



# THE BURKETT FAMILY

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## Bill Easterling



Times Columnist

## Missing him too much to stay behind

**T**he whole neighborhood showed up when she made her famous tamales.

Not just those who lived next door and across the street, either, but those who lived farther down Halsey Avenue, plus a few from around on O'Shaughnessy.

Some who should know said she was "the best cook" they ever saw, which explains why her tamales were regarded as a specialty in that corner of the Dallas Mill village.

It didn't matter if she used meat from a store or from rabbits her husband hunted, her tamales always turned out the same — too good to be true and too tasty to be missed.

Of course she had some kind of secret recipe. All the great ones do. But whatever her secret was it's safe now, because it went to heaven with her.

Bessie Lee Burkett couldn't

stand being without her husband, J.B., which is why most of us believe she went to be with him six weeks, to the day, after he died in a car accident April 21. We could not help but notice, those of us gathered there on a gentle slope in Maple Hill, how fresh the dirt on his grave still looked.

On that soft April afternoon when her husband was laid to rest, Mrs. Burkett told one of her daughters, "I won't live long." She was hardly being a prophet of doom. She was stating her heart's desire.

Many have said to me since Bessie Burkett's death that husbands and wives who've lived together for a long time

left her, too. In her mind, I suppose there was only one alternative.

**M**aybe a prayer was being answered. Doctors said the deadly infection worked fast, and was of such strength a person much younger than Mrs. Burkett's 82 years couldn't have resisted. I do know everyone at the funeral home agreed there was a look of peace on her face they hadn't seen in years.

When she was at her best, Bessie Burkett was a fun-loving woman whose sense of humor took a back seat to none.

While he was cutting wood with an ax, one of her brothers accidentally chopped off three fingers on her right hand when she was a child. As a grown woman, she'd put a serious look on her face and tell children her brother "chopped my hand off" when she was a child. Naturally, they'd be scared to death and hoped they never had to meet this mean old man until she laughingly told the truth.

Losing those fingers never kept her from sewing and quilting and being one of those old-fashioned mothers who have wonderful stories told about them when they die.

I bet J.B. met her at the Pearly Gates with a great big kiss, and I bet Leroy Elders and Bud Barlow and a bunch of others from her old neighborhood in Dallas village were right behind asking when the tamales would be ready.



(1973)

Bessie Lee Bryant Burkett 12/28/12 - 6/2/95  
Gentry J.B. Burkett 9/24/10 - 4/21/95

Married April 8, 1933

often find it hard to carry on when a spouse dies, and I suppose this is simply more proof.

J.B. and Bessie had been married 62 years at his death, and those of us at his funeral could tell she was taking it hard. Her children were grown and gone and the man she had lived with for six decades had

This article appeared in the Huntsville Times Tuesday June 6, 1995.

## Reunion 1995 !

Sometimes - and somehow - things have a way of working out for the best. And that's exactly what happened this year. You will recall that a tornado hit the park where we had been having our reunion so Audy Majors had to scramble around to find us another location. He found us one and it turned out to be a better place than the one we had been using! We had the place all to ourselves and there was a lot more room both in the size of the pavillion and the grounds. And while I have no way to prove it, it seemed cooler to me down there along the river. Therefore, based on the many favorable comments, both verbal and written, we have reserved it for next year.

Before going any further, the picture below seems to sum it all up. It was brought down from Tennessee by Bob Burkett, Jr. and I wanted to include it in case some of you didn't see it. The picture frame in the lower left corner reads "Families Are Forever".



**Families Are Forever**

Although saddened by the absence of an Uncle and Aunt to many of us, Gentry J.B. and Bessie Burkett, both of whom we lost in the weeks just prior to the reunion, we went on just as they would have wanted us to. They always enjoyed the reunions even though their health was fading in the past couple of years and it tired them a great deal to attend. Looking back at pictures from last year leaves no doubt about their enjoyment.

## THE BURKETT FAMILY

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And I believe everyone enjoyed themselves again this year. I know I did. But then, I always do. Plus, we were pleasantly surprised and happy to have some cousins attending for the first time. From Lizella, Georgia came Marlene Burkett Evans and from Lewisburg, Tennessee Frances Burkett Cordum, daughters of Audy Burkett and sisters of the Alabama Kenneth Burkett. Also a first-timer, from Jasper, Alabama where they recently moved from Tampa, Florida was the daughter of Kenneth and Janie Burkett, Lori Burkett Bertoldi, husband Wesley and daughter Amanda Jane.

All the way from Havelock, North Carolina came David and Della Andrews Frey with daughter Caitlin and new son Travis. Della is the daughter of Verdie and Kathleen Majors Andrews. David is in the Marine Corps.

And from Saudi Arabia, Almon Majors, Jr. and wife Rita with many interesting - and often funny - stories of their life in a country so totally different from ours.

If I have missed some other first-timers, and I probably have, please let me know. It seems the few hours we spend at the reunion pass so quickly I never have enough time to visit with everyone.

I arrived at the park Saturday morning at what I thought was an early time but it was not early enough to beat Nancy Majors Roberson and husband Frank. In fact, Nancy was already at work setting up things. And she brought a dish which I thoroughly enjoyed and so did several others who asked about the recipe for "Baked Hash Brown Potatoes". Herbert Lee Majors and wife Liz remembered and sent me the recipe which you will find later in this issue. However, Herbert cautions, "Three extra pounds a week!". Thanks to Nancy and everyone else for all of the really good food *and desserts* which were in plentiful supply.

Among all the others, we had one thing take place at the reunion which we can all be proud of. You will recall that in the last issue of our Newsletter I published a letter from Lois W. Gilley about maintenance for the Sugar Tree Knob Cemetery where some of our relatives are buried. In this letter, Lois outlined the shortage of money to pay for the upkeep due to the falling interest rate. We put a jar on one of the tables and collected

\$160.00!! On Monday after the reunion, Audy Majors, Herman Chisholm, Herbert Lee Majors and I drove up to Woodbury, Tennessee and went to the courthouse where Mrs. Gilley works. We walked into her office, introduced ourselves - none of us had met her - and presented the money. Well, she was completely flabbergasted but you should have seen that smile of hers! She asked that we pass along her thanks as well as those of our other relatives up there to all who contributed. We gave her the money on behalf of the Burkett Family instead of any individual names because she understood, as we did, that money is not in plentiful supply and not everyone was able to contribute. So thanks to all who contributed and to those who couldn't, we understand.

Among the missing were the Tennessee Kenneth and Ronald Burketts and Laura Burkett Durham and Frances Burkett Watson. Sorry you folks couldn't make it. We would have loved to have had you there. Maybe next year. I did have a note from Laura though and she said the trip would be just a little too much for her. Maybe we can see all these folks at the Bogle reunion in October.

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### ***Bogle Reunion coming up!***

Again this year, it's scheduled for the second Saturday in October which is the 14th. As we have done in the past, you can come to Audy's house and we'll make up the "caravan" or you can drive on to Woodbury, Tennessee to the Bank on the Court-house Square.

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### ***News from StellaB (Nita) -***

*From time to time, as she has been able, Nita has forwarded information about our family. Her last letter in June included some interesting information and I am including some excerpts below.*

. . . It is almost impossible to exclude the Epley relatives of our Mary "Polly" Epley Burkett. This time is no exception. I am enclosing information about Mary's niece in Texas hoping it may be of interest to the Burketts who lived in Tennessee

where she also lived.

As most of you know, Mary Epley's brother John Epley died about 1850 in Missouri leaving several children. (*On this point Nita is incorrect because this is the first I knew of what she is saying here.*) One daughter, Elizabeth Caroline Epley, came to Texas from Missouri with her cousin, William Lyon "Bill" Williams, whose parents John and Ann Epley Williams (*Ann was a sister of Mary's*) started the town of Williams Ranch in what was then Brown County but is now Mills County. Elizabeth lived with her Williams Aunt until she married John Dan Chesser. John Dan was a son of William Lewis Chesser who was born 1819 in Cannon County Tennessee and married Polly Reed in 1840. John Dan was their first child. The William Lewis Chesser family migrated to Burnet County Texas which is near Mills County. John Dan came to Mills County where he met and married Elizabeth Caroline Epley in 1860. They started the community of Chesser Valley six miles from Williams Ranch.

Many camp meetings were held in Chesser Valley. People came for miles to attend, camped out under live Oak trees. The Chessers were devout Methodists but the preacher always stayed with the Chessers regardless of his denomination or church belief. John Dan would always kill a deer or hog or beef and the cellar was full of canned fruit and vegetables. Elizabeth thought nothing of setting a table for fifty or more people. In fact, almost every Sunday John Dan asked the neighbors to eat dinner at his house. Elizabeth and the girls got up before daylight that morning to have it ready.

William Henry Epley, nephew of our Mary "Polly" Epley Burlett and borther of Elizabeth Epley Chesser, reared a large family at Williams Ranch and Chesser Valley before moving to Arizona. . . .

*This is all of the excerpt I selected from Nita's letter. It gives us another insight into how our relatives lived back in those days. I do have more information on John Dan Chesser which Nita had provided some time ago and will include some of that in later issues. Thanks, Nita. This will be added to my growing collection. ■*



## *From the Kitchen . .*

### **Baked Hash Brown Potatoes**

- 2 pounds of frozen hash brown potatoes
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- 1 can Cream of Chicken soup
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 1 stick of margarine
- 1 cup of sour cream
- 1 8-ounce pkg. Cheddar Cheese
- 1½ cups crushed Corn Flakes

Put hash browns in a 9 x 13 casserole dish; sprinkle salt and pepper on the potatoes. Pour cream of chicken soup over the potatoes. Saute the chopped onions in margarine and pour onto the potato mixture. Stir well. Spread sour cream on top. Grate cheese and sprinkle over the sour cream. Sprinkle corn flake crumbs over entire mixture. Bake for 1 hour and 15 minutes at 300 degrees.

**ENJOY!**

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## *Did you know . .*

That Tray Pratt was not only one of the men responsible for bringing the cotton mills to Huntsville but was also one of the individuals who laid out East Huntsville which included Dallas Village? Mr. Pratt was from South Dakota and the Governor of South Dakota in the 1890's was Arthur C. Melette so Mr. Pratt named one of the streets after the Governor and one was named after Mr. Pratt. Well, Pratt is still around but what happened to Melette Avenue?

In 1901, President McKinley decided to visit Memphis. To get there from Atlanta, one of his first stops, his train had to follow the route of the Southern Railroad which passed through Huntsville and the President's train stopped in Huntsville. Even though the stop was for only twenty minutes,

it was remembered by thousand of people for many years.

On September 6, 1901, President McKinley was shot twice and subsequently died September 14. On September 17, the day of his funeral, memorial services were held at three churches in Huntsville.

President McKinley was a popular President and, after his death, Melette Avenue was renamed for the slain President. And it has been McKinley Avenue ever since. ■

## *Your Photographs . .*

At the risk of sounding like a nagger, I am reproducing a recent "Dear Abby" column from the Tampa Tribune.

**Dear Abby is on vacation. Here are some of her favorite letters from 1980.**

**Dear Abby:** You suggested that "older people" should mark the backs of family pictures while they can still remember who's who, and where the pictures were taken and the approximate dates. But why only "older people"? That's something everybody should do as soon as a snapshot or picture is developed.

For years I was too busy (or lazy) to do it, and now that I'm retired and have plenty of time, I can't remember who half the people are!

My parents can't help me because my father has been dead for 25 years, and my mother is in a rest home unable to remember much of anything.

So here I sit with a big box of family pictures, beating my brains out trying to recall names, dates and places. What a mess!

Abby, please remind your readers often to label their pictures. Then their grandchildren won't have to go through what I'm going through now. — Kicking Myself in Asbury Park

**Dear Kicking:** Not only should family pictures be labeled, but accounts of historical events and newspaper clippings of births, graduations, marriages and deaths in your family should be dated and kept in a sturdy scrapbook. Fascinating family histories could be preserved if younger members interviewed older relatives. A tape recorder would be ideal for this purpose.

I know some of you are putting off working with your photo's but here is an example of what happens when pictures are not identified. Enough said. ■

***How you can tell it's going to be a rotten day -***  
You see the "60 Minutes" news team waiting in your office.

## *From the mailbag*



I received a letter from Sid Huggins the other day which contained a couple of surprising documents which I have reproduced on the next page.

They both relate to my third great grandmother who is the fourth and even fifth great grandmother for some of you. She is Mary "Polly" Epley Burkett who has been the subject of articles in previous issues.

Both documents relate to the marriage of Mary and Henry Burkett which took place in Greeneville, Greene County, Tennessee. Greeneville is located about halfway between Knoxville and Kingsport and over near the North Carolina line Now take a look at the first or top document. It is a "**bond**" for marriage! I have never heard of such a practice but there it is, a bond signed by both Henry Burkett and Daniel Epley, father of "Polly." You can see they are both bound to the Governor of Tennessee but the bond will be "void on condition there be no lawful cause to obstruct a marriage from being solemnized". That alone is unusual to me but look at the amount "**Twelve Hundred and Fifty Dollars**"!! Why you could buy a farm of 160 acres with a house and barn for less money than that in 1819! I guess they were really serious about marriage back n those days.

Now, let's look at some points of interest. First, notice the Governor's name - Mc'Minn. Could that be where McMinnville, Tennessee got its name? I bet it was. Next, and you'll have to look closely at this, they spelled Burkett with an "i" - Burkitt. And they used Marys nickname "Polly" instead of her given name of Mary. Still further, Henry could not write and made "his mark" which you can see between "Henry" and "Burkitt". It appears to me that Daniel Epley could write because below Henry's mark it looks as if Daniel has signed except it looks as if the "d" is written in lower case as does the "e" in Epley. But try to imagine not being able to read or write and relying upon someone to tell you what you are signing!

*continued on page 7*

This page was somehow lost on that great hard-drive of the computer! However, here are the two (2) items which were on the original page.

Know all men by these presents, that we, *Henry Burkett*  
*Daniel Epley* \_\_\_\_\_ are held and firmly  
 bound unto **JOSEPH Mc'MINN Esq.** Governor of the State of Tennessee, and  
 his successors in office, in the sum of **Twelve Hundred and Fifty Dollars**, to  
 be void on condition there be no lawful cause to obstruct a marriage from being  
 solemnized in the County of *Greene* between *Henry Burkett*  
 and *Polly Epley* \_\_\_\_\_ Witness our hands and seals this *23* day  
 of *August* ANNO DOMINI 18 *19* *Henry Burkett*  
*Jest* *Mark*  
*W. Payne* *Clk* *W. Payne* *Clk*

State of Tennessee, \_\_\_\_\_ *Greene* County

TO ANY REGULAR MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL HAVING THE CURE OF SOULS,  
 OR ANY JUSTICE OF THE PEACE FOR SAID COUNTY;

**GREETING.**

I *Andrew Patterson* Clerk of the Court of Pleas and Quarter  
 Sessions of the County of *Greene* aforesaid, by virtue of the power  
 in me vested by law, do licente you, or either of you, to celebrate the rites of  
 MATRIMONY between *Henry Burkett* and *Polly Epley* \_\_\_\_\_  
 by uniting them together as HUSBAND and WIFE.

Given at Office in *Greenville* the *23<sup>rd</sup>* day of *August* ANNO  
 DOMINI 18*19* and of American Independence the

*A. Patterson* *Clk*  
*W. Payne* *Clk*

STATE OF TENNESSEE | S. S.  
 COUNTY OF GREENE

I, *Freddie Shaw*  
 of the County Court for said County, do hereby  
 certify that the foregoing is a true and perfect  
 copy of the

.....Marriage Record.....

.....  
 as the same appears of record in my office.

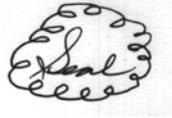
Witness my hand and official seal in *Greene-*  
*ville* Atty. day of *August*..... 19.95..

*Freddie Shaw* Clerk

*Frank Wagner*  
*Deputy clerk*

continued from Page 5 -

To the right of both signatures is the substitute for a seal. It's a little hard to make out but it was done by writing the word "Seal" and drawing some circular squiggles around it much like the example I have done below.



On the lower left side of the Bond is some more trivia which may be of interest only to our legal cousin, Danny Banks. In today's legal world, we "attest" to something but on this document, the word "Test" appears where "Attest" would appear today. Loosely defined, when we Attest to something we "testify" or "affirm". Could it be that back then "Test" was short for "Testify"? And signing the document was M. Payne, D.C. which I assume stands for Deputy Clerk of the County.

Now let's move to the second document where I see some unusual wording in the first line "To any regular Minister of the Gospel *having the cure of souls*:". I don't recall having ever heard any expression even closely resembling "having the cure of souls". It makes sense and I understand what they mean. It's just that I have never heard it said that way! Have you?

On this document they (I assume "they" is M. Payne, Deputy Clerk) have again spelled Burkett with an "i" and have also spelled Epley without an "e" between "l" and "y". The licence states that Andrew Patterson was Clerk of the Court and shows his name signed as A. Patterson, G.C.C. By M. Payne, D.C. Just as I assumed that D.C. stands for Deputy Clerk, I assume that G.C.C. stands for Greeneville Clerk of the Court.

The lower left corner simply shows that this is a true copy of the marriage record on file in Greeneville County and shows the date, August 4, 1995, that Sid Huggins secured the copies.

As of August 23 just past, it was *176 years* ago that they were married! And I find it remarkable that these records are still available. My sincere thanks to Sid Huggins on behalf of all of us for these documents! ■

## The Historians Corner



First, let's go back to the article on Page 4 "Did you Know . ." I should have pointed out that this article would be of interest only to those who grew up in or are familiar with Dallas Village! Obviously, someone like Nita Jaynes or Laura Durham would have no idea of the significance of these street names but, as a final point, many of us lived on McKinley at one time or another.

Now, let me get down to the nitty gritty. Why is this issue so late? Earlier this year, my Doctor and I set a date for surgery on my left hand. This would be essentially the same surgery he had performed on my right hand in 1983. The problem was a condition known as Dupuytren's Contracture. What happens is that tissue grows around and tightens the tendons in the hand which begin to curl the fingers into the palm of the hand . . . and it's hereditary. But before anybody gets excited, it comes from the Webb (Irish) side of my family and has nothing to do with the Burketts, so relax! It seems that 85% of the Irish have this to some degree . . . or so I have been told.

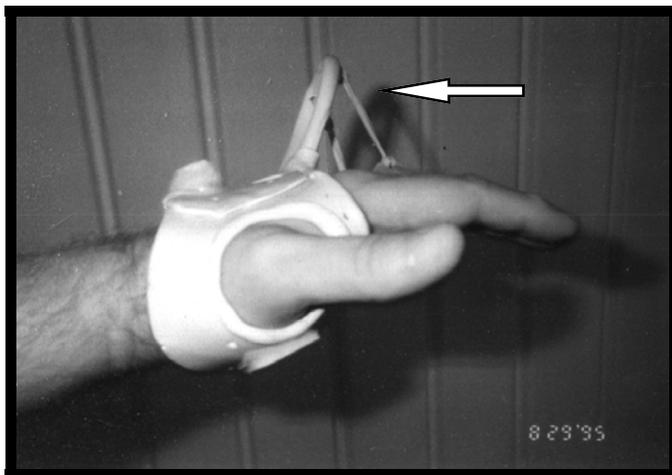
When the right hand was operated on in 1983, I was back playing golf in about three weeks. Anyway, we scheduled this left hand for the first week in July expecting a similar recovery time which would then allow me to get the Newsletter out on a timely basis. But it was not to be so easy this time. After the surgery, Dr. Belsole told me he had to go much deeper and more extensively on this hand than he did on the right hand.

It has now been 11 weeks and I still go for therapy three times a week - Monday, Wednesday and Friday. They are using heat, massage, exercise, and ultrasound techniques to break up the scar tissue which formed and to eliminate the swelling which I still have. It was this swelling which

prompted them to tell me to stay off the computer keyboard. The swelling extended on into my wrist and they told me if I did any keyboarding I could cause myself a problem with Carpal Tunnel Syndrome.

In addition to the three days a week therapy, I have exercises and heat treatments to do at home. One of the exercises is shown below.

The arrows point to rubber bands which I have to pull down with my fingers in order to get the strength back after so many weeks of not being used.



To summarize all this, I can only stay on the computer about 30 minutes at a time before the hand gets tired and I have to quit for an hour or so. The good news is I am improving. The bad news is that it appears to me I still have another couple of months to go. Plus I have to be careful around heat and sharp things because I still don't have the feeling back along the lower part of my hand and the little finger. Not sure I would have had this

done if I had known this was going to happen! If all this isn't enough, I have one golf friend who had a hip replaced and another who had both knees replaced. They are both back playing golf!!

Okay, let's get back to the family but I wanted you to know I haven't lost interest - just ability to do it.

Now, here's something to think about. Nita Jaynes has introduced the idea that our family name before Henry Burkett may have been **Burkhart**. Nita has presented this idea to both me and Sid Huggins and seems to have some data which is strangely coincidental. While neither Sid nor I have accepted this at this time, we don't discount it but are looking for more proof of what Nita is thinking. Sid has established correspondence with the only Epley in the Greeneville telephone book and it may be we can get lucky and backtrack through them.

One of the reasons we can't be too quick to discount this possibility is we must keep in mind that Henry Burkett could not write and it would follow that he could not read either. Therefore, if somebody along the line thought he was saying Burkett when he might have been saying Burkhart, he would have no way of knowing. I have one document where Almon Rigsby gave his grandson, Almon Lee Burkett, and his daughter Rebecca Caroline Rigsby Burkett some 48 acres of land in Cannon County in 1879 when Almon Lee was only four years old and this document also spells Burkett with an "i". This document shows that Almon Rigsby could not write either because he made "his mark". On the other hand, I have another document dated in 1854 where Henry Burkett purchased 270 acres from an Irvin Petty and this document spells Burkett with an "e". Obviously, this is going to take some more research.

Speaking of these other two documents, they are too faded for me to scan like I did these wedding documents plus the handwriting is a little difficult to read. However, I think I have figured them out enough so I will type and include them in the next issue. ■

***How you can tell it's going to be a rotten day -***  
You turn on the news and they're showing emergency routes out of the city.

## *Those Burkett Brothers from Watertown -*

In a much earlier issue I wrote about the Burkettts from Watertown, Tennessee and what good football players they were. At the time I didn't have all their statistics but now, thanks to Bob Preston Burkett, Jr., take a look at their accomplishments as compiled from Watertown High School records by Annette and Ken Fountain (non-relatives).

Longest pass from scrimmage - 99 yards,  
William Burkett, 1939

Longest interception return - 92 yards, Bob  
Burkett, 1939

Most touchdowns in a game - 6, Bob Burkett,  
1940

Most touchdown passes in a game - 4, William  
Burkett in 1939 and Wilburn Burkett in 1940

Most touchdown passes in a season - 20, William  
Burkett, 1939

Most points in a career - 200, Bob Burkett,  
1938-1940

Most touchdowns in a career - 31, Bob Burkett,  
1938-1940

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## *I could have been famous in Huntsville history if . . .*

I had been born downtown instead of Dallas Village! And I would have had a silver loving cup plus other prizes! Wow!

Now you just know there's a story there, don't you?! Well, there is and here it is.

It seems the Huntsville Hospital opened its doors June 8, 1926 and boasted of a modern maternity ward and an up-to-date delivery room. At this time, most babies were born at home with a mid-wife helping in the delivery. With the lack of sanitary conditions and improper training, this often resulted in dire medical complications for both the mother and newborn baby. The staff of the Hospital realized the dangers and had begun an intensive campaign to educate the public on the benefits of a modern delivery room.

To promote this new facility, the hospital offered a silver loving cup to the first baby born in the new

facility. Not to be outdone, several merchants in town also offered prizes.

As it turned out, Israel Bernard (Buddy) Miller was born July 11, 1926 and won the prizes. According to the publicity, only three ladies were located who were expecting any day. Had they known about my mother - but you have to keep in mind we lived in one of the cotton mill villages - I would have won because I was born **July 3, 1926 - eight days earlier!!**

Oh, well. Just another of the missed opportunities in my lifetime. But I'm just as content with having been born on Stephens Avenue there in Dallas Village. All of the publicity might have gone to my head anyway!

*The information for this article came from a special issue of the publication "Old Huntsville" celebrating the 100th anniversary of the hospital. As a final point of interest, Buddy Miller was located and visited the hospital sixty-five years after being the first baby born there and was given a replica of the silver loving cup that had been given to his mother and which had subsequently been lost.*

***There are three hair styles -  
Parted, non-parted, and de-parted.***

Folks, that's it for this issue. At the risk of sounding like a complainer, this has been at times a very painful issue to work on. There! Do I have everybody's sympathy?

But it's true and it's hard to concentrate and work on something when you're hurting. So bear with me on this issue and I'll try to do better next time.

I do plan to be at the Bogle Reunion October 14 in Woodbury, Tennessee and hope to see many of you at it and in Huntsville. ■