



Wartime, VA nurse Trudy Fann reflects on full life

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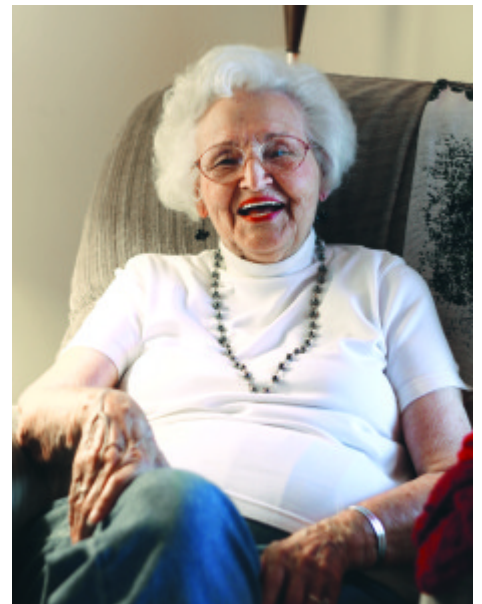
By Jeff Keeling

From attending a two-room schoolhouse on the Cherokee Indian Reservation to World War II nursing duty on the Pacific Coast and a post-war career at Johnson City's VA hospital while raising five children, Trudy Fann has made plenty of memories.

"I have had a real interesting life," Fann, who turns 93 Friday, said understatedly in the cozy den of her Johnson City home last week.

Fann, who has lived in Johnson City for most of the past 70 years, has a story that starts in Birdtown, N.C., a community at the mouth of Adams Creek, where it joins the Ocunuluftee River on the reservation. Though she's just 1/32 Cherokee, Fann was raised with six siblings by her father as a tribe member, General Washington Bradley, a non-Indian, and Julia McCoy Bradley.

"G.W.," as her father was known, farmed 78 acres, with all the children helping out with canning and growing much of their food in a large garden.



Trudy Fann smiles as she tells a story from her childhood. Photo by Jeff Keeling

There was no indoor plumbing, and light came from kerosene lamps, Fann remembers.

"It was all we knew. At the two-room elementary school in Birdtown they had indoor plumbing, and I worried the teacher to death to take a shower. He finally said, 'well, go on.'"



Fann completed late elementary and high school at the main school in Cherokee – she still votes in tribal elections – and finished with strong enough academics to go to Bacone College, a Baptist-operated school for Native Americans in Muskogee Okla.

"My parents didn't have the money for me to come home for Christmas, so I stayed there in the dormitory with the house mother," Fann said.

Then came the day that will live in infamy, and the U.S. suddenly found itself in the thick of World War II. "That's when every girl in my class decided to become a nurse," Fann said. She spent her first summer after college working in her uncle's craft shop on the reservation and also got a part-time job as an aide at Cherokee's Indian hospital.



Then it was on to Knox General Hospital to start the cadet nurse training program. "The street uniform for cadet nurses was gray, with little red epaulettes on the shoulders. They treated us like officers."

Fann and her classmates spent more than two years training in Knoxville, but as she said, "the war was heavy." So in 1944, with Verda Lee Kesterson and classmates Charlene White, Fann headed west for her last six months of training. It would be on the job.

"I had chosen the Navy, and we rode a troop train all the way across the country to Oak Knoll Navy Hospital in Oakland," Fann said. "They had big open wards, and there were about 8,000 patients. It was hard to see some of what these boys had been through, but they were excited that it was close to being over with. We treated more Marines than sailors, because they were closer to the combat usually."

That pent up tension burst out after V-J Day. It was understandable but a little intense for a young lady. "I remember going downtown and it was just bedlam. They just wrecked San Francisco. If you was with a fella they'd leave you alone, and I remember this little sailor said, 'do you need help,' and I said, 'can you take me to the bus?' They grounded us nurses at the hospital for three days."

Trudy Bradley headed back home, but not for long. She got an RN job in Oak Ridge, and then an old Knox General roommate, Norma Olivares, invited her to Johnson City where she met Ray Fann. "It was a blind date. He had just gotten out of the Navy."

Before long, Bradley was engaged. Her friends gave her a big wedding, something that wasn't common on the reservation. "A friend of mine had a wedding gown that she loaned me. I did buy the veil."

The Fanns settled into life in Johnson City, with Ray working for Blue Cross/Blue Shield and Trudy putting in three decades at the VA, much of it on Ward 14.



Trudy Fann on her honeymoon.

"I worked on surgical service. I enjoyed it. I really, really did. You have to like a place to stay that long."

The Fanns raised Sam, Becky, Ben, Tim and Julie, first on Locust Street, and then in a larger home in Cherokee Hills. Fann has 10 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. Ray passed away in 1993.

After retirement, Fann spent a year in Odessa, in the Ukraine, just after the fall of communism, with Mission to the World out of Atlanta.

"They wanted somebody to help put God back in their country, they'd been out of it for so long," she said. "We were teaching morals and ethics using the Bible in public schools. I kept thinking somebody was going to tell us we couldn't do that."



Ray Fann on the couple's honeymoon.

Fann has enjoyed China painting, and still crochets, something her mother taught her and her sisters. She gets a bit of money from the Cherokee casino revenues, and votes for chief and for the tribal representative from Birdtown.

Fann is a faithful member and attender at Westminster Presbyterian Church, and answers quickly when asked if she has a favorite scripture verse: "And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life." (John 5:11-12)