffelt always looking sharp. "He would dust the flour powder off his clothes and shoes at the end of the day and walk home looking neat as he had when he reported to work that morning" said Temple.

Coffelt began the avocation of selling newspapers later in life. The papers were dropped off on the corner near his home by a currier. Initially, he sold papers on Saturday and Sunday at the corner of Park Road and Bruce Street near his home. Later, he walked from his house to a spot near the bridge over Middle Creek on Newport Highway to carry out business. This routine began sometime in the 1930's and continued for around thirty years.

Mel Coffelt died on November 7, 1968 at the age of 85 and was buried in Alder Branch Cemetery.