



Text Version of Audio Story: Gertrude

The Civil War ended some 137-38 years ago. On the date of this writing, January 19, 2003, the last surviving widow of a Union Civil War veteran died in her little log cabin about 30 miles north of Knoxville, Tennessee. Much of what I know about the life of Gertrude Janeway was derived from an interview she did a few years back with a gifted reporter named Fred Brown. This is the story of Mrs. Gertrude Janeway.

Bedridden from old age, Gertrude — Gertie to her friends — talks to the reporter about her life. She was *one of* several children. Her momma was a strong woman, solid. Her daddy was a kind, compassionate man. Gertie had been born with a deformed arm and leg. Her daddy was determined that she would walk, regardless of how hopeless it seemed. He would give her the end of a string. He held the other [end of the] string in his hand.

“Bring me your end, Gertie,” her daddy would tell her.

He was a very patient, caring father. Together they worked diligently. At age 7, Gertie finally learned to walk. A few years later, her father would die. She was heartbroken. Her momma took in laundry to make ends meet. Gertie still had the big, black wash kettle at the time of her death. From her bed, she recounted the story of how she met her husband. He came knocking at the door one day. She was 16 years old. He was about 80, give or take a year. He asked her mother if he could marry the girl. The mother thought on it briefly and decided it would be okay if Gertie was agreeable. But, first, the mother insisted, *“You’ll have to spark for awhile.”* Sparking means courting. And the old gent did court Gertie. He would come over, and they would sit on the back porch for hours on end. Finally, just a month’s shy of her 18th birthday 1927, Gertie became a bride.

Her new husband was a Civil War veteran, old enough to be her great-grandfather. They lived with kin for a year or two before buying the little three-room log cabin, the same log cabin Gertie lived in until she died yesterday. Mr. Janeway died ten years after they married at the age of 91. While life in the world would certainly change in the years to come, life in Gertie’s little log cabin for the last 70 years hasn’t, at least not much. Just a couple of years back, friends and family talked her into getting electricity for heating purposes. She did get herself a television. She loved watching TV. I wish I could tell you what her favorite shows were, but I don’t know. Other than that, things didn’t change much, and that was okay with Gertie.

Over in the corner in the kitchen sits her old wood-fired cook stove, the same cook stove she cooked meals on for her husband. Gertie loved to cook. She loved to read. She could hardly wait to get her hands on the newspaper. Once a month, a check came from the United States Government Office of Veterans affairs, \$70, because her husband had fought in the Civil War. Was she a lady that time forgot as it marched on, or was she a lady who forgot time was marching on? Gertrude Janeway, in her 93 years of life, only spoke once on a telephone. She never had a driver's license. She certainly never had a computer or any of the things we seem unable to live without.

The reporter asked her the obvious question before he left. Why would she marry a man 64 years older than herself? The answer was firm. She said, "*He was good to me. I loved him. I adored him.*"

From somewhere behind the radio with the music of Johnny X, I'm the American Storyteller.