

Apostle of the Smokies, Kelly Bennett Dies

Roaming the Mountains, John Parris, June 30, 1974

Kelly Bennett, the Apostle of the Great Smokies, is dead at the age of 84.

Death came to the storied old man of the mountains Friday night in the Swain County Hospital when his tired and weakened old heart finally gave out.

Funeral services for him will be held Monday at 2 p.m. at the Bryson City Presbyterian Church he served as an elder for more than 30 years.

They will bury him in the town's hilltop cemetery that looks away to the towering, haze-shrouded mountains that were a love he cherished unto himself and championed to the nation all his days.

He leaves his wife of 60 years, Ola Tela, and three daughters – Mrs. Mary Alice Greyer and Mrs. Jean Swan of Bryson City, and Mrs. Sam Coleman of Clearwater, Fla.

Kelly Bennett was the mountain man of a thousand stories and a thousand legends.

And in his time, he walked tall and he cast a long shadow.

He was the synonym for Carolina Mountaineer.

Nobody ever did more to give it dignity and respect and none ever wore the name more proudly.

Once, while taking pictures of the Smokies from the parking overlook at Newfound Gap, a magazine writer named Caroline Bird approached him.

He wore a roll-brim fedora, a double-breasted suit and a bow tie. He had a flower in his lapel. She thought he was a tourist like herself.

"Have you run into any mountaineers yet?" she asked him.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "I'm a mountaineer myself."

Later, she wrote that Bennett seemed to enjoy her incredulity, but that he quickly convinced her that, "despite his total lack of resemblance to the sullen, suspicious, trigger-happy type I had expected to find here, he was a genuine mountain man."

Except when he hiked the back trails or fished, his dress never varied from the roll-brim hat, double-breasted suit, and bow tie. And there was always the flower in the lapel, usually one that came from his own fabulous flower garden which was his pride.

But it was the mountains that were his love and his life.

"Of course," he once said, "there are taller mountains, but none so friendly and none so beautiful. They are truly great."

He knew the Smokies like the palm of his hand.

There wasn't a peak he hadn't climbed nor a stream he hadn't fished.

When he was born just up the way at Whittier in 1890, the Smokies were a lost world, a land back of beyond, an untamed wilderness in America's front yard.

His father, Aurelius McDonald Bennett, was a doctor – the only one at the time for some 15,000 mountain whites and a reservation of Cherokee Indians.

When Kelly was two years old the family moved to Bryson City, then only a village with the forest all around.

“My younger brother Percival and I took to the woods when we were barely hoe-handle high,” he once recalled.

But both were equally fascinated by the medical lore they picked up from their father and, at the age of 15, Kelly had already started helping with the prescriptions.

In 1905 he helped his father set up a drug store in Bryson City. Then he went to the University of North Carolina and Chapel Hill and became a licensed pharmacist. Percival studied at the University of Maryland and became a medical doctor.

Both returned to Bryson City to carry on their chosen professions.

“It never entered our minds to settle some place else,” Kelly once told me. “I came back and took over the drug store in 1912 and Percival came back in 1917 to share an office with our father.”

But Kelly not only found the time but made the time to hike and fish the Smokies. His most constant fishing buddy was Mark Cathey, the greatest trout fisherman who ever danced a fly on a mountain stream.

Meanwhile, Kelly set out to help better his people's lives by getting into a fight for better roads that would open up Swain County to the outside world.

In 1917, he got himself elected to the N.C. State Senate. And right off the bat he introduced a good-roads bill. It got clobbered. The down-east lawmakers could have cared less about the mud tracks and sled roads of the mountains.

But Kelly Bennett didn't give up. Two years later they passed his bill in its original form. And by the time the state took over the county road system in 1931, Swain boasted \$2 million worth of gravel roads.

At about the time he started his good-roads campaign, he started out on a crusade that was to earn him the sobriquet, “Apostle of the Great Smokies.”

While lumbermen moved in and began leveling the forests of virgin timber, he joined forces with Horace Kephart to save the Smokies from the woodsman's ax and set it aside as a sanctuary.

Kephart, from his lonely cabin on the Sugar Fork of Hazel Creek, began putting down on paper what Bennett felt about the Smokies. He sent articles off to some of the national magazines, along with scenic shots Bennett had captured with his camera.

Others joined in the crusade and by 1934 the dream of a park became a reality. Kephart didn't live to see it – he was killed in an automobile accident near here in 1931 – but his work earned him the title “Father of the Great Smoky Park.”

Kelly Bennett was at Newfound Gap in 1940 when Franklin D. Roosevelt came down from Washington to dedicate it. And he continued to work for its development the rest of his life.

When the federal government was starving the Smoky Park, he fought for appropriations, spending his time and his own money on trips to Washington.

Some of the fights he won and some he lost.

But those who tangled with him came to learn that he was not a man to be taken lightly, or who could be taken lightly.

He was outspoken and frank, even in situations where it made him enemies.

But at all times he strived to do what he thought was best for the mountains and the mountain people.

He gave of his time and his energy and his money to the detriment of his own business.

His credentials for public service cover a breathtaking range.

He served 14 years as mayor of Bryson City, four years as town alderman, 20 years on the county school board, three years as chairman of the Swain County Democratic executive committee.

He served five terms as State Senator and two as State Representative.

He had been a member of the N.C. National Park, Parkway and Forests Development Commission since it was established in 1947 and was at one time commission chairman.

In 1954 he was named North Carolina Pharmacist of the Year.

He was one of the founders of the Cherokee Historical Association, producers of the famous outdoor drama “Unto These Hills”, and had served as trustee and treasurer from the beginning.

He was also one of the founders of Western North Carolina Associated Communities and the Western North Carolina Tourist Association, and a member and one-time director of the N.C. Travel Council.

He served seven years on the N.C. Hospitals Board of Control and six years on the board of Morrison Training School.

He was an elder of the Bryson City Presbyterian Church and one-time superintendent of the Sunday School. In 1956 he was moderator of the Asheville Presbytery.

A charter member of the Bryson City Rotary Club, he served as district governor in 1955-56.

He was a 32nd degree Mason and a Shriner.

He was an expert gardener and a grower of prize winning flowers.

For 70 years he carried his camera into every cove and up every mountain and onto every stream of the Smokies. His picture file at his death contained more than 8,000 black and white negatives and some 5,000 color slides.

Until 10 months ago when he had the first of a series of heart attacks, he had worked a seven-day week behind the prescription counter of his drugstore where his daughter, Mary Alice, the region's first woman pharmacist, helped him.

Even so, he somehow found time to carry on with civic projects and to get off into the Smokies for a few hours to hike, take pictures and occasionally wet a hook.

Kelly Bennett was a legend in his own time, and even though he is gone the legend will live on.

And one day one of the peaks of his beloved Smokies will be named for him. Just you wait and see.

A visitation will be held Sunday afternoon and evening at the Bill Moody Funeral Home here where the body will remain until placed in the church 30 minutes before the services.

Pallbearers will be members of the Masonic Lodge. Honorary pallbearers will be members of the Bryson City Rotary Club, Cherokee Historical Association and members of the Oconee Lodge.

The family has suggested that contributions in lieu of flowers may be made to the Presbyterian Home for Children at Black Mountain.