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Bessie Mae Alford Lewis, AAFA #1104
(Written by Frances M. Lewis Cooke)

The following was written by Frances M. Lewis Cooke and submitted by Rob Lewis, AAFA #0789, Bessie's son. There is also a reference to Bessie in the report of our Raleigh Meeting. [There is a picture of the Lewis family taken at the Raleigh Meeting. See article 2001 Annual Meeting Report.]



Bessie Alford Lewis
Incomparable Lady

Bessie Mae Alford Lewis celebrated her 96th birthday on July 25, 2001. She was the first of 7 children born to Lucy Elladene Voliva Alford and John William Alford. John, a Free Will Baptist Minister, always joked that she was born on the day they married, the truth being that Bessie was born on the day of her parents' first wedding anniversary. Five of the Johnny Alford children are deceased: Eloise Grady, Guy Phillips, John William, Jr., Lucy Gaynelle, and Benjamin Randall. Nellie Ruth, the youngest, and Bessie survive. Bessie was born in New Bern, NC and lived there and in Morehead City before the family moved back to Johnny's hometown, Kenly, NC.

Widowed for eight years, Bessie lives alone in the farm house in which she and Earl reared their children. People are amazed to learn that she continues to do so and her children are bewildered when people ask, "Does she 'still' live alone?" The word 'still' does not apply, for what else would we have expected of our mother? She has always approached every circumstance with the attitude that she would do what must be done. Her approach to life in this 95th year is that "as long as I live, I am going to live".

Bessie was trained as a teacher at East Carolina Teachers College (now University) in Greenville, North Carolina. She was employed at the Free

Will Baptist Orphanage in Middlesex, NC when she met and married Earl Lewis, a rural mail carrier and farmer. The family has always enjoyed the account of their wedding events. The marriage was bitterly opposed by her parents, both because of her age (19) and probably primarily because of Earl's vocation. Bessie had always lived in towns in eastern Carolina and was not familiar at all with the life of hardship usually endured by southern farmers. The story of their wedding plans includes a confrontation between her father and prospective groom, with a pistol taken to the meeting by John who thought to intimidate Earl. The ploy did not work. Earl and Bessie were determined to marry and already had the marriage license in hand. Johnny relented and insisted they buy another license for the county in which he lived and that the wedding be held in his home.

Bessie concerned herself with learning to be a farmer's wife and has applied herself to that job the rest of her life. She and Earl reared ten children. Their lives were filled with hard work, but with much more. Music, reading, church attendance, sports, citizenship (including always voting!), academic excellence were all encouraged - and expected! Bessie met life head-on and continues to be involved in many of the very same activities. And why not? She is living her life to its fullest.

If Bessie is intimidated by any circumstance or is reluctant, her family is never aware of it. Her first commercial plane trip was made alone from North Carolina to Hawaii where a son lived. Her philosophy told her that she could do it if other people could! As the president of her Senior Adult group at church, she plans all the trips and outings as well as the weekly schedule. She makes the over-night plans, securing hotels, tickets for performances, and makes travel arrangements. She attends baptisms, weddings, parties, graduations, and every conceivable event in which her 69 grandchildren and great-grandchildren are involved. On sleepless nights she entertains herself by playing her piano at which she is greatly talented. For seventeen years Bessie led the Youth Choir at Knightdale Baptist Church, and in her late eighties she sang a solo part in a Senior Adult choir production. She continues to teach Sunday School, speak at gatherings and give readings of her original poetry! Despite failing eyesight (not critical yet!) her embroidery, professional-grade crewel work and craft items are treasured gifts for her friends and family.



John William Alford, Bessie's father.

Earl - the farmer - thought farm life was not complete without cows to milk. Bessie, the city-bred girl, churned and made butter daily for nearly 65 years! She became a legend in the community, for this was a forgotten art.

Following her 94th birthday, a daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter treated Bessie to a Broadway weekend in New York City. They selected an expensive Manhattan hotel, famous restaurants, two Broadway productions and cab rides for sight-seeing. Her dream had been to see the Statue of Liberty - up close! - and a harbor cruise fulfilled that desire. Her hotel window looked down on the spires of St. Patrick's Cathedral and entering was a required treat for her. Everywhere, from hotel personnel to waiters to cab drivers, Bessie caught the eye of New Yorkers and many wanted to snap her picture! Unbelievable!

The ultimate indignity to her daughters is her youthful face. Some new acquaintances question if we are all sisters - not mother and daughters. But believe me, we enjoy it! Still living alone? Still active with life itself? Her children pray that they have inherited some of the Alford-Lewis genes!