

HUDDLESTON FAMILY STUCK TOGETHER IN TOUGH TIMES

by Megan Trotter

COOKEVILLE — The Huddleston family knows what it’s like to live through hard times, and now that their photos, uniforms and memorial brick are on display at the Putnam County Archives, they can honor the sacrifices that they and their mother made for each other.



Their mother, Beulah Brown Wilhite Huddleston, became a single mother after her husband divorced her, leaving her with seven children — Bill “Outlaw,” Kenneth, Robert and John Huddleston, and Annette Matheney, Connie Norton and Doris Waller-Behr.

(Pictured: At the Putnam County Veterans Hall, siblings, from left, Annette Matheney, Bill “Outlaw” Huddleston, Connie Norton and Kenneth Huddleston display military portraits of the two brothers along with two who have passed away, Robert Huddleston and John Huddleston. All four men fought in World War II).

“He ran off and never gave us a nickel for anything,” Bill said. “I remember asking him for a nickel for a notebook when I was in the second grade. He said he didn’t have it, and that’s the last time I asked him for money — except I asked him to help the (other) kids some, but he never did.”

In order to pay the bills, Beulah took as many odd jobs as she could get, from teaching rug-weaving, to supervising children at the city playground, to working in factories. She worked her way up to the foreman position of a mattress factory where she kept the books and was in charge of the pay roll, though she’d only formally completed eighth grade. Her boss claimed he never saw her make a mistake.

“The men who were under her resented her very much,” Connie said.

Even though she worked, times were still hard for the family. Some days they depended on the generosity of their neighbors just to have enough food for the day. Even though she got plenty of offers for marriage over the years, she refused every one, despite the extra income a husband could have brought in.

“She told me that she would never marry anyone else. She had people asking her,

different men, but she said she was afraid that they wouldn't be good to us," Connie said.

Instead, she made every penny count to make sure her large family had the basic necessities and planted her own large garden for food. Once the older children were old enough, they picked up stray jobs as well, such as collecting cardboard boxes to sell to the local grocery stores, and working for a local fruit merchant to sell fruit door-to-door. The one who sold the most fruit earned a quarter for their day's work, while the others earned 15 cents.

"Bill always got the quarter. We never did beat him," Kenneth laughed.

"Well, I knew who the good customers were," Bill replied with a grin. "When we got off that truck, I'd run a half block to get to the good customers."

The boys not only took care of their mother, but they took care of their sisters, too. Connie remembers all the suitors who mysteriously stopped calling on her after they encountered her brothers.

"One came in a taxi one time and he had the taxi driver blow the horn so it wouldn't cost as much, and Bill ran out and said, 'If you don't respect my sister to come up on the porch after her, you don't come back! Then there was one boy, (Bill and Kenneth) got together and scared him so bad that he wouldn't come out of his room for three days. He told me about it 15 years later. I just kept wondering what happened to all these boys!" Connie laughed.

When Robert was old enough, he joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, where he was supposed to work for one year, however once World War II started, he was sent off to war, serving in the Army. Bill enlisted in the Marines next, then John enlisted in the Army, and two weeks after Kenneth turned 18, he followed into the Army. Both Kenneth and Bill served in the South Pacific, while the other two served under General Patton in Europe.

While Robert was serving overseas, he broke his nose and had to wait for a specialist from Nashville to come tend to it. However, by the time the doctor arrived, the bridge of Robert's nose had rotted. He was unable to use a gas mask, and so was assigned to cover the supply line four miles back. When his brother, John, heard that his brother was nearby, he asked permission to go visit him. They found each other, and Robert asked permission to come stay with John.

"Well, he did, and they were bombed all night," Connie said. "It was the first time that Bob had seen any active duty. He said he'd never been so scared in his life."

Having four boys in the service was hard on their mother, who Connie says prayed and cried all the time that they were away. Before they were deployed, they visited her as much as possible — sometimes despite direct commands to not leave their base, and sent her portions of their paychecks on every payday. They made sure she was provided for up

until she passed away at the age of 95 and a half.

“Mother raised us to be so close,” she said. “These boys helped support the family more than you can imagine. They worked and gave to mother.”

Now the family’s work and sacrifice for each other can be seen at the Putnam County Archives where their military portraits will be displayed with their old military uniforms. They also purchased a granite brick engraved with the boys’ names and military ranks, along with their mother’s name to honor her memory. It will be displayed at the site of the new Putnam County Veterans Hall when one is constructed.

For more information about purchasing a memorial brick, contact the veterans hall at 931-520-0042.

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*Read more about the History of Putnam Co., TN at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>