

'ROSIE THE RIVETER' TURNING 100

Amy Davis | Herald-Citizen

Ruby Mackie has had more birthdays than anyone she knows.



And this Friday, the former Rosie the Riveter will celebrate the biggest yet — her 100th.

(Ruby Mackie, who turns 100 on Oct. 21, holds a photo of herself from her days as a Rosie the Riveter in Michigan).

“She’s lived a clean, healthy, good moral life,” her oldest daughter, Gail Smith, explained as Ruby, dressed in pink

pajamas, finished her lunch of scrambled eggs in the living room of her Cookeville home. She’s lived there since 1972.

On the table in front of Ruby lay folded dish cloths, something her daughter said Ruby is always eager to help with. She also likes to keep busy drying kitchen utensils and breaking green beans from the garden. Up until age 90, she even maintained the garden herself — that is, until she fell while picking bugs off the potatoes.

These days, Ruby has around-the-clock care. It’s a fitting tribute to a woman who did the same for others most of her life.

“My mother had to take over the household at age 14,” said Gail, who spends several days and nights a week with her mother. That’s when Ruby, the seventh of 11 children born in rural White County, lost her mother and took over the care for her younger siblings, including a 20-month-old baby.

She learned to make biscuits that were “so hard they could break the barn door down,” Gail said, remembering what her mother had told her. “But she became a supreme biscuit maker.”

Ruby can’t recall much from the old days — “it’s been so long ago,” she says — but at times, a memory is triggered, and her words flow.

She’ll tell you a bit about her job as a seamstress at the shirt factory in Sparta between 1939 and 1942. She’ll mention the surrey, a horse-drawn carriage her father drove to take the family to the fair.

And, of course, she’ll have something to say about her days in Ypsilanti, Mich., where she helped build B-24 Liberator bomber planes during World War II.

“She was a Rosie the Riveter,” Gail said of the iconic name that represents American women who worked in factories and shipyards to produce war supplies. Celebrated for their patriotism, they filled the jobs of men who were drafted for combat.

“Rosie” was a symbol of feminism and women’s economic power, and images of women workers like Ruby were widespread in government posters and commercial advertising.

“She was one of those people who broke the glass ceiling for women to be able to work,” Gail said of her mother.

Ruby worked for the Briggs/Ford Motor Co. in its Willow Run plant from Oct. 31, 1943, to April 29, 1944. Her job was to “rivet,” or fasten a strip of metal to the doors of the plane. Another woman — a “bucker” — worked behind her.

“Me and that lady could work them like nobody’s business,” Ruby said of the door assembly. “It was easy as pie.”

Gail took the historical significance of her mother’s work for granted up until around 10 years ago. It just wasn’t talked about.

“And my dad never talked about being in the service,” she added.

Ruby married Elbert Mackie on April 4, 1942. The couple had eloped in Rossville, Ga.

Elbert joined the Army on July 17 of the same year. He and Ruby then moved to Battle Creek, Mich., where Elbert was in basic training at Fort Custer.

“He was affiliated with the medical unit and in close proximity to Percy Jones Army Hospital,” Gail said.

During that time, before her Rosie the Riveter days, Ruby worked in a drug store, making milkshakes and sandwiches. When Elbert went on to Fort McCoy in Wisconsin for additional training in the medical field, Ruby went back to Sparta for a short time.

“She didn’t have the clothes for cold weather,” her daughter explained.

When Elbert was shipped overseas, spending 25 months in the European Theatre, Ruby went back to Michigan, joining her sister and brother-in-law, in Ann Arbor to help with their baby daughter.

Then she went to work on the bomber planes.

After the war, the Mackies moved to Putnam County, where they raised four children, including Gail, who was born in 1947.

Ruby's job as a Rosie the Riveter was the last she had outside the home. Instead, she resumed the caregiver role she had taken on at age 14. She took care of several family members through the years, including her father.

"That's really what she's done her whole life, is take care of people," Gail said.

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 17 October 2016

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