

The Stories of Butler Beattie

Brief Background and Introduction (by Irene Beattie):

Butler Beattie's parents were Charles Walter Beattie and Josephine Ada Butler Beattie. His father grew up in Annandale, Virginia on Green Spring Farm. The farm is now a county park in Fairfax County. His father, referred to as Walter, was one of a family of twelve (six girls and six boys.) When he grew up and completed the academy (the private equivalent of high school) he spent some time in California learning surveying and practical civil engineering from his brother, Clay. Walter's father, Fountain Beattie, had been an aid de camp to Col. John S. Mosby on the Confederate side in the Civil War. After the war John Mosby stayed active in politics and was at one time the Counsel to Hong Kong. The Mosby's and Beattie's remained lifelong friends. John Mosby used his political connections to get Walter a job as a civil engineer working on the Panama Canal.

Josephine Ada Butler (who was called Ada) was the daughter of a pharmacist in Washington DC. She grew up on "C" street, near our nation's capitol, and also completed the academy. She enjoyed playing the piano. Ada became friends with Walter's sisters. One time when Walter was on leave from his work in Panama, Walter and Ada were introduced at a barn dance. Walter's sisters indicated that Ada wouldn't be interested in Walter because "he was only a raw boy." However, Ada was interested in travel so they soon married in a Roman Catholic church. Ada was 30 and Walter (the raw boy) was 29. They traveled to Panama. They had their first son there who died after three days. We don't know what happened but Ada always blamed it on the poor doctors and their instruments. The conditions were not ideal there, because one of the things they were doing was installing the sewers in the city of Panama. In fact there is a rather tacky story about Walter, who occasionally was known to have too much to drink. One time he had a bit too much and was sick. Well, he lost his dentures down the toilet. Fortunately he had helped lay the sewers out and he knew where to go to retrieve them.

After Ada and Walter returned to the United States they had four more boys, John (Spot), Butler (Bob or Fatty), Walt (Bush) and Frank (Gee). Nicknames were freely used in this family. Walter, I have heard, was quite a practical joker. He also cooked weekend breakfasts (one thing he made was popovers), made candy, like molasses taffy, and enjoyed fixing things up around the house and woodworking. Like many marriages, theirs had its difficulties. It was complicated by each having different ideas about life (Ada being more Victorian, more class oriented and more serious about life and religion, and Walter being more easy going) and also Ada's rapidly occurring deafness and Walter's periodic drinking. They did have common values and both felt education was a high priority. They both enjoyed plants, flowers and gardening. Throughout her life, Ada loved books and reading. She would read every chance she got to her children and grandchildren. She also did baking and candy making and enjoyed knitting and crocheting.

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Earliest Memories in Virginia: Beginning about Age Three (about 1914)

I have been back to Virginia many times with my family and sometimes I confuse these times with earlier times. Here are my memories.

The first Christmas that I remember was at Pohick. Every time I hear "The Night Before Christmas" I have visions of the home at Pohick, Virginia. Before Christmas my mother took us to a department store in Alexandria, where we saw toys we never dreamed of having. We also visited my aunts (my father's sisters, Aunt Jane, Aunt Lillian and Aunt Lelia) on North Peyton Street where I remember an iron fence around the yard. I do not remember my grandfather, Captain Beattie, although he must have been there when I was there. Because of my size, I think adults must have appeared as giants and we spent most of the time looking at their legs. On Christmas Eve, my father took the two of us (my brother John and me) out into the wood to cut down a Christmas tree. When we woke up Christmas morning we saw the tree all decorated and lit with candles. A warm fire was burning in the old pot belly stove with isinglass windows. I received a little truck with a wind up motor that my father spent the rest of the winding up for me. I think my brother John got a wind up train. My father soon succeeded in breaking the spring of the wind up truck. Now I know why.

In the winter it had snowed. I remember going down the hill on an old wooden sled. This was the type of sled that we would now find in an antique shop. In one of our trips we ran in to a tree; that was the end of the sled. One day John and his friend broke some windows in a farmhouse across the road. He had a tendency to be destructive.

In Pohick there was a general store that had some candy. I always wanted some but never remember getting any. We lived with my Uncle Harry and Aunt Sal in Pohick. Aunt Sal was another of my mother's sisters. Uncle Harry always had a jug to drink out of. He was the first alcoholic that I ever knew. I have a faint recollection of old Pohick Church. I remember catching fireflies on summer nights. Also, all three of us (by now my younger brother Walt sometimes joined us) would go out to the middle of the road when an automobile came at night to have the headlights shine on us, because they were the brightest lights we had ever seen. Coal oil lamps lit up our home at night and I liked their smell. I remember sitting beside my father, very still, while he was hunting. Another time, I was sitting next to him on a long railway bridge where we were fishing.

We took a trip to Upper Marlboro, Maryland where my Uncle Lee Clagett, his wife, our Aunt Rose and her sister, our Aunt May Butler lived. (Aunt Rose and Aunt May were my mother's sisters.) My Aunt May was my Uncle Lee's former girlfriend, but Aunt Rose married him. Aunt May lived with them the rest of their lives. Uncle Lee had a tobacco farm. My cousins, Arthur, John and Charles Clagett took us out to a stream, where the water had washed out the bridge. I remember a man with a horse and buggy was trying to get across.

Moving to Illinois and School Days: Beginning Age Five

The steam engine in my father's saw mill wore out, so he had to look for something else to do. In the spring of 1915 Mr. Frank Harris Masters of Joliet, Illinois wrote my father, asking him if he would like to work for Illinois Steel Company in South Chicago. My father and Mr. Masters had been best friends when they worked together on the Panama Canal. My father left for Chicago, leaving his family in Pohick. We followed later. There were three events during that trip to Chicago that I remember. The first event was when the R, F & P (Richmond, Fredricksberg and Potomac) stopped at the station in Alexandria, Virginia, and my Aunts Jane, Lillian and Lelia handed in a lunch through the train window. A ladybug lit on the train window and they said "Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home. Your house is on fire and your children will burn." The next memory was getting into the Pullman upper berth with my brother John, on the B & O (Baltimore and Ohio) train. We woke up the next morning and saw the green fields of Indiana. We were all excited when we arrived at the South Chicago railroad station to see my father waiting for us. As the railroad car was higher than the railroad station this is the first time I remember seeing him face to face. He took us on a streetcar to the Windsor Park Hotel.

During the next five years we lived in three different places. The first was at 7848 Marquette Ave., where we lived on the second story of a three story building. There was a telephone in the apartment and we would pick it up and the operator would say "Number please." As we did not know any numbers we would just laugh and soon the phone company removed the phone. We did not get a phone in our house again until about seventeen years later.

My brother, Frank, was born the next fall but I do not remember when he was born. I do remember my mother nursing him. He was named "Gee" almost right away. John and I thought it was funny when he filled his diaper, but my mother didn't and she told us so. A few years later I understood why events that are funny to children sometimes are not funny to adults.

My first day at school, I remember well, and I did not want to be left without my mother. The kindergarten, at the Myra Bradwell Public School. Kindergarten was fun, but what I remember most was a little girl named Ethel. This was the first time I noticed girls, and remember the loud voice of the teacher when she discovered that Ethel wasn't quite housebroken yet. Almost every school I attended I found a girl I liked to look at and think about but I never spoke to any of them. I was transferred to first grade because I was too old for kindergarten. This was the beginning of my unpleasant school years because I did not know what was going on. My only recollection of my year in the first grade was standing at the old slate blackboard. The chalk made a squeaking noise that made me shiver.

My father and mother would talk about the possibility of the United States going to war in Europe. I did not understand about war at that time but it did not take me long to find out. We would buy "Liberty Stamps" at school to help pay for the war. The children at school had "victory gardens" because there was a shortage of food. Much of the food grown here had to be sent to Europe to feed the soldiers. John and his friend skipped school one day and helped themselves to radishes from the victory garden. My mother and father were informed of his conduct and he did not do it again. After the war (WWI) had started we had a parade where we made paper hats. The wind blew my hat apart and I was very unhappy because the wife of a friend that my father worked with (a

Mrs. Irvin Cool) promised to watch me. Mrs. Cool had been a kindergarten teacher and she showed us how to make paper wagons.

One day I learned to skip and that represented to me a better way of walking. I had a friend named Isadore. In the mornings we tried to guess what we had for breakfast by looking at each other's mouths. I had two friends who used to walk home from school with me who were Harold Reich and Bunny Olsen.

One Christmas Eve, our Christmas stockings were filled and left in our room by our beds. My brothers and I, being enthusiastic about Christmas, woke up very early Christmas morning, about 4 AM. We turned on the lights and were very excited to find our filled stockings, which contained oranges, among other things. We quickly determined the oranges made excellent weapons. An enthusiastic fight, with all the associated activity, followed. That activity provided sufficient energy and vibration to cause the chandelier on the ceiling below, to fall on the occupants of that apartment. Our family was invited to find a new place to live.

The second place we lived was on Bennett Avenue in a 4-plex. My days on Bennett Avenue were happy ones. New buildings were being built and we played in them. I don't think the contractors were very happy to see us so we waited until they went home. Billy Bracken lived in the apartment just south of where we lived and he was a real pest. He was a spoiled brat and a smart aleck.

Bennett Avenue had gas streetlights and a lamp lighter would come and light the lamps each night. I remember well the Christmas that we spent there. We were not able to get a Christmas Tree so my folks put our ornaments around the picture frames. We got a wind up train for Christmas, that my father had to wind up for us. I told him not to wind it too tight but he said that he would give it just one more wind, and the spring broke. We also got a Sandy and Andy, a toy that was operated with sand. I don't think my mother liked the sand we got over the floor but that year my father got her a vacuum cleaner. My mother was getting quite deaf and we were getting away with more and more fooling round. The young man upstairs had just returned from France. He showed us his uniform and when he put on his gas mask we were all afraid. He dressed up like Santa Claus on Christmas evening. We all believed he was the real one. We all asked him where his sled and eight reindeer were. He said they went so fast that we could not see them. Billy Bracken pulled off his whiskers. He was a little too sharp for his age. Billy got an electric train for Christmas and he let us play with it. John and I discovered an old type outlet in the living room. It was one that had a door on and you had to screw the plug in like you screw in a light bulb. John told me to open the little door and put my finger in it. That was the day that I learned what electricity was and I don't ever remember when I have ever moved so fast. It was a very shocking experience. My mother used the outlet to operate her new vacuum cleaner.

I remember when Jack Dempsey won his first prize fight. We used to play on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad track that were only a few hundred yards to the west of us. We got in trouble when our folks caught us playing there. I always remember these tracks.

The year was 1920. I was nine years old. I remember the poem that my mother read to me when I think of railroad tracks. "The peanut sat on the railroad tracks, its heart was all a flutter. The two thirty came rumbling past. Toot, toot, peanut butter."

I found out that my Aunt May was my godmother. I wrote her a letter. She sent me a gold ring. I lost the ring in back of our home. My mother told me to pray to St. Anthony as he was the saint that would help people find things that they lost. I never found the ring.

One day a group of strange kids were in our back yard. Billy Bracken saw them take some things over the fence. We found that our sled was missing. This was my first experience with stealing.

In the third grade I noticed another pretty little girl. Her name was Mary Jane Evans. On Valentine's Day some boy gave her a box of candy. She never looked at me. By that time I was a fat little kid and my brothers called me "Fatty." There are some things I would like to forget, but after living over four score years it does not seem to be very important now.

As we were still country boys, we did not always use the inside facilities to take care of our bodily functions. I do not know why John picked the rafters of a newly constructed building to do his but he did. After about a week the results had completely solidified. During the next time we played there I picked it up and threw it at him. Why it hit him and gave him a black eye I will never know, because my athletic ability was so poor that I could never hit anything in my life. The little girl upstairs (Dorothy Hudson) found our behavior very disgusting. When we got home, we were questioned by our mother as to what had happened. We told her; she told my father when he got home from work. We were both invited into the bathroom that night. I don't know why John got the razor strop because he had done what comes naturally, but I believe that he was glad that I got it too. I still find it difficult to sit down when I recall this event. I believe John's brotherly love was a little strained at this point.

One day my father came home with large water blisters on his legs. He said he had been pushed into a car full of hot cinders by a crane. He took my mother's sewing scissors and cut the skin off from these blisters. As he showed no pain, and let me watch, I asked him "Did it hurt?" He said yes. The burns became infected and he had to stay home for some time until they healed. I never saw him show any pain until he was dying in 1935. (He died of pneumonia.)

One day, a friend and I had a disagreement on the way to first communion instructions that ended in a wrestling match in a mud puddle. We made up before we got to church. The priest must have has some problem recognizing us because we did not look like the nice dressed little boys that our mothers had sent to church. Rather we looked like mud covered urchins. I did not remember much of the instruction we were give each day, except that day, I can almost quote word for word about the sin of fighting.

Upstairs of our apartment, the Hudson's had a player piano. Here is where I must have learned some of the World War I songs. My mother had to have an operation, so we had to have a woman name Mrs. Maher, take care of us. (I found out later that my mother had breast cancer. She was 43 years old and not expected to live. She lived to almost 91 and the cancer didn't return until nearly the end.) She saw all of her children married, had 10 grandchildren and three great grandchildren by the time

she died.) Mrs. Maher had a little girl named Patsy. She came to us because she was having trouble getting along with husband.

The day of my first communion was April 4, 1920. Everything seemed to have gone wrong at home. My mother was recovering from a major operation and my father had his legs burned at the mill, so neither of them could attend. I did not have a white suit and there was a snowstorm that day. The kind people at church took care of everything. My mother told me that when the French general, Napoleon Bonaparte, who was in prison at St. Elba Island was asked "What was the happiest day of your life?" He replied "My first communion." I was very happy that day, but I think I was even happier the day I married Ruth, and the days each of the children were born.

At the same time my mother was sick, we found a house and had to move. Our new home was at 7651 St. Lawrence Avenue. It was really ideal, with four bedrooms and two bathrooms. Our housekeeper moved with us, as our mother could not take care of us. I was to live at this address for the next 22 years. Ruth and I lived in this home for about a year and one half after we were married. Cathy was born when we were living here. My father died in this home.

The day we moved to our house, I had to go to school in the morning with my brothers. When we came home we got on a truck full of furniture. I remember putting my books on the tailgate and climbing on to the truck. The truck was owned by a Greek peddler named Angel. When we arrived at our new home the first thing we noticed was a clothes chute. It was clogged up with papers. We cleared it up by throwing bricks down it. John told me many years later that he had been able to go down that clothes chute, but he never tried again because he almost got stuck in it. He did many daring things when he was young like trying to go down a ski slope using a pair of barrel staves.

Soon after we arrived at our new home we were invited to a party given for Herbie Hoffeman. We told him we had a garage in back of our new home. We did not have a car until seven years later. As soon as we were settled in our new home we went to the Paul Cornell school. Ruth taught in that same school some 24 years later. John stayed at that school until the end of the school year but Walt and I were transferred to the Cornell branch that was nearer to home. This was a portable schoolhouse with a stove in the corner. I was still having trouble with all the subjects. One day on the playground, we were playing cowboys and Indians. I was playing dead laying on the playground. My brother Walt came up to me and asked me what was wrong. I said I was dead. John seemed to have gone his own way so I played with Walt all the time. Frank was too young for us but he seemed to follow along. Walt and I slept together in the back room while John had a room for himself in the north center of the house. I believe Frank also slept in the room with us, in a cradle.

As soon as we moved in, the Peterson boys, Vic and Bill came down to play with us. On the first time we played together Bill and Walt were roughhousing and Bill broke Walt's arm. Bill went home and told his father that he thought that he had broken the new kid's arm. His father came down right away and he and my father took Walt to Dr. Tansey who set Walt's arm. Mr. Peterson wanted to pay the doctor's bill but my father would not let him. This began the long friendship that existed between our two families. The day our father died Mr. Peterson came down to our house and offered to help us.

Mr. Peterson operated a burglar alarm service and he made his calls in a model -T ford. Any time we were around when he was ready to make a call, he would allow us to ride with him. We went all over the south side of Chicago and northern Indiana. We went as far away as Momence, Illinois. Vic and John could not get along so Walt and I played with the Peterson boys most of the time during the early years that we lived at the St. Lawrence address. Vic got me interested in electricity.

We still played in new construction when we had the chance. In fact, I had an accident playing in a new building that cost me my four front teeth. We were running through the new building, through the walls, when I had a close encounter with a pipe in the bathroom.

In the fall of the first year in our new home we transferred to St. Dorothy's Catholic school. My father objected to paying for our schooling for us, because he had to pay taxes to pay for the public school, but he allowed us to go anyway. The tuition at St. Dorothy's was one dollar per month for each of us. As they were on the year system, instead of the semester system, I was set back to third grade. John was then two years ahead of me and Walt, who was two and a half years younger, was one year behind me. I still did not do well in school but I liked the nuns, and school was more like home.

One boy, Caswell, was always fooling around, and the nun would make him stand in the corner with his back turned to the class. He would wiggle his ears and make the class laugh. The nun never did catch him doing it. John did very well because he could draw and he would draw pictures for the nuns. He was also an altar boy and knew the church Latin. I did not see any girls that I liked. I did not go for Irish girls in uniform.

The nun that taught fourth grade was Sister Mary Francis Clare. She was a tough one that would hit me on the head when I could not do long division. Her method was successful because I finally learned long division. Many years later I used the same method on a student trying to learn the Morse code. He is now a television engineer working for the Wisconsin public television system. His name is Tom Adams and his call sign is K9TA.

My fifth grade teacher was Sister Mary Incarnata. She would tell us stories in the morning after we had said our prayers. Her stories were quite long and we would remain standing until recess. She told me that my writing was impossible to read but it did not seem to make much difference because I could not spell anyway. My arithmetic was beginning to improve but it was still below average. One day I wrote something on the blackboard that did not look like my usual scribbling, and the sister asked the whole class who did the writing. Nobody guessed; and when she told the class that I did it, they were surprised. That was the first encouragement that I received in school. By the end of the school year all my grades has improved except spelling. When the sister told me I would have to repeat fifth grade, I went right home to my mother and told her my sad story. She went right up to school and asked the sister why I should fail when my other grades were good. The sister passed me into sixth grade.

The sister that taught me in fourth grade was then teaching sixth grade. My grades were lower than average but passing. When I was in seventh grade we were taught by a very nice sister named Sister Mary Callistus. She would read us a story about a family that had a daughter named Marie. There was a girl named Marie in Walt's class. I liked her because of her name. I could only see her when we practiced hymns on

Friday afternoon. I liked the seventh grade sister and my grades were better than sixth, but at the end of the school Walt came down with diphtheria.

When I was in the fifth grade we all took a note home to get our parents' permission to get a shot to prevent diphtheria. None of my other three brothers were given the shot. I did not understand what it was all about, but it got me out of school for a few minutes so I did not care. Two years later my younger brother Walt came down with diphtheria. The doctor checked all of us for the disease and Frank and John were fine but I was not. In Chicago when anyone in the house had a contagious disease the health department would quarantine the house by putting a big red sign on the front door that said keep out. Over the years our front door was full of tack holes. The health department put a red sign on our front door saying "Do Not Enter" and I was told I could not go out. In about three weeks Walt got better but I, who was never sick, had to remain because I still checked positive for the disease. I still felt fine but they would not take the sign off the door. Walt went out to live with his friends. The reason that I did not get sick was that I had been given shots for the disease in fifth grade. They used me and the other fifth graders as an experiment, to see if the shots were any good. The doctors were very happy I did not get the disease. In about four more weeks I was given a clean bill of health, and the health department took the sign off the door. I took off like a lion that has been let out of his cage. When I returned home I found a new bike waiting for me. I guess the shot was worthwhile after all.

Addendum: (by Irene Beattie):

Despite his travails in school, Bob went on to finish high school, participating in the ROTC, spent a semester or so in community college and two years in Pre-Med at the University of Illinois where he was again active in the ROTC. Due to the Great Depression and lack of money, his school days ended for a while, as he built a ham radio from spare parts, and worked for Stewart (I think) Radio as a debugger. He went to the Steel Mills and worked as a welder and later a test engineer while he completed his Bachelor's degree in Physics at the University of Chicago. During the last couple of years he courted and married Ruth. Despite his ROTC background Bob was not called up in WWII because he was working for US Steel, and steel was a valuable commodity for the war effort. After graduation, Bob taught electronics for many years at Chicago Vocational High School, during which time he supported his family and mother, and got a Masters of Education degree from Chicago Teacher's College. At CVS he ran a ham radio club and licensed many radio hams. As the school situation got difficult in the turmoil of the late 60's (South side of Chicago ... race riots) Bob transferred to Washburne Trade School where he taught electrical apprentices (electricians) subjects including motor control, three phase circuits and transformer wiring. At age 65 he was required to retire but for a while he ran a ham radio club at the local high school and spent several years working with and training blind people to become ham radio operators.