



No. 268

June 2015



# Old Huntsville

HISTORY AND STORIES OF THE TENNESSEE VALLEY

## SEARCHING FOR NANNI B.



THIS WAS A JOURNEY THAT STARTED IN 2011 ON ONE COLD NOVEMBER NIGHT IN MICHIGAN WHEN I SEARCHED THE INTERNET AND FOUND A COPY OF MY GRANDPARENT'S WEDDING LICENSE.

WHEN I SAW BOTH SIGNATURES ON THE DOCUMENT, I KNEW I HAD TO DISCOVER WHO MY GRANDMOTHER WAS AND AS IMPORTANT, HOW HER DEATH AT CHILDBIRTH AFFECTED MY MOTHER, AND BY INHERITANCE, ME.

MY MOTHER TOLD ME OFTEN OF AN EXPERIENCE SHE HAD WHEN, AT ABOUT AGE TEN, SHE VISITED HER MOTHER'S GRAVE.

SHE OVERHEARD TWO WOMEN WALKING NEARBY SAY, "IT'S TOO BAD NANNIE B. DIED AND THE BABY LIVED."

*Also in this issue:*

**The Ghost of the Golden Ghetto**





## Searching for Nannie B.: A Headless Lamb on Top of a Gravestone

by Nancy Owen Nelson

When you drive out of New Hope, Alabama on Cedar Point Road, your car curves back and forth until you reach Poplar Ridge Road. You turn left and drive straight north until you reach Cherry Tree Road. Then you turn left again onto Keel Hollow Road. Here you will find Bethel Cemetery, where my mysterious grandmother, Nannie B. Russell Chandler, is

buried.

On July 12, 1905, in Poplar Ridge, Alabama, Nannie B. Russell Chandler went into labor with her only child. One hour after the birth, the mother died. She was buried here in the Old Bethel Primitive Baptist Church graveyard. I'm sure, because her family attended the church and her father, John R. Russell, served as Church Clerk for many years.

Nannie B.'s husband, Robert E. Chandler, must have buried her hastily because her stone, aged with moss, says only "Nannie B, Wife of R. E. Chandler." There are no words of endearment. There is only

**I've learned that  
sometimes all a person  
needs is a hand to hold  
and a heart to understand.**



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a lamb on top of the stone, its head gone, lost over all of the years before my visit.

Her little girl, also Nannie B., was named in memory of her lost mother, but that memory was buried along with her mother's body. For the rest of her life my mother, Nannie B. Chandler Nelson, who died in 2001, knew almost nothing about this good woman who gave her life so her daughter could begin hers.

This was a journey that started in 2011 on one cold November night in Michigan when I searched the internet and found a copy of my grandparent's wedding license. When I saw both signatures on the document, I knew I had to discover who my grandmother was and as important, how her death at childbirth affected my mother, and by inheritance, me. My mother told me often of an experience she had when, at about age ten, she visited her mother's grave. She overheard two women walking nearby say, "It's too bad Nannie B. died and the baby lived."

What greater guilt or pain

could be laid on the shoulders of a child? What must have been the lifelong feeling of loss, of alienation, of unworthiness that this child would carry through her life?


Somehow on that night, I knew I had to go forward with understanding not only the woman who birthed my mother, but the legacy she left behind. I had to know the story.

My memoir, "Searching for Nannie B.", is that story.

Soon I was spending hours on Ancestry.com looking for any details about my grandparents. I knew from the 1900 U.S. Census that my ancestors lived in Poplar Ridge, Alabama. Where was it? Did the community still exist? Where was my grandmother's grave, the spot where my mother had stood over 100 years ago and heard her life reduced to "too bad the baby lived"?

Continuous Ancestry.com searches brought up many Nannies—apparently a popular name for southern women at that time. I also searched findagrave.com with no results. Then I decided to search

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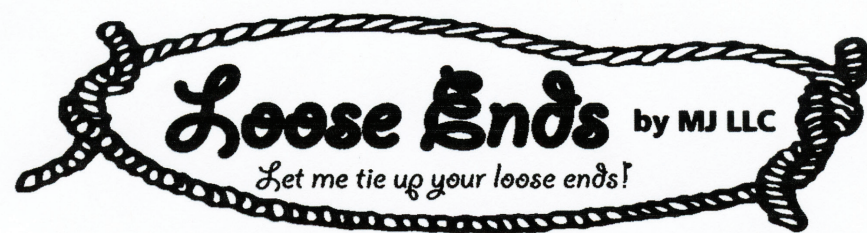
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for the Poplar Ridge community. I was able to locate a road by the name of Poplar Ridge, but not a town.

One evening I put in another search for "Nannie B. Chandler" and gravesites in the early part of the 1900s. One small scanned document came up with the name "Nannie B." highlighted. It was in the Bethel Churchyard on Keel Hollow Road. I was sure I had found her. I focused on this graveyard on Keel Hollow. Wasn't it important that one of the roads to the cemetery was called "Poplar Ridge"? There must be a connection, I thought.

I scanned online maps of the area near where I had seen Poplar Ridge Road. I found a tiny demarcation of a church off Cherry Tree Road. However, there was no information, no phone number or website for the church.

As a leap of faith, I contacted the New Hope Library. "Indeed," the person on the other end of the phone said, "Priscilla Scott can help you. She's our local genealogist."

Priscilla was able to help. Within a day, she sent me a map of the graveyard at the Old Bethel P B Church, along with a photo of my grandmother's gravestone with the simple lettering and the headless lamb.

When I drove into the cemetery yard for the first time in June, 2012 I felt the energy of sacred land beneath my feet. I had arrived at a destination I never imagined I would see, and I knew that my mother, Nannie B's daughter, was with me.

I unlatched and went through the iron gate, follow-

ing the cemetery map given me by Priscilla Scott, genealogist of the Elizabeth Carpenter Library in New Hope. In Yard 10 my ancestors from the Russell family rest—my great-great uncle Calvin Russell, who died in the Civil War; my great aunt Mary Russell, and my great grandparents, John Riley and Delilah Jane Chapman Russell. Only a foot or two of earth separates my grandmother, Nannie B., from her parents.

That week I attended a service at the Old Bethel Primitive Baptist Church. On this rainy Sunday night, I was welcomed by Elder Ricky Siniard, his wife Syrethia and Deacon Everitt Blackwood. I was also welcomed by all of the people who came to sing and pray. After talks by two elders, we sang my mother's, Nannie B. Chandler Nelson's, favorite hymn, "Amazing Grace."

I offered a prayer for my grandmother, Nannie B. Rus-



Robert Chandler with baby Nannie B. in 1906

sell Chandler, who had been "lost but now was found."

My father was career Army, and we rarely lived in one place for more than a year or two until we returned to Alabama when he retired. So until I took



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Huntsville was so small  
you read the newspapers  
just to see if the gossip  
was really true?**



this journey, I never really understood my Alabama roots.

Through all my research, I would find out that Robert Chandler remarried three years after his first wife's death to a woman who was also named "Nannie." Yes, a third Nannie. Coincidence or residual loss? That she raised my mother as her own, along with the other six children she had with Robert. That Robert Chandler would become a prominent businessman in Decatur, Alabama, with his dry goods store on Moulton Street and 2nd Avenue.

I would come to realize, too, that that ten-year-old girl in the Bethel Cemetery who heard the harsh comments about her survival would live with that burden for her entire life. That I inherited the burden of her angst, though I did not realize it until I was writing this book. I would also realize that in this writing, I have lifted the burden from all of us—my grandmother, my mother and myself.

But that grave and church service was not the end of my journey. I was driven to know

more about why my grandmother was never spoken of or acknowledged. I continued looking for the missing pieces that had separated my mother first, and then me, from Nannie B. Russell.

I found a third cousin, Helen Robinson Paschal, now deceased. Helen's grandmother, Mary had taken my mother in as an infant after Grandmother Chandler died. Remarkably, Helen remembered that she had two buttons from my grandmother's clothing in her sewing box. Helen's granddaughter Dixie sent me those chipped but valuable buttons in 2012. The day they arrived, I wound my mother's hair around her mother's buttons which I had collected from one of her hair brushes.

Now mother and daughter were together, not only symbolically, but physically, the oil from my grandmother's fingers pressed into the beautiful pearl buttons, her DNA mingling now with her daughter's DNA embedded in her hair.

The Nannie B's were together for the first time in 107 years.

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# BAXTER'S BOTTOMS AND MY PAPER ROUTE

by Johnny Johnston

Some say the community was named after the grocery store sitting by the creek which ran through its center. Others told me the name was not official and did not appear on maps or records. I just know that now, over 60 years later, I seem to be the only person who remembers the name Baxter's Bottoms.

The creek ran from somewhere on Monte Sano into Pinhook Creek just down by the Naval Reserve Building. Baxter's Bottom covered an area from about Lowe Mill to the branch and to the south by Governors Drive and Madison to the east... A new road, the extension of Harvard, is being built across the creek connecting with Lowe Mill and would have bisected the Bottoms area...

At any rate, Baxter wasn't a name well known in Huntsville circles especially when referring to this section called "Baxter's Bottoms" by some downtown residents. The neighborhood seemed to degenerate just after passing the well kept and managed "Royal Funeral Home", which sat on the edge of the hill on Oak St.

The Royal Funeral Home catered to the Black citizens of Huntsville and was owned and managed by a kind gentleman named Mr. Lawrence Hundley. I can close my eyes now and almost see Mr. Hundley reach into his pocket to retrieve a twenty five cent piece to pay

for the week's paper delivery. Royal is still known for its extremely elegant funerals where Limos, Hearses, Flower Cars and all Royal equipment are all white. Not the typical black vehicles expected in most funerals.

Directors and employees are always dressed in impeccable clean black attire with shoes shined to the limit. They have pride in their service and operate with extreme precision their jobs to perform. Even today, Tony Pickens cleans the rolling equipment on an almost daily basis.

From 1950 until September 1953 I was the paper carrier in Baxter's Bottoms for the Huntsville Times which included all the streets north and west of the current Huntsville Hospital and over to Madison St. I was the carrier when most of the area was taken over by Government Authorities for the purpose of building Council Courts.

My brother Lloyd and I took over Huntsville Times paper route #1 in 1950 from an

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## SEARCHING FOR NANNIE B.

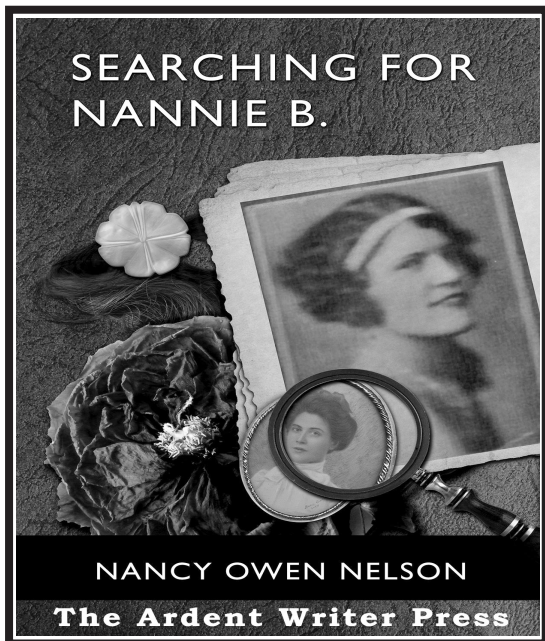
BY NANCY OWEN NELSON

### EVENTS

1. **Friday, June 26, 2015:** Book signing, New Hope Public Library New Hope AL, 7:00 p.m.
2. **Sunday, June 28, 2015:** "Searching for Nannie B." Talk at Auburn Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship, Auburn, AL, 10:00 a.m.
3. **Monday, June 29, 2015:** Talk and book signing, Hartselle Historical Society, Old Burleson School, Hartselle, AL, 6:30 – 8:30 p.m.
4. **Tuesday, June 30, 2015:** Book signing, Little Professor Book Center, Homewood, AL, 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.

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**Excerpt from  
"Searching for Nannie B."  
by Nancy Owen Nelson**

I was twelve years old when I found out that my maternal grandmother died in childbirth.

"Nancy." We are alone in the living room of our apartment in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, in mid-afternoon. My mother's voice is subdued, as if she's afraid to speak, or as if she can't breathe. She draws my name out, both syllables. She has not lost her southern accent, despite our many moves outside the South.

"My mother died when I was born. Big Mama is not your real grandmother."

I don't understand this at all. I think about how Big Mama always hugs me to her fulsome chest, pounds me between my skinny shoulder blades when we arrive from our latest Army assignment. She leaves me almost gasping for breath afterward.

How could she not be my grandmother? My mother speaks again.

"I have my mother's name, Nannie B. I never knew her. She died an hour after I was born. I heard only stories from some of her kin. I can

tell you stories about her." My attention shifts. I'm anxious to leave this sad room, where my mother is telling me these sad things.

I don't want to know more right now. I just want things to be like they were before this afternoon, when Big Mama was my grandmother, when Mom wasn't

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telling me sad things.

I will not think very much about Nannie B. Russell until over fifty years later, after my mother has been dead for ten years.

The mystery of my grandmother has haunted me since my mother's death in 2001. I want to know about Nannie B. Russell. I want to know why no one would speak of her, why no one helped the little Nannie B. Chandler understand that she was not responsible for her mother's death. I want to know why the only record I can find is the certificate issued by the State of Alabama, Madison County, for the marriage of R. E. Chandler to Nannie B. Russell, July 26, 1904. And why the State of Alabama agencies can find nothing else: no death certificate, no obituary and no burial site.

Where is the cemetery where my mother stood more than 100 years ago? Is the gravestone covered with grass and weeds, dirt washed over it by heavy rains?

I want to find the grave, but I think that everyone who might know where it is must be dead.

Most of all, I want to understand what this legacy of silence and guilt has meant for my mother, and for me.

For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to rescue my mother from invisibility, from having only the roots of her father's line, the Chandlers, which she will share with six siblings. I've wanted to rescue her from a feeling that she belonged nowhere.

I didn't realize that I also felt as if I belonged nowhere.

In my own life as a military child, I always looked to the Alabama of my grandparents as my home. Papa and Mama Steve Nelson lived their whole lives there until their deaths in the early 1960s. Big Mama (Nannie Dixie) Chandler, my step-grandmother,

died in the 1970s. Robert Chandler died before I was born.

I seem to have inherited my mother's sense of not belonging. Maybe finding Nannie B. Russell's grave will answer some of my questions about belonging.

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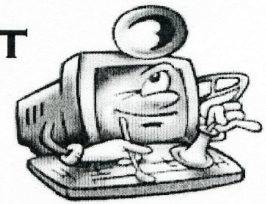
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