

HELLO LITTLE DARLIN'S!

By Sarah Holloway
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Many of you may know Judy Duke, a well-known Cookeville native, actress and director of the Cookeville



History and Depot museums. Many also know Aunt Mattie Gooch, a funny old lady who wears tacky clothes and baggy stockings. She travels the country making people laugh and elicits comments such as, "Aunt Mattie is a jewel," "Aunt Mattie was the highlight of the conference," and "Aunt Mattie held our group of 500 spellbound."

But did you know that Judy Duke and Aunt Mattie Gooch are one and the same?

I met with Judy recently in the History Museum just before she and Aunt Mattie left for Syracuse, N.Y., to do a gig for the Empire State Salvation Army.

"They have two divisions in New York state -- the regular New York area -- New York City -- and the rest of the state which is known as the Empire State," Judy says. "Every officer of the Empire Salvation Army will be in Syracuse for a retreat this weekend and Aunt Mattie will be the entertainment.

"I've flown all over the United States with her in the last 30 years," Judy says of the character she created. "I've gotten on circuits and have had two agents, but I'm not exclusively with either one because I've learned that when you book yourself, you get to keep all the money."

Judy speaks with brisk directness laced with a distinct Middle Tennessee Southern charm and frequent laughter. Of Aunt Mattie's origin, she says, "I've got a picture of me when I was 10 or 11 and I had dressed up like an old woman and did some kind of program for my daddy at a Christmas banquet or something. Maybe this was the beginning of her. This little-old-lady-type-person floated around in my head for years. I could see her and I could hear her talking."

Judy first brought Aunt Mattie to life when she and her husband, Dwight, were in a couples class at First Baptist Church. Cookeville business man Paul Ramsey was their teacher ("He was a fabulous teacher") but he wanted to take a hiatus from teaching.

The class decided to give him a roast and Judy says, "Because of my background in English, speech and theater, they asked me to be the emcee and I decided, 'I'm going to bring that old lady to life.' "This must have been in the late '70s. I pulled her together, had a wig and a costume and I blacked out a tooth and went in as Aunt Mattie. Dwight helped me out by saying that Judy was running a little late but she'd be there.

"Now, these were people in my class who saw me every Sunday and they didn't know who I was. I didn't say anything at that point -- I'd just nod. I kind of kept my head down and sat down and ate my complete supper. Then it was time for the program to begin. Still no Judy. Somebody got up and was struggling around trying to kill time when Aunt Mattie stepped up to the plate.

"I named her Aunt Mattie Gooch because I was pretending to be Paul's Aunt Mattie. I liked the sound of Gooch and since then I've met people who are really named Gooch over in White County.

"At that time I was teaching English at Tennessee Tech -- I was adjunct faculty there for 14 years. I taught four classes and did the theater department and it was full-time work but I only got paid for part-time and no benefits. Anyway, word of mouth spread and the next person who wanted me to do something with Aunt Mattie was Al Enochs at First Realty. He hired me to do a show for a Rotary Sweetheart banquet and

asked me how much I charged.

"I had never charged anything and I was just blown out of the water, but I quoted him a fee of \$30 which was pretty low now that I've been doing this all these years. But when it was over, he handed me a check and he had doubled it. I thought -- 'Wow! This is pretty cool.'"



Judy Duke as "Aunt Mattie."

Judy became increasingly dissatisfied with her work at Tennessee Tech and says, "I will always give Dr. Don Weinrauch credit because his office was next to mine in Johnson Hall and he encouraged me to come up with some publicity for Aunt Mattie and offered to help me market her. My buddy, Melvin Case, who lived behind me as a child, actually designed my first brochure.

"I was still teaching at Tech when I woke up one morning at 4 o'clock just like an alarm had gone off. It was as clear as a bell to me that I should resign from Tech and pursue Aunt Mattie full time. I believe God was telling me to do this. Some people think that's a lot of baloney, but I believe that and I share that with anyone. I knew I had to talk to some people. One of them was my former pastor, who was very encouraging, and my husband, Dwight. We had always had two incomes and our children were young so I sat down and asked them, 'How would you feel if mommy stopped teaching and started doing Aunt Matte full time?'

"They all said, 'Whatever you want to do,' and Dwight was willing to have our income cut in half for a while. To this day, he's one of my biggest fans, God love him, and so are my children.

"We have two; our daughter, Shellie, lives in Cookeville and has a son, Jacob; and our son, Josh, has four children and lives in Shelbyville, so I have five grandchildren. So, some doors opened and some closed, but that's how I got the encouragement to start marketing Aunt Mattie big time."

Judy was born in Cookeville in 1947 "in the old Howard hospital" on Broad Street, just off the Courthouse Square. This building later served as the Putnam County Library and now has been renovated for offices. Judy is the only child of Clarence T. Brown, who was the state manager of East Tennessee for Woodman of the World Life Insurance, and Frances Gibson Brown. Her great-great-great-grandfather on her mother's side was State Sen. Richard Fielding Cooke, who introduced a bill in the Legislature in 1854 that reestablished the original boundaries of Putnam County and for whom Cookeville is named.

From her earliest memories, Judy always loved to dress up and pretend to be something or somebody else and made her first stage appearance in second grade. She grew up on Walnut Street near what was then the Tech Training School on 7th Street (later the Tech Campus School) where Judy attended grade school.

She says, "One of my best buddies as a child was Melvin Case, who lived with his grandmother right across the hedge in the backyard that separated our houses. We used to put on shows in his grandmother's basement for the kids in the neighborhood. We'd hang up a quilt for a curtain and he was always the announcer and I was always the performer. The kids were all close and we rode our bicycles all over the neighborhood."

She graduated from Tennessee Tech in 1969 with a B.S. and in 1976 with her masters in English. She and Dwight, her husband of 40 years, were married in 1970. "He was an accountant until he was 55," Judy says. "Then he decided he didn't want to crunch numbers anymore, and I told him he was crazy. He'd lost his job because of downsizing and was unemployed for two years. It's hard to find a job at age 55, but he came in one day and said, 'I'm going to be a barber.' He went to barber school, is a master barber, and he has his own barber shop and loves it. And I've had to eat so much crow!"

Judy has been involved with theater since high school and later at TTU and likes to do realistic roles. "I played Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* twice -- once in college and once after I was married and had our daughter. I loved that role," she says. "A few years ago I played Annie Nations here in Cookeville in *Foxfire* and I loved that role. The *Foxfire* books were an experiment by an English teacher whose students interviewed the mountain people in the hills of northern Georgia to understand their lifestyles. There really was a mountain woman that the character, Annie Nations, was based on. The play is based on Annie's life and it was a very challenging role for me. I like to portray real people or what could be real people in real situations."

Her own Aunt Mattie has developed over the years and Judy says, "I've created a whole family for her. She has a brother, Floyd, and a sister, Gladys Grace, and extended family. She's always impromptu and a storyteller and I've collected jokes and stories all these years."

"Cotton Ivey, who was commissioner of Agriculture under Gov. Ned McWhorter, is a fan of Aunt Mattie's. A long time ago he and I were on the same program at the Tennessee Preparatory School in Nashville for the state Department of Education, and he was the main speaker. I've done principals meetings, in-services, cafeteria workers meetings and all kinds of things for the state Department of Education. I used to come on stage as Aunt Mattie, do my thing, go backstage and change my clothes and drive home, if it's within driving distance."

"And I had driven down that morning and had on a pair of shorts. Once that wig comes off, I'm pretty hot. People don't get it, but it's hard work. You've got to be reading an audience, you've gotta have your mind ahead of your mouth so you know what's gonna happen next -- da-da-da-da."

"Anyway, he wanted to meet the real person behind Aunt Mattie. The woman who had hired me came running back and said, 'Judy, you've got to come out on stage again,' and I went, "Oh, no-no-no, because my hair was wet after that wig and hat and saw came off, but that's how I met Cotton Ivey."

"He was my mentor and he said, 'The most amazing thing about Aunt Mattie is the transition from Judy Duke to Aunt Mattie, and you need to let the audience see that.' I finally got up the nerve to try it and I do that now more than anything else because people find it fascinating. I go on as Judy Duke and talk about the importance of humor and no matter how bad your life may be that God blessed us with a sense of humor. A lot of the best known comedians have had very tragic lives, but they're able to laugh and to laugh at themselves."

Is Aunt Mattie her favorite role? "Yes, but working full-time with two museums to handle, I don't have much time. I'd love to be back on the stage in Cookeville. I haven't done anything since *Foxfire*, but I hope to do more theater in the future."

Judy answered an ad in the paper 11 years ago for a part-time Depot Museum administrator for the City of Cookeville, interviewed and got the job, and says, "I've loved history all my life -- I owe that to my parents. And I could work part-time and still be active with Aunt Mattie but we made so much work for ourselves when we opened the Cookeville History Museum that the position became full-time."

When she does have free time, Judy "plays golf every chance I get" and likes to read, walk, cook and see movies. Some of her favorite actresses are Meryl Streep, Helen Mirren and older ones like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford.

"They tackled roles that didn't make them look glamorous," she says. "So many of the younger actresses have beauty and that's about it. They couldn't act themselves out of a bag."

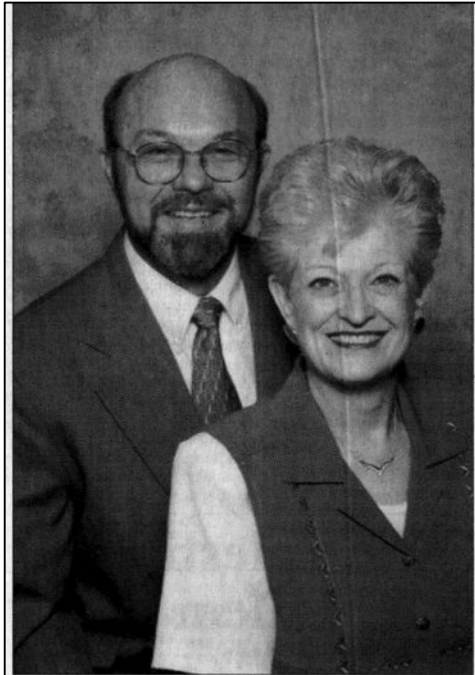
Judy has a sunny, outgoing personality and when I asked her what makes her angry, she responded promptly, "Somebody who hurts my family or who makes fun of my family. Part of that is that Dwight was born with a hearing loss. He had a cochlear implant a couple of years ago, but I've seen people who think others are stupid because they're hard of hearing."

"Anybody who has a disability is going to be made fun of and that makes me really angry. When somebody makes an ugly remark or treats one of my family or close friends badly, that sends me over the edge. Being an only child, my friendships are very important to me."

I wondered how she expressed anger, and Judy says, "I'm a yeller and a screamer -- I just let her fly." Judy can play neurotic, introverted Blanche Dubois or Aunt Mattie Gooch, who never met a stranger, but one thing about her might surprise you. She's not as much of an extrovert as you might think.

"A close friend told me I'm really an introvert," she says. "Everybody has a public persona, but whether I'm teaching or performing or whatever, I have to find 'Judy time.' I just want to be quiet, get away from everything and -- chill out."

<http://www.ajlambert.com>



Judy Duke and her husband, Dwight, were married in 1970.