

Bailey's death captures nationwide attention

by DEANNA LEE

One week ago today, Harlan County bid farewell to one of its most beloved legends. In that time, her family has received a number of phone calls and e-mails from individuals and groups throughout the nation expressing condolences for the woman known as "Queen Maggie."

Maggie Bailey, referred to as "Aunt Mag" to many in the county, died of complications from pneumonia on Dec. 3 at the age of 101.

And though she lived an eventful 101 years full of excitement, interest and intrigue, her family said it is still difficult to think of her as gone.

Don Halcomb, Bailey's nephew, said Bailey loved the people of Harlan County, and she made no difference between those she cared for and helped.

Halcomb, along with his older brother, was raised by Bailey from the time he was 4 months old. Halcomb's mother was Bailey's youngest sister. When his father died at the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, Halcomb said Bailey kept her promise to his father to help raise his two small children.

Halcomb's wife, Helen, smiles when she hears the story.

"Maggie said there could be only one boss," she said. Halcomb's mother agreed, and it was decided that Bailey would play that role. From the point on, Don Halcomb said Bailey cared for him as her own, and he has affectionately called her "auntie" from the time he could talk.

Caring for family and friends came easily for Bailey, Halcomb said. As the second-oldest of eight, she began working with her family at a young age to help take care of the home and her younger siblings.

That led to the beginning of Bailey's legend.

To help raise her family, Bailey began selling moonshine when she was just 17.

"That's the only way that she knew to take care of her family," Halcomb said.

"He said he believes Bailey's family made a large portion of the moonshine that she sold.

"Just about everybody then made moonshine," Halcomb said.

It is said that Bailey was still selling alcohol from her modest home in Clovertown when she was 95. She was able to help many Harlan Countians by doing so, Halcomb said.

Though Bailey married young to Lora Bailey, the two never had children. But those she cared for in the county, Halcomb said, were her children just the same.

"She was a good person. She would help anyone," he said.

And she did. She sent several children to college, and the offer stood for many more. She clothed, fed and cared for others, and opened her home too many times to count. She helped the poor buy coal to heat their homes and food to put on their tables. She donated money countless times to community churches, regardless of denomination or race, Halcomb said.

"She had a heart of gold," said Helen Halcomb, explaining that the money Bailey collected from selling alcohol went to those she cared for perhaps the reason she was never convicted of illegally selling alcoholic beverages, though evidence often proved otherwise.

"I don't care what the evidence was, the juries would not convict her," Harlan lawyer Eugene Goss has said.

Helen Halcomb said Bailey knew her rights and was very smart when it came to the law.

"She read every newspaper and always watched the news. She helped everybody... Everyone knew her," she said.

And many did.

For her 101st birthday, Bailey received well wishes from President Bush, Gov. Fletcher, Tubby Smith, Rich Brooks, Sen. Jim Bunning and state Sen. Daniel Mongiardo, to name a few.

Bailey's burial was just Wednesday, and Helen Halcomb said the family is receiving several condolences from those touched and intrigued by Bailey's life. Bailey has been featured in The Washington Post, United Press International and on the Paul Harvey radio show this week.

"She knew how to make friends and keep friends," Don Halcomb said.

Her friends were anyone and everyone. Four pastors officiated Bailey's funeral service.

The Rev. Howard Farmer, the Rev. Joe Howard and the Rev. Joshua Hensley were present, as was the Rev. Butch Clem, who sang, Halcomb said.

Helen Halcomb said Bailey "turned her life around" late in life, and was saved and baptized at the age of 96. The Rev. Farmer was present for both and performed the baptism.

"She could quote the Bible from front to back," she said.

The words of one of Bailey's closest friends, Lexington lawyer and author William Bagby, still weigh on the Halcombs' minds today. Bagby, who died about a year and a half ago, was Bailey's tax attorney and wrote about Bailey's run-ins with federal authorities throughout the years in "Queen Maggie Outfoxes the IRS Evil."

Bagby once said he has only known of two queens in his life.

Queen Elizabeth. And Queen Maggie.