

PRESIDENT HAD FAMILY TIES TO COOKEVILLE

Lindsay McReynolds

Herald-Citizen Staff

COOKEVILLE -- Former President Gerald Ford has a Cookeville connection.

Ford, who died Tuesday at his Rancho Mirage, Calif., home, was born Leslie Lynch King Jr. to Leslie Lynch King and Dorothy Ayer Gardner, but his mother soon divorced King and remarried Gerald R. Ford.

And her young son was later renamed for her new husband.

So while Ford had no full brothers or sisters, he had quite a few half brothers and sisters through his parent's second marriages.

One of those half-brothers, Leslie "Buddy" Henry King, lived in Cookeville for many years before he died in 1976.

But he left behind a wife, Virginia, as well as several children. Now many of King's relatives still live in Cookeville, including his wife, Virginia, who's now 85.

Virginia King Hunter told the Herald-Citizen on Wednesday, just a day after President Ford's death, that she didn't know that her husband, Buddy, even had a half brother when they married in Akron, Ohio, in 1943.

The couple moved to Cookeville in 1947, following a fishing trip to the area, after which Buddy was impressed enough with the area to want to live here.

Hunter said she didn't know about her husband's connection to Ford until several years after they had been married.

"We lived on 9th Street, and one night I was reading the paper, and I heard Bud talking to him on the phone," she said. "He was in the House of Representatives. It was the first mention he made of having a half-brother."

King was reunited with his half-brother, Ford, and Hunter met him for the first time in 1960 in Chicago at the Republican National Convention.

"He has always been a down-to-earth, nice man," Hunter said of her first impression of Ford. "He was always considerate."

Hunter and King saw Ford several times over the years, although Ford never came to Cookeville.

"We always went where he (Ford) was speaking in Tennessee," Hunter said. "I think the last time was in Chattanooga."

Of course, Ford's life became much busier when he became president in 1974 following President Richard Nixon's resignation, and Hunter said King was always supportive of his half-brother's political career.

But King died in 1976, the year that Ford won his first Republican nomination to the presidency but lost the election to Jimmy Carter.

Hunter said she hasn't had much contact with Ford's family since Bud died, although she has received a Christmas card from the family nearly every year.

She also took a family trip to Palm Springs, Calif., several years ago and visited Ford at his Rancho Mirage office, where she had her photo made with him.

And King still has several living relatives that also serve as relatives of the late president.

The children King and Hunter had together include Pamela Smith of Sunset, South Carolina; Kyra Parrish of Naples, Fla.; Leslie King Jr. of Cookeville; and Craig Hodges King of Cookeville.

Grandchildren are Brandon and Jonathan Parrish of Cookeville; Jenna King of Cookeville; Charles "Chad" King of Cookeville; Christy Burkhardt of Knoxville; and Leslie King III of Naples, Fla.

Great-grandchildren are Mason Burkhardt and Maddux Leslie Burkhardt of Knoxville.

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A photo of late President Gerald Ford with Viginia King Hunter is a memento of Ford's connection to Cookeville as Hunter recalls her family's connection to the late president.