

Dortha Byrd and the Smallest Library in the U. S.

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of January 6, 2020)

When I receive a call from John Rice Irwin I know I am in for a treat and often a potential Historically Speaking column. It is always delightful to talk with John Rice. He has more knowledge about East Tennessee than anyone I know. He can take a person's last name and tell them in which East Tennessee county their ancestors likely lived.

This time he wanted me to know about a lady who operated the "Little Library" in Back Valley, near Coalfield. What he told me was fascinating. Dot's name is Dortha Byrd. Her daughter, Barbara Cannon, worked for John Rice when he was the Superintendent of the Anderson County Board of Education.

That is how John Rice learned of Dot and the "Little Library." As he has often done, John Rice, thinking Dot should be recognized for her dedication, proceeded to help promote her story. He loves to do that to this day! He helped get the story on local media with Gene Patterson's help and the story even was published in the National Inquirer as the "Smallest Library in the U.S."

This publicity led to even more interest and eventually an appearance on the Johnny Carson show with the resultant payment used to start a fund that led to the creation of the Coalfield Public Library! Also, eventually the Little Library was moved to that location as well, where it stands proudly today!

As we talked more about Dot's story, John Rice indicated I should go meet her for myself. So, I did. What a delight!

I drove to her home and enjoyed one of the most memorable interviews. She is a delight to listen to and she obviously loves to tell the story of her life and the "Smallest Library." I think the reason the "Little Library" is now known as the "Smallest Library" may be the National Inquirer's choice to use "Smallest" in the title.

Without prompting she talked non-stop for the entire interview. Sharp as a tack, she is! Her memory is amazing! This is undoubtedly one of the most memorable interviews I have ever experienced.

She told me that her grandmother's house was a "Sears and Roebuck house" in Kansas. She has brought a handmade shingle from that house with her to Tennessee. She keeps it in plastic to show kids what a handmade shingle looks like. That is just how she is, always thinking of what benefits the children.

She also told me of her parents, her Dad's black lung disease, her mother's health issues and how she and her husband took care of them. Dot shared many other interesting aspects of her life as a nurse as we sat at her kitchen table. Such as, of course, the story of how the Little Library came to be.

But the most enjoyable part of the interview was her telling about the trip to be on the Johnny Carson show. First, she was called by the David Letterman show. She thought it was a crank call and hung up on them twice. She then called her daughter Barbara and told her about what she thought must be crank calls. At Barbara's prompting when they called again, she told them she was waiting to be called for the Johnny Carson show.

That actually happened just a few days later when NBC called. She hung up on them twice before the lady calling said, "Please don't hang up again, Mrs Dot, this is not a crank call, we want you to be on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson." Dot said, she replied, "Who is Johnny Carson?" The Tonight Show hostess finally convinced Dot they would pay her and also pay to fly her to Burbank, California and they needed her to come that day. Dot said she told the lady, "I can't go now, I'll have to wash my face first." So they agreed to delay a week, so off she went!

You should have seen her delight when I asked her to tell me about the airplane ride. She explained that when she arrived at the airport there was no plane available. Her traveling companion, Louise (Walls/Scarborough) Crowe and her daughter, Barbara, who was there to see them off, told the agent they

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did not know how he would do it, but Dot was scheduled to be on the Tonight Show and just must get to Atlanta to catch a scheduled flight.

Dot said, she thought he found an airplane close enough to turn it around and bring it back to the airport. As they were being loaded, a team of golfers were also trying to get to Atlanta to play in a tournament and were going to miss their playing time. There were just enough seats on the airplane for Dot, Louise and all the golfers! She took considerable delight in recalling the team would not have made their tournament if not for her!

There were other stories she told me, such as the time she was asked to teach a class of third grade students at the Coalfield school. Well it did not go well as the youngsters were chewing tobacco, dipping snuff and spitting on the floor. She would not have that and things got out of hand as she attempted to keep order.

She said the students began fighting among themselves, so she went to the principal to get help. She said he just laughed at her and that made her mad. She said, "I will have your job!" She immediately filled out a petition (she said she had learned how to do that in high school) and got all the teachers to sign it. She said, "He got fired that night!"

Dot also told how she helped save the vocational school funding when they needed a female student in the small engine repair class to keep from losing funding. She went there after work and put on an apron and she worked in the tool room to check out tools, which to her was much like checking out books. So she did that for the entire course and funding was retained. What an amazing person and what a joy to listen to her tell about her exploits!

She thinks the world of John Rice Irwin, because of his efforts to bring attention to the Smallest Library. What started out as a way to provide books to Back Valley went from obscurity to national recognition and it all started because John Rice saw something he thought needed to be known by others. That is just like him! He would surely recognize the potential for good that could come from publicizing Dot and her Little Library.

Over the years, recognition of the Little Library has come in numerous ways. The most recent happened last May, 2019, when a special event was held to place a historical marker at the Smallest Library. Joani Trout, Annetta Watson and Cathy Bird provided the details about the latest honor provided Dortha Byrd and the Little Library.

The next Historically Speaking column will conclude the Dortha "Dot" Byrd saga with the details of the placing of that historical marker and the events of that special day for the "Smallest Library in the U. S."

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Dortha "Dot" Byrd as she delighted me with stories of her life

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The Little Library or as the National Inquirer titled it, the "Smallest Library in the U. S." (Photo by Cathy Bird)