

Memories of Living in the Old Jail

This letter was written by Ruth Penland to Sara Smith about Ruth's experiences when she lived in the old jail. Ruth agreed for it to be published as one of our articles on the Old Jail Museum.

Dear Sara

Since I am a native and 40 year resident of Clay County, I look forward to reading the Clay County Progress each week. Since I am 100 years old (June 19,1918) the paper has been a part of my past and I hope the future. In fact, I was a one-time reporter. We should give thanks for the wonderful staff and reporters for their dedication and hard work they do so we can read about events, local issues, and people of the place we love. I attended the multiple class reunion in the beautiful restored courthouse where I used to attend court and sing in conventions held there. I am the oldest living graduate of Hayesville High School.

In 1959, George and I, with our three sons, Jerry, Jim, and Joe, left our home, Clay County, Oak Forest Methodist Church, and the people that we dearly loved and moved to Buncombe County (32 years in Asheville and 27 years in Swannanoa) to have good employment that wasn't available in Clay County.

Sara, in the Clay County Progress, I read your article and also Lorrie Ross' article about a restoration project to preserve the old jail museum. I have a lot of memories of that old jail since I spent about 2 years there. I better do some explaining. In 1934-1936, when John Tiger was sheriff, my Uncle Ruel White was a deputy sheriff and he and my Aunt Neva lived at the jail. I lived there with them and helped Aunt Neva cook and feed the prisoners. I was a junior and a senior at Hayesville High School where I walked to school, and George and I graduated in the class of 1935 and married in 1937. I am the only one living from our class of 25 members. Uncle Ruel's brother, Mac White, spent a lot of time there helping us. When their father, John White was sheriff in 1914, they lived at the jail. Mac held the distinction of being the only baby born there.

Then in 1946-1950, my uncle Glenn Swanson was sheriff and lived at the jail. Since his wife, my aunt Lillian was deceased, my parents, Edney and Bessie Ford lived there with him to take care of the prisoners. My family spent a lot of time there. When Joe was born in 1947 at Murphy, we spent the first week of his life at the jail with my mother taking care of us. I have several years of good memories at the jail and a few bad memories. While I was there, we had a man

for the murder of his neighbor, another man for killing his wife, two young boys for killing their granddaddy for money, two men for burning a church, bootleggers making whiskey, drunks, etc. One day when I was there alone, one of the prisoners (I still remember his name) had made a hole in the brick wall, tied the sheets together, and escaped. A short time later he was brought back.

Some people don't like to tell their age. I am so thankful to say "by the grace of God" I am 100 years old (June 19, 1918), in good health, living alone in my home with a medical alert system, and praying Alzheimer's won't find me. George died 2001, Jerry in 2005 and Joe in 2014. I still have Jim and Linda, Janice and Terrie, 10 grandchildren and 9 spouses, 20 great-grandchildren, 12 great-great-grandchildren, and a sister Sue Crittenden. I really enjoy visiting the old jail museum and I am wishing you good luck in raising the money for the restoration (replacing the windows, etc.) I am enclosing a check to replace one window. I am sorry if I talked your ear off.

Sincerely,

Ruth Ford Penland

This article is part of a series about historical gem related to the Old Jail Museum. The Clay County Historical and Arts Council is raising funds for the repair and restoration of the museum. To donate visit: clayhistoryarts.org or mail check designated for Old Jail Museum Restoration Fund to: CCHAC, P.O. Box 5, Hayesville, NC 28904.