

Does Anyone Care That Emma Lee Johnson Russell Died Today?

Written by Jackie Layne Partin

At one fifteen this morning, **March 26, 2008**, my friend Emma Lee Johnson Russell died at the Southern Tennessee Medical Center in Winchester, Franklin County, Tennessee. She was sixty-six years of age. It came as no surprise to me when her husband Albert called me early this morning to tell me that his wife had passed on. He was crying so sadly; he obviously was overcome with grief. Emma Lee had been sick for so long.

Emma Lee left Albert a letter with the words “open the minute I die” written on the outside of the white envelope. Emma Lee was always a good “letter” writer. She spoke of her love for Albert through good times and bad. She guided him to the important papers in the house, especially the deed to the grave plot. She asked Albert to take care of himself (*he is a diabetic, and she worried about his health*). Then she expressed how hard she had worked at being a good wife and mother – but as to the latter, she felt she had failed. Then she gave instructions for her funeral – the pallbearers, the minister, her clothing and her coffin. Finally, to Albert she wrote, “...until we meet again.”

The two of us had gone to school at Monteagle Elementary when we were children. I started school in 1948, so we are talking about a long time ago. I always liked Emma Lee Johnson. She was funny and kind and loving. She had all the children believing that she was a witch. I was never in her home, but I remember it quite well. It was on the Laurel Trails Road very near where she and Albert have lived for years. That old house where Matthew Trussell Johnson and his somewhat younger wife Cleda Mae (Trussell) Johnson lived was of the weatherboard style. To me, as a child, it appeared gray and weathered. Maybe that is why they were called “weatherboard” houses. This little gray house, with its little gray couple and its black cats, was a perfect setting for this little black-haired, self-proclaimed witch. Emma Lee was no dummy. She knew that the kids would fall for her tall tale of witchcraft. The setting was perfect.

Well, the two of us grew up and went our separate ways. I moved away and came back to settle in Tracy City around **1982**. I thought of Emma Lee from time to time; I have to admit that it was the witchcraft stories that made me think of her – I always had a little giggle when I did think of her. Some years later, I gave her a box of history books; she always seemed to like to read. Then there were the few encounters throughout the years at the Monteagle Post Office. There she sat in that little truck with her little head

“boggin,” I called it, wrapped around those ears. “Why, I wondered, does she wear that thing even in the summer months?” I knew Emma Lee was an intelligent person, so there must be a good explanation – someday I would ask her.

Then on **March 14, 2003**, I got a letter from Emma Lee. I lived in Tracy City; she lived in Monteagle. I thought it strange that she didn’t call instead of writing. I never did like to write a letter, but I was soon to learn that Emma Lee was a faithful letter writer. It seems that she had heard from a cousin that I did genealogical researches on my family, and she wanted me to help her find out who her Johnson family was; she was especially interested in knowing if she was related to the famed Jeremiah Marr Johnson since one of her uncles had that name. Well, I took all the information that she supplied in the letter and went to work. I worked on it at periods of time for the next four years. I managed to help her with some of her Johnson/Trussell lines, but I never got that straightened out for her on the “Jeremiah Marr Johnson” situation. I would mail her a letter with some information; then it might be a year before I would hear from her again. **2005, 2006, 2007** – the letters would come like a yearly donation to a worthy cause. I was always excited when I pulled a letter from her out of the mailbox. “Wonder what she has conjured up now!!” I began to feel like I was the worthy cause. She made the donation of information, and she had all the faith in the world that I, being the worthy cause, would appreciate it. She desperately wanted me to find out about her Johnson ancestry.

After each letter, I would renew my searches, but I always came up empty-handed to the point that on **June 03, 2007**, she wrote, “Oh, well, once I’m dead none of it matters anyway, does it?” Emma Lee and I had had one of those chance encounters in front of the post office just a week or two before I received the letter with that statement in it. There she sat again in the little truck, waiting on faithful Albert to come out with their mail. On that sweet head of thick dark hair was her little “boggin.” I bounced over to talk with her. When I asked how she was doing, she said, “Not so good, I have this “thing” in my throat. I can’t swallow food. I don’t know what to do about it.”

I’ve never been known to be a tactful person, and most people know me as being quite outspoken – too outspoken. When Emma Lee suggested it might be cancer, I boldly said, “Girl, you need to go to the doctor and find out either way. If it is cancer, it might kill you; you are worrying yourself to death not knowing, and you need medical advice. If it isn’t cancer, then you need to have it tended to, so you can get on with your life.” She told me that she did not think it was cancer, and I immediately realized that she didn’t want to know. She said that she was going to see a doctor soon; I begged her to call me

and let me know what she found out. I wanted her to know that I loved her and would try to help her while she was sick.

On **September 25, 2007**, she wrote, "I keep thinking there are so many really bad people in this world. Why did this happen to me? Why couldn't it have happened to the really bad people?" She had been told by a doctor at Vanderbilt that she had cancer of the larynx. Her spiritual condition was of utmost concern to her. "I know I am going to die; it's just a matter of time. I want to be 'ready' to go...I haven't lost sight of God." She spoke of being the only caregiver for her mother for over ten years—to the point of neglecting her own health. She wrote, "Now who's going to care for me? My husband? He's hardly able to care for himself. My death will be the 'last straw' for him...I love him so much. I've got to go. If I don't, I'm going to be in tears."

From this letter on, Emma Lee and I became close. I went to her house on a warm fall day, and we sat under a tree in her yard and talked. First, we discussed our spiritual places in this life. I told her that I was a believer in God and Jesus; then I asked her if there was anything I could help her with in that realm. She explained that she was saved and a believer also. Contentment in her spiritual state was evident, so we went on to discuss her options health wise. Immediately obvious to me was that she had not accepted the doctor's diagnosis of cancer. She wanted to explore herbal remedies and treatments. The Vanderbilt hospital called while we were sitting there, but she refused to accept the call. Seeing that she had a mind of her own, and that she was mentally able to make up her own mind about what to do about her cancer, if it was cancer, we moved on to lighter conversation.

"Emma Lee, why do you wear that little 'boggin' over your ears all year long?" I asked. She told me when she was a child that she had had a bad ear infection that was very painful. The "boggin" was her way of insuring that she never had to go through that pain again.

"Emma Lee, do you still think you are a witch?" I asked with a big smile on my face. She laughed and then very seriously said, "Jackie, do you know why I told everyone that I was a witch?" I told her that I didn't know, but that I thought it was so funny and clever of her to do such a thing. I told her it made me giggle. Then her story came rolling out. Her father was an older man when Emma Lee was born. He had a grown daughter who had "rebelled" and ran off to marry at a young age. In his mind he had to make sure that he did not *fail* this new little daughter he had been given to rear. In one of her letters

she wrote, "I've never been a bad person. I never had the opportunity; my Dad wouldn't let me out of his sight. He would have gone to high school with me if the driver had let him on the bus...!" Her father wanted her by his side and wanted no one around to influence her development, so she conjured up the story about being a witch to scare the children and others from coming around her house, and for the most part, it worked. She would have loved having friends and children to play with, but not with her father behaving the way he did toward her. When I asked her if she came to believe her own story, she laughed and said, "No!" I liked that about Emma Lee; she could always laugh no matter how heavy her burden.

Did all these turns of events cause harsh feelings toward her father? In her own words, "Poor old Daddy. He's been dead now for 47 years this past June 22nd (2007). I still miss him. I miss my Mom too. I felt like an orphan when my Mom died." Immediately I thought of Forrest Gump's statement, "Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you will get." This wonderful, loving woman had many mountains to climb, and she climbed them with every fiber of being in her little body. Was she perfect? She would be the first to tell you, "No!" But she would also say, "I tried so hard to do the best for all my family and those around me."

From this "tree visit" on, the only things Emma Lee asked of me were turnip greens and turnips, and while in the hospital she asked for a lemon meringue pie. I told her that the day she came home, I would have a huge pie waiting for her. She hoped that by that time that "old thing" in her throat would be gone, and she could eat her pie without fear of choking. She never came home – not to Laurel Trails Road. The answer to the question, "Does anyone care that Emma Lee Johnson Russell died today?" is "Yes, Jackie Layne Partin cares. Her friend Beverly Tate Sweeton cares. Her husband Albert Russell cares, but more importantly – God cares!"

Emma Lee's Funeral Service

On Friday, **March 28, 2008** at 11:00 A. M. at the Cumberland Funeral Home in Monteagle, Emma Lee's little body lay lifeless in her coffin. The body left no semblance of the person it once sheltered. Her "boggin" was gone. Her black hair was salon tended, not the way Emma Lee let it do its own thing. Let's face it; she was gone away – far away. The Seventh Day Adventist minister, Richard Barger, read a story and a poem; then my husband Grady Ward Partin read the above paper that I had written. Her family took turns speaking to those in attendance; then the gathered were ushered passed the body.

Emma Lee's little tabernacle was placed in the back of the hearse for its trip to the cemetery.

The driver turned the key in the ignition, and there was a long grinding sound. The motor on the hearse just wouldn't start. When I realized what was happening, I thought I heard Emma Lee giggle. She would have loved being a "fly on the wall" in this situation. After all the older men tried to get the vehicle started, Emma Lee's son came up to the hearse, leaned over under the hood to work around on the carburetor, and revved up the engine as it sputtered then started. Mama would have been proud of her baby son.

Emma Lee's last drive through her hometown of Monteagle began. She was buried under a cloudy sky with a drizzling rain. One of her grandchildren came to our car as we were about to leave the cemetery. She asked me if I had a pen; she wanted to give me a couple of phone numbers – hers and her mothers. I was wondering what I was supposed to do with those numbers; she was worried about her grandfather, and she wanted me to know how to find them.



Matthew Trussell Johnson, daughter Emma Lee, wife Clede Mae (Trussell) Johnson

