



tar heel memories

# Grandma Macon

*Vivid recollections of visiting a cherished relative bring to mind childhood days spent rambling in the woods, working on the farm, and learning how to live.*

BY TERRIE EDITH MOFFITT

**M**y earliest childhood memories of Grandma Macon's farm in Randolph County begin with the meandering dirt driveway to the house. Grandma's road wound through the pine woods; past a big garden where raccoons bent the corn stalks over for their babies and terrapins bit the bottoms of the tomatoes; past some fields with persimmon trees on the right and sheds for chickens and rusted tools on the left; past the pole barn piled high with hay bales where cats hid litters of kittens with eyes shut tight; and on up to the house, where the road ended under magnolia trees.

From a child's perspective, one of the most important features of that road was that it was studded with white, flint rocks that stubbed our toes if we ran. The road was Grandma's nemesis, too. Granddaddy always hollered at her from one end of the road to "get down here" to the other end, and the garden was always too far down the road to carry hoes and bushel baskets in the humid heat. She had to fight the unending battle against red mud holes, and poison ivy always broke out violently on her arms and neck when she cut the weeds in the ditches. Still, I think she loved and admired her road — years later, when we drove together through



Tending to her flower garden was one of Grandma Macon's daily chores.

Beverly Hills, California, Grandma said she felt sorry for the movie stars because their driveways were so short.

## Out and about

Days on that farm were so full for us grandchildren in the 1950s and '60s. We found birds' nests made of the long, creamy hairs from the tail of Chesty, Aunt La Verne's palomino walking horse. We picked violets and made tiny bouquets. Aunt Sandi put quilts over a stick frame to make us a teepee. We found nests of baby rabbits and quail eggs after the hay was mowed down. We played in the creek branch, building rock dams to hold prisoner unfortunate salamanders and crawfish and tadpoles. We caught jars full of lightning bugs. We dug up moss and tiny little plants to make terrariums in gallon glass jars. We hunted Indian arrowheads and quartz crystals in the fields; Grandma had special eyes that enabled her to spot the perfectly shaped ones. My finds were

usually broken. We also dug worms and fished in the pond for little sunfish the size of my hand. Grandma caught the most, because she spit on her worms. Other people remember their grandmas' houses. I remember Grandma Macon's woods and fields.

One of the most fun things about being with Grandma on the farm was feeding the baby Holstein calves, each one perfectly clean in black and white. I always liked to stick my head in the sack of calf manna to smell the rich, sweet powder. Grandma would mix up a bucketful of the milk substitute and start the calf on it. When the bucket got almost empty and light enough that I could lift it up, Grandma would let me hold it while the calf sucked on the big rubber nipple that came out of the bottom of the bucket. Grandma told me that the calves depended on us to take care of them or else they'd die.

At the end of the long, long days, after all the cows were milked and



GRANDMA WORKED HARD: SHE GOT UP BEFORE DAWN AND ANYBODY ELSE, AND SHE MILKED AND PLOWED AND FIXED THE TRACTOR AND SOWED CORN, WHEAT, AND SOYBEANS IN THE FIELDS. SHE MOWED HAY AND FED THE FIELD HANDS AND FIXED THE TRACTOR AGAIN AND HAULED HAY AND CHOPPED UP BLACK SNAKES WITH HER HOE AND TOOK CARE OF AN ENORMOUS VEGETABLE GARDEN.

everybody came in from the fields, there was supper in the kitchen. I thought milk tasted so good after Grandma carried it in the steel can from the barn up the dark road to the house at night. On the way, we could see the lights shining, gold and welcoming from the windows. We always ate the same supper — or so it seemed to me — but I wouldn't have wanted anything else: molasses and butter, hot cornbread johnnycake, and fresh, cold milk. Grandma cooked, although now that I'm a grown-up myself, I can't understand how she managed to stay on her feet to do it. Granddaddy sat sideways, never putting his feet under the table. The Macon daughters usually crumbled their cornbread into glasses of buttermilk, even thought the best way to eat cornbread was to use it for sopping up a big lake of black molasses and yellow butter very carefully mashed together with a fork.

### All in a day's work

Grandma worked hard: She got up before dawn and anybody else, and she milked and plowed and fixed the tractor and sowed corn, wheat, and soybeans in the fields. She mowed hay and fed the field hands and fixed the tractor again and hauled hay and chopped up black snakes with her hoe and took care of an enormous vegetable garden. I used to hate helping her pick the garden. When she'd say, "Girl, you got to pick now if you want to eat later," I'd swear I wouldn't want to eat any, anyway. Every summer she'd laugh at that joke. Grandma Macon laughed a lot, with a chiming laugh, and she sang rhymes, too.


Most days, Grandma wore bib overalls, a long-sleeved shirt, a pith helmet, and knee-high rubber boots with metal latches all up the sides — not done

up, just flapping. She looked like a twin of Granddaddy, only bigger and stronger. She smeared Bag Balm on her hands and Oil of Olay on her face, and that was her daily beauty regimen. Grandma hardly ever got dressed up, but when she did, the preparations took whole mornings. She said it was because there was so much repair work to do. She only wore girdles and stockings and high heels and dresses and hats and gloves and lipstick for a wedding or a funeral or if she had to go to Greensboro to the doctor. She always arrived many hours late, but she looked regal and gracious, like the Queen of England.

### Life lessons

My grandma disdained prissy church ladies, medical doctors, and black snakes — putting them together in a single category of "God's creatures, but to be avoided at all costs." Ladies and doctors she avoided by staying squarely on the farm unless it became an absolute necessity to leave it. But once, in 1977, she rode with me all the way across the country when I went to California for graduate school. Driving to the Grand Canyon, we showed the ranger her

"Golden Eagle" park discount pass for seniors and the disabled. When the ranger tried to flirt with Grandma a little bit with the coy suggestion that she didn't look old enough for a senior citizen pass, she told him it was mine, because I was blind. I was driving the car.

I know there were other people besides my grandma on the farm when I was growing up. Granddaddy Macon was there, of course, and my much-loved aunts and my many warmhearted and playful cousins. But I always had eyes only for her. I wasn't by myself in that respect, either, because I know that all 14 cousins feel exactly the same way about her that I do. Each of us were on the farm when we were different ages and at different points in Grandma's life, but we all got the same lessons, which we will always keep: God is to be found in the woods and fields. The animals depend on us, or they will die. Eat what tastes good. Respect is earned, not demanded. A woman's beauty is in her strength and in her laugh. 

*Terrie Edith Moffitt is a university professor in London, England.*

Grandma Macon teaches grandson Greg about milking the cows, while Granddaddy observes.

