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The Difference

There isn't a lot about a man's life that a little dash between a birth date and death date can say, yet most of what I knew about my grandfather came from the tombstone that we decorated every year which reads: Berne O. Stahl: 8 Dec 1913 – 4 Mar 1971. After a dig into the past, I've realized that during that little dash this man made a huge impression. "He wasn't much in the eyes of the world, but to those who knew him he was something special (Massey)."

If you define success like most of the world: "being known for good looks, having money, world possessions, and a prestigious job," then Berne wasn't someone that you would call successful. He stood at over six feet tall with huge feet and enormous hands (Massey). My grandmother, Frankie Mae Owens, described him as a "gentle giant," because he never raised a hand in anger. He was kind of awkward, had a gap between his front teeth, and the "prettiest, sky-blue eyes (Massey)." He didn't worry about appearances. Once when he was on his way to church with his family, one of his daughters stepped on her bottle and splashed milk all over my grandmother's dress, but he wouldn't take her back home to change. He just didn't think appearance was something to be concerned with in life.

Berne never had a lot of money, but he always provided for his family. He was raised on a farm with eleven siblings, where they lived off the land and the money they got from selling cotton, wheat, corn, milk, butter, firewood, sorghum, peanuts, popcorn,

vegetables, wool, pigs, calves, and cows (Thomas). At eighteen he became an ordained minister and was married at age 23. He and my grandmother lived in a garage that had been made into an apartment. All of their furniture, except for the bedstead that was given to them, consisted of pieces that my great-grandmother and my grandmother's brother helped them build. Two rockers and a dressing table were fashioned out of apple crates. They bought a used cook stove for five dollars (Thomas). They had nine children between the years 1939 and 1957. Through the great depression Berne worked to support his family on wages as low as fifty cents a day.

Although times were tough, money wasn't a big concern for Berne. He knew that as long as he worked and had faith, God would provide, and He did! My grandmother told me a story about how they got their new car. Grandpa Berne, Grandma, and the four kids (the others weren't born yet) had been praying in secret for a new car. The car they had didn't have any of the windows in it and you had to hold the gearshift in place with a forked stick. When it rained the whole family got wet on the way to church. One day they were standing outside and they saw a "bright, shiny, black car, with all the windows in it (Owens)" coming down the road. When it got closer they could see that the deacons from the church were riding in it. They got out and handed Berne the keys to the car and told him it was his. They had no idea that the family had been praying for a new car, the deacons just said that the church felt like they needed it. Berne and his family knew they got the car because God was providing for them.

But, Berne wouldn't ever let the family live off handouts. He worked where he could and wasn't concerned with having a prestigious job. He was a hard worker, and whatever he did, he did it well. Some of his jobs consisted of picking cotton, driving a bus, working in a sawmill, hauling logs, building a missile silo after World War II and a dam

for the Corps of Engineers, and hauling milk. My grandmother said that he would lift five gallon steel cans full of milk in each hand and swing them up onto the truck. He also tended the garden so that the family would have plenty to eat. Berne fixed plumbing and electrical problems around his house and for his neighbors, and even worked some with a certified plumber.

Besides working at one of these jobs fulltime, he also worked fulltime preaching, singing, doing wedding and funeral services, and visiting the sick, but he never allowed the church to support his family. He always put the money they gave him for preaching back into the offering plate. He felt his real calling was to evangelize. During his lifetime he and my grandmother organized five Free Will Baptist churches in Yell and Scott Counties and all five are still in operation today. Most of them started when he'd travel to a town to do a revival. He'd lead music and keep time by using his signature move, moving his open hand and whole arm up and down in front of him, like he was patting someone on the head. Then he'd preach. "[His] sermons were always really easy to follow. He gave you something to grab on to (Massey)." After he preached the people would respond. My grandmother said that one time fifty people were saved and baptized at the revival, but most of the time they didn't take count. Usually the new church would start meeting in an abandoned school building or on land that somebody donated until they had time and money to build a church. The Plainview Free Will Baptist Church met in the American Legion Hut before they built a building (Plainview). Berne and his family would get there early and clean up all the alcohol bottles left from the night before and then they'd have service. Berne pastored the church until the congregation was large enough to hire and support a pastor. (Owens)

So what makes Berne so special if it wasn't his looks, money, or prestige? Berne is remembered for being a hard worker, man of faith, a "straight man", creative, and having a sense of humor. It is already evident through the stories I've told that he was a hard worker and a man of faith; it is the other qualities that I'd like to expound upon.

Berne's only living brother, Randa Stahl, described Berne as a "straight man." Randa said that his mother always had homebrew around the house but as far as he knew "Berne never drank a drop in his life." My grandmother said that she *never* heard him curse. Instead of swearing when he got upset he'd say "lan's sake." But, he didn't believe in being moral just for the sake of morality, he believed that a man should follow his convictions. Once he was confronted by a woman in the church congregation for delivering milk on Sundays. He just responded by saying, "if you can get the cows to quit giving milk on Sundays, then I'll stop hauling it (Owens)." My grandmother described him as living a "black or white" life. "He didn't know any gray." But I think Berne described it best himself when he told this story...

"There was a man walking a pig home from market and he got tired so he decided to stop and rest. As he was napping some boys decided to play a trick on him and switch his pig for a pup. The man woke up and walked a little farther and then the boys switched the pup back for a pig when the man wasn't looking. The man turned and saw the pig and said, "I don't care if you're a pig or a pup, just be one or the other!" (Owens)

Berne was also a very creative thinker. After attending a "Normal School" for learning how to teach singing by shape notes, he and my grandmother wrote a song together and it was published in a periodic hymnbook. He invented a perpetual motion toy using magnets long before they were heard of. He built a "trash smasher" which consisted

of a water powered metal foot. He made a big toy top and when he wound it up and let it go it flew through the window. My grandmother said that he laughed and laughed about that... which brings us to his sense of humor.

After talking to those that knew him I think his sense of humor is one of things that stood out about him the most. One time a young man came to the house to ask Berne if he would officiate he and his fiancé's wedding. After talking to him for a while the man said, "Brother Berne I want you to marry me." Berne replied, "Sorry son, but I can't. I'm already married." (Owens) He used his sense of humor to battle the stresses of life. When I asked his brother to describe Berne with one phrase he said, "He was a happy-going guy. He didn't get mad at much (Stahl)."

My Grandpa Berne wasn't rich and famous, but he touched many lives during his short time on this earth... My grandmother, who said he made sure she *always* knew he loved her, his family that he worked so hard to provide for, his neighbors that he helped with house mending, the churches through his singing, preaching, and servant heart, the many others that were touched through his outreach ministry, and everyone that he came in contact with because he "knew no strangers (Owens)." When he died suddenly at age 57 the church was full and the church yard was over crowded with people that said he loved them, he helped them, he prayed for them and they were healed, and he made a difference in their lives. He was a man with many skills, but the most important one was the ability he had to make an impact on all who knew him... and even those who came after his lifetime, like me.

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