

My Grandmother: Miss Billie, Maypops and the Steel Magnolia

My grandmother was the original Steel Magnolia.

Folks around Memphis knew her as Miss Billie—the Pink Lady at Methodist Hospital with the snowy white hair.

I called her Mema. And she was a force to be reckoned with—a genteel granny with a honey-dripping drawl who also wielded a mighty cast-iron skillet.

Her home became a beehive of summertime celebration during my growing up years.

My days were filled with trips to the golf course and scampering about in her prized rose garden and eating pulled pork sandwiches at Leonard's Pit Barbecue and fishing at Kermit Buck's lake in Mississippi.

And when the sweltering Southern sun was at its zenith, I would retreat inside for a glass of sweet tea and one of her famous chocolate chip cookies.

She would spread out pages of *The Commercial Appeal* on the kitchen table and plop down a bowl filled with maypops. And we'd spend the afternoon carving all sorts of creations from the delicate skin of the maypop fruit.

I would ride shotgun in the Buick as she drove me to Vacation Bible School down at the Whitehaven United Methodist Church. And she would listen patiently as I reported back my findings regarding David and Goliath and the big fish that swallowed Jonah.

Yes sir. Those were mighty good days—mighty good memories. But as is true with life—time passes and seasons change.

The maypops are long gone now and so too that beautiful rose garden and the Buick and the Methodist church.

They are precious memories that have faded away.

The telephone call from Memphis came early this morning and the news, while expected, was still unexpected.

Miss Billie's heart had stopped beating after more than 100 years. The Steel Magnolia was gone.

In the end, death came not as a victor, but as a friend.

Her memory had faded in recent years—she struggled with names and faces. I remember calling her one day and she replied, "Todd who?"

But when Miss Billie breathed her first heavenly breath this morning, her memory was restored, and her health was replenished.

I take comfort in that. I truly do.

And the lyrics to that great church hymn ring even truer. When we all get to heaven—what a day of rejoicing that will be.
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