

Regardless of my appalling lack of natural musical talent, my mother faithfully paid for me to learn to play the piano, starting when I was around five years old. Even for farm kids like me, teaching children, particularly girls, to play an instrument is one of those social norms that began eons ago in our early history.

Maybe it was because she never had the opportunity to learn, but my mother was determined her children would learn to play. She somehow found a way to save a little money from her job as a secretary when she worked for an attorney in Murray and later at the Murray State Bookstore. With her earnings, she bought a beautiful upright piano, a Betsy Lynn model made by the Grand Piano Company in North Carolina.

She proudly placed it in the living room of our house. That room was generally off limits except for housing the Christmas tree during the holidays, or if we entertained company. It was the perfect quiet place for me to practice my lessons. And that was the problem. I detested practicing. I wanted to play outside with my brother or our neighbor Charley Bazzell, climbing into our treehouse or riding our bicycles. Alas, both boys were saddled with taking piano lessons as well.

Moyna Sims and later, Margaret Porter, were my two piano teachers. Those dear women deserve a star in their respective crowns for listening to what had to have been a tortuous half-hour each week.

Because my mother saved everything, I still have copies of the sheet music I was learning from. John Thompson's "Teaching Little Fingers to Play" and Hazel Cobb's "Second Solo Book for Piano" were the standard fare. I learned to play some of the same songs we sang in elementary school: "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean," "Home on the Range" and "She'll be Coming Round the Mountain" were a few of my favorites. These rousing songs were far more fun to sing than to play.

Then there were the piano recitals. I don't know who thought that was a good idea. Those events had to be an excruciating experience for all those who attended, let alone we poor children who were terrified of performing in front of people. But perform we did. We practiced for weeks in advance, got all gussied up in our Sunday best, and tried our hardest to get through a piece of music without making a mistake.

My most vivid memory of a recital was the year I played one of my favorite hymns, "Lilly of the Valley." I did fine until I got to the chorus. I could not remember which keys got me to the chorus so I kept repeating the main verses. I finally just stopped playing, stood up, and bowed to the audience; relieved to be finished.

Frankly, I just didn't have what it took. I had no sense of rhythm and could not get the timing down. I remember the teacher using a metronome to teach me to count the beats. I don't think it was long after that debacle that I was freed from the agony of practice and lessons. My guess is that my teacher told mom she was wasting her money.

Even so, my parents and grandparents were so proud of my efforts, they insisted that I play at our church at Kirksey. I'm guessing there is a reason that didn't occur more than once or twice.

Hometown Ramblings

By **Bobbie Smith Bryant**
Contributing Columnist



Me and my piano



Photos provided
Neighbors in the Kirksey community, Jill Falwell, left, Charley Bazzell and Bobbie Smith sit at a piano recital in the 1960s.



Bobbie Smith stands next to her piano in 1968.

In my teen years, I would occasionally slip into the living room and pick out a tune or two, just to see if I still could. When my nephew came along in the 1980s, he loved to bang around on the keys, so I would sit with him and play what few songs I could remember.

Then, I moved away from home and left the piano with mom. She never could play it but when my dad's sister came to visit, they would ask her to play for them. My Aunt Bettie is a gifted pianist and I know mom regretted that I did not inherit that trait.

My parents moved away from Murray in the 1990s for my dad to start a new job. Mom insisted on moving the piano along with everything else they owned. They moved twice more before retiring back in Murray. Each time they changed homes she paid again to have that heavy piano transported across country. When I married, mom asked us to come get the piano and we made room for it at our house. My husband and I moved it three times ourselves. I can count on one hand how many times it was played.

Not long after my mom passed away in 2015, I lamented to a girlfriend, wishing someone could

get some use out of the Betsy Lynn. With a granddaughter taking piano lessons, my friend was elated to buy it, and moved the piano to her house a week later.

Yes, I had some guilt pangs about the transaction. I just pray mom doesn't hold it against me when I meet her in heaven. It would be even worse for her to ask me to play when I get there!

Bobbie Smith Bryant is a native of Calloway County. She is currently working on a commemorative history to celebrate the 2022 Calloway County Bicentennial. For more information about the author, visit bobbiesmithbryant.com. ■

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