

Ruth Lucille Traynham

By MELISSA TUFTS

Ruth Lucille Traynham has never worked an eight-hour day in her life. She's put in the hours, though: about 16-a-day, as a matter of fact.

In defiance of labor laws, she was up at 5:30 a.m. and going to bed at between 1 and 2 a.m. the next morning. Her career is one that can't be measured on a time card or paid by the hour. She is a "professional" mother and up until just a few years ago didn't stop a minute during those 16 hours.

In addition to driving the Cedar Grove School bus for over 18 years, she has always taken in sewing, and even ran a small grocery store while her husband worked for 13 years in Baltimore, Md. Somewhere in her schedule she managed to find time to raise five of her own children and take care of several others over the years—84 to be exact.

Eighty-four children? The number sends chills up anybody's spine. How many diapers must have been changed by the gentle hands of Ruth Traynham in her 20 years as a foster mother?

But meet her, and it's easy to understand how she has managed. Calm, level-headed attitude and motherly affection are immediately apparent. In her smile is a confidence and warmth that expresses a rare amount of patience and energy. Even today, with two grandchildren playing at the house until their mother gets home from work, her maternal concern is obvious.

I've got my hands full, my arms full and my heart full.

At 60 years of age, things have slowed down a bit. She sleeps until the late hour of 7:30 a.m. and sometimes goes to bed before 1 a.m.

In her words, "I've got my hands full, my arms full and my heart full," but she is never too busy to offer a helping hand.

As one of ten children in a farming family from Person County, Ruth learned to appreciate at an early age what she feels is the most important institution in our society: the family unit. Her parents, Carrie and H. G. Gibbons, were loving ones. She attributes her father with passing on to her this incredible love for others.

The career of child rearing began

with her and her husband's five natural children over forty years ago. They had three girls and two boys, all now married and with families of their own. Juanita

Torain, Barbara White, Carolyn Betts, and the two sons, Richard and Roger, perhaps know better than anyone just how much energy this one woman has devoted to others. It is doubtful that throughout the career any one of them ever felt unloved or neglected. She seems to have an inexhaustible resource of maternal energy.

Even today, she has two "adopted" elderly people living in her home next to the old Cedar Grove School.

She and her husband opened their home to children of relatives in 1938 and from then on the place served as warm hearth for almost one hundred people who were not members of their immediate family.

Aunts, uncles, and Ruth's parents (her mother was there for 25 years) all found a home at the Traynham's along with those 84 foster children.

They came in all shapes and sizes and I loved every single one of them.

The kids didn't all arrive at once, needless to say. In 1952, Jane Parker of the Department of Social Services approached Ruth saying she had two homeless children that desperately needed a place to stay.

"I told her I'd talk to my husband but I knew before I asked what he was going to say—that it was up to me. And of course I told her yes. Now you know why I'm nuts," she says shaking her head.

The length of stay was different for each child. Some were in her home as infants (some only two days old), others stayed all the way through high school.

"They came in all shapes and sizes and I loved every single one of them."

Has she kept up with all 84?

"No, and it breaks my heart to say it. Rules prevented foster parents from keeping up with each child after they leave. I still don't understand why and I don't hesitate to tell you it broke my heart every time one of them left."

Some have kept up with her despite DSS regulations; in particular, her daughter Barbara (Nikki) Bunker who is now a supervisor for the Department of Human Resources in New York.

"She, above all of the foster children, was most like a real daughter to me. My natural children regard her as such even today."

Ruth says she finally had to quit taking the children into her home because the pain of saying good-bye was getting to be too much.

"Oh, I got used to it to a certain extent. I got to where I knew they were going to have to leave sometime and just kept that in the back of my mind. Still, it didn't make it any easier when those days came around."

She recalls the last boy who lived in her home who told her she was the only mother he had ever known. He left the Traynham's when he was about 16 and "that was the last time I put up with a broken heart," Ruth says.

It broke my heart every time one of them left.

For someone who has been at the task for so long, it would seem she'd be a perfect source for learning the mysteries and difficulties of child-rearing. But she says only simply when asked about the secrets of being a good mother: "nothing but love."

"All the discipline and spankings in the world won't get a child to learn in my opinion. The key is to love and care for them and convince them you have full support for them. My mother used to accuse me of being a spoiler . . . and she was right."

Discipline is something Ruth Traynham has always taken seriously. "You've got to teach them the difference between right and wrong but the simple truth is, anybody would rather be loved than scolded."

All of her spankings for her children were accompanied by seated discussions and explanations.

"Spanking a child won't do any good unless they know why you're doing it so most of my punishings were accompanied by explanations."

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This loving attitude is attributed to her father whom she refers to as a "spoiler" like herself.

"I haven't missed him but once since he died and that is ever since he's been gone."

She still has a worn, hand-sewn shoe her father wore. The shoe turns up slightly at the toe and she laughs recalling that the pair was always too long for him.

One of her ways of releasing tension and providing herself with a few moments of relaxation is by writing poetry. She says her poems are a good way for her to express her moods and concerns in life.

In one poem she writes about her father and recreates that love for him in a simple way. In three of the

stanzas she conjures up the feeling of paternal love that has been so important to her in her life as a parent:

I remember sitting on my
dad's knee
it was a long time ago,
yet to me it seems like yesterday,
but I guess it was the day
before.

He would cross his leg and lift
his coat
then look at me and smile;
I would run and jump
upon his lap,
and we'd talk and play
a while.

Then I'd bury my head beneath
his coat
and he would tell me things of
long ago,
To me it seems like yesterday
but it really was the day
before.

In addition to her writing, Ruth has her plants to provide her with a temporary escape from the chaos of a day. She says some of her most cherished and peaceful moments come after the 11 o'clock news when everyone else in the house is in bed. She uses that quiet time to read her favorite short stories and novels and water her many plants. Even the plants, which are all over the white frame house (both inside and out), have obviously received loving care



SKETCH BY BILL TERRELL

She married her husband Richard who was born in Harmony, Va., just after completing high school. They moved to Orange County and lived over in Cedar Grove just down from Tom Ellis's house. Richard Traynham was a teacher for several years in the two-teacher school at White Oak Grove. In the late 1950's, however, the only work he could get that he wanted was in Baltimore. He was employed by the Baltimore city schools for 13 years, visiting his family on weekends and vacations whenever possible.

When asked why she never moved her family up to be with him during those years Ruth replies simply:

"I knew he was going to need a place to sit down when he retired and we had put so much energy and time into this house that I decided to stay here."

When the two moved to their present home on old N.C. 86, the house was "just a shell", according to Ruth. They have, over the years, paneled, enclosed and added rooms making the place a sturdy homey place for the huge family.

*Her home is clean enough
to be healthy and dirty
enough to be happy.*

Richard Traynham began losing his eyesight and had to retire in 1970. He remains active despite the near-blindness. When not at the craft program in Cedar Grove, he can be seen puttering around his beautiful yard and vegetable garden. Cherry trees, grape vines, strawberries and numerous vegetables are among the delectables flourishing in the yard.

Ruth says calmly she continues to "stay busy" these days. By anybody else's standards, "staying busy" is a gross understatement. She continues to sew for people on her small back porch. The same little crowded porch reflects her closeness and obvious time spent with family and friends.

*What's a good mother?
nothing but love.*

Mother's Day cards and birthday greetings are on display all over the wall, as are pictures of all her children and nine grandchildren.

The aroma of her kitchen is an especially enticing one, the T.V. blares, roosters in the back yard let out an occasional crowing, the phone continuously rings and she has to end an interview to help her grandson go feed his father's cows.

She has raised 84 children

Her philosophy remains one of total involvement in life:

"A mother can't live a life for a child. As parents we have to serve as guides, probably the hardest thing to do. I have tried to teach all my children to make their own decisions. I haven't hesitated to let them know their lives are their own."

Her basic dedication in life is found in what she calls "loving support for the hard job of growing up," and somewhere out there are at least 84 people who could be witness to her success.

She contends her energy comes from a happy-go-lucky attitude her father instilled in her at a very young age. She is constantly doing things in and around her house but maintains her home is "clean enough to be healthy and dirty enough to be happy."

Whatever physical condition the house may be in, it is Home in every sense of the word.



'I'm a spoiler'

Ruth Traynham and grandchildren Anitra (L) and Roger White (R). Anitra attends Central Elementary and Roger, Stanback. They live just down the road from their grandparents' home in Cedar Grove. (Photos by Melissa Tufts)



Richard and Ruth Traynham



Ruth Traynham in a rare quiet moment with her poetry