

HISTORIC SPELLING MATCH CONTINUES AT SMITH CHAPEL

By MEGAN TROTTER

It's a game that has been going on for more than 60 years in the little chapel next to Smith Chapel Cemetery — an old-fashioned spelling match. Every year since 1946, both children and adults have been gathering together to test out their spelling skills. Before



that, the match was held only occasionally. Opal Burris, the chairperson of the event, has been the one to give out the words for the spellers since she volunteered for the job in 1965, however she first started as one of the spellers herself.

(Caden Langford, left, goes over some spelling words with his great-great-aunt, Opal Burris, in preparation for this year's spelling match at Smith Chapel).

"Today, it's nothing like when we first started," she said. "Back then, they spelled for blood."

Back in those days, competitors were serious about spelling. Though they didn't study words beforehand, they were still fiercely competitive. Some would even get mad and leave after getting their word wrong.

However, things are much more relaxed these days. Now, the match is simply a friendly game for both children and adults. You don't even have to be a particularly good speller to participate. The group has participants of all types of skill levels.

"Some of them can't spell very well at all," Burris said with a chuckle.

The important thing is just having fun. The group makes a circle with a row of benches, with two openings on either half of the circle. The participants are split into two teams, each sitting on either side of the circle. When everyone is seated, the goal is to move the next seat up by correctly spelling a word.

"If the one in front of you misses the word, but you spell it correctly, then you get to move in front of them," participant Linda Smith Langford explained.

The winners get bragging rights, and everyone snacks on sweet treats after the game is over. The spelling match is free and open to the public to join in or watch.

It is set up to be fun, with no shame for those who misspell their words.

"Young folks are afraid to spell these days, but they shouldn't be," Burris said. "It's not extremely serious; it's for fun."

The chapel is on Smith Chapel Road in Cookeville, off of Dodson Branch Highway. Parking is available around the chapel and behind it.

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