

Myrtle's Story **(Myrtle Elizabeth Culpepper 1880-1976)**

It should be the birthright of every girl to have a Myrtle in her life. I could never have survived the rigors of growing up, the middle child of seven rowdy kids, had it not been for Myrtle. As long as I can remember, she was close by, just like family.

Mother said the first time she saw Myrtle, she was plodding along through the pasture and barnyard toward our house. It was a hot summer afternoon. Mom and Dad had just moved to the Ozarks from Nebraska and had not yet met all of their neighbors – in fact, none who lived north of our farm. Mom didn't know it then but here came one who was to be so much more than a neighbor. She would be Mom's best friend for the rest of her life.

Myrtle's apparel, except for her shoes, was typical of the everyday wear of other women in this area. She was wearing a long, shapeless dress and on her head was old, floppy and faded sunbonnet. What impressed Mom the most was that she wore a pair of mans plow shoes. Shoes that had belonged to her late husband, Mom would learn. She also learned that Myrtle had been left with two teen-age boys and a five year old daughter. Her four older girls were grown and only one of them lived nearby. This daughter was a school teacher who rode a horse to school each day. (Better than waling, Mom thought, which is what she had done while teaching school in Nebraska before she and Dad were Married.)

As well as being Mother's best friend, Myrtle came to be mine as well. When I fell and skinned a knee, she comforted me, just like Mom. When I did something she thought deserved it, she spanked me, just like Mom. The difference was that when Mom got tired of explaining or I was crying, Myrtle still took time for me and she nearly always made me laugh. When I did something stupid and Mom was embarrassed or angry with me, Myrtle would listen to my story then laugh and show me the funny side of it. Soon I would be laughing too. Nothing every seemed too serious after talking it over with Myrtle.

When I began to grow up and Mom still wanted me to wear little girl dresses, Myrtle understood that I wanted something different.

“They all have to grow up, “ I overheard her say, gently, to Mom on day.

Myrtle's five year old, Dud, was my best girl friend. She was just one year older than I. We stayed all night with each other a lot. It was more fun for me when I stayed with her. At my house, everyone had to sleep inside, even in the summer time when it was hot. But not at Dude's house. Myrtle let us tear the bed apart and move it out into the yard then she took a cot out for herself. It was wonderful to lie there looking up at the stars, listening to the katydids and the night bird's call. I often fell asleep dreaming that I was a pioneer out on some western trail.

My sister, just two years younger, usually stayed with us. Myrtle seemed to enjoy our being there and entertained us in hilarious and outrageous ways. One evening, about sunset, we sat idly on the front steps with nothing to do. I suppose we looked bored but not for long. The screen door burst open and Myrtle leaped out into the yard all dressed up in her late husband's long-handled underwear. She ran and skipped to the front gate and back and while we were still laughing, she turned her head, pulled out her false teeth and proceeded to tell us one ghost story after another until it was dark. We were scared half to death by bedtime and none of us wanted to sleep out that night.

It seemed Myrtle had the answer for every problem. One night, when we were sleeping out, the mosquitoes were exceptionally bothersome.

“Wait a minute,” she said and headed toward the barn.

“Where's she going?” I asked Dude.

“Probably to get the fly spray,” Dude responded, and sure enough, Myrtle soon re-appeared with this long-handled-fly spray---the spray most farmers used to keep the flies away during milking time. And it worked beautifully – except for the strong odor!

Myrtle had an unusual way of milking her cows. Most of the time she only kept one milk cow, which she milked when she needed milk. Dad and Mom had strong opinions about their cows. They needed to be milked at certain times, morning and evening. Dad said a cow could go dry if it wasn't milked regularly. I don't remember ever hearing Myrtle say that her cow had gone dry. Perhaps she did milk regularly (some of the time.) However---

One day I started over to Myrtle's house – it must have been about two-thirty in the afternoon. As I crossed the pasture, about one-fourth of a mile from her house, I spotted Myrtle, over near the bushes. She was squatted down, milking her cow. She saw me.

She whooped a “Hello,” adding. “I started to make a puddin' and didn't have any milk so I had to hunt up my old cow. Wait a minute and I'll walk on to the house with you.”

As we mosed on, Myrtle handed the bucket of milk to me and began gathering bits of wood. Old, rotten pieces of lumber. Parts of old fence posts. Small limbs that had broken off the trees.

“Cook wood,” she explained. “Both the boys are gone and I want to build a fire and make that puddin!”

When we reached the house, Myrtle dropped the wood against the house just outside the kitchen door. Dude heard us and came running. Soon we were off making playhouses. When we returned, Myrtle was starting to cook. The old wood cookstove burned brightly. The side door where the wood was fueled was left open. About two feet from the stove sat a straight, wooden chair. Across it lay an old fence post. One end had been pushed into the stove and had already burned part way through.

“When it buns up,” Myrtle explained, “I'll just shove it in another foot or two. I drug this post up a few days ago but my ax had been misplace. This will make do.”

One of the most extraordinary things about Myrtle was that she could always “make do.”

Myrtle helped my Mother in so many ways. She knew all kinds of home remedies. What she didn't know, she would ask an old woman who lived down near the river. She would walk the two and a half miles there to talk with her if it meant helping someone.

When my baby brother was only three months old, he took the whooping cough and we were all afraid he would die. Nothing the doctor did kept him from having the coughing spells that nearly completely shut off his breathing. One day Myrtle studied him carefully, then told Mom, “You know, Edith, I think you should give this baby some warm mare's milk.”

Mom listened because she had learned early in their acquaintance that, more often than not, Myrtle had the answer. We had a mare and skeptical though he was, Dad managed to get the milk. It wasn't easy.

They gave the milk to the baby and he began to improve immediately. He recovered with no damage.

It was this kind of experience that caused Mom to answer me the way she did when I asked her a question one day. It was on a visit home, long after I had grown up and moved away. Mom and I were visiting and recalling times when Dad had to be away working when we kids were growing up. Mom had been alone out on the farm for days—often weeks at a time. No car. No telephone.

“What,” I asked, “would you have done if there had been a serious accident or if one of us had become critically ill while Dad was away?”

Mom smiled and answered quickly, “Send for Myrtle.”

Myrtle was with Mom during some of the last hours of her life. She looked at my Mother with love and compassion written all over her beautiful, wrinkled face. Mom had suffered a stroke and could not speak but I know she understood when Myrtle finished her visit by saying “Well, Edith, we've been neighbors and good friends for a lot of years and I don't think we've ever had a cross word, but those days are over now.”

So typical of Myrtle. Doing what she had done all her life. Not trying to smooth over or disguise truth but meeting it head on, and dealing with it.

Tears rolled down my Mother's face then and I know she was trying to say something very special to that very special friend.

At the cemetery later, after the casket had been lowered, Myrtle made her way to us, reached out trembling arms and said, “As long as I live, you kids will have a mother.”

Yes, she was a very dear, a very funny and courageous lady. The last time I visited her, she had long since moved to town and was living like the lady she had always been. Life on the farm, the widowed mother of young children, had been incredibly hard but I never heard her complain.

Every child should have someone just like her in his or her life. Sometimes I get so homesick for her. Just once more, I would like to watch her twist her tongue around and then listen as she spit out some humorous bit of homespun wisdom.

Oh, did I tell you? She had a wart on her tongue!