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THE DRAKE SISTERS

Submitted by Cheryl Pujadas



Joy, Becky, Bunny, Doris & Dixie Drake

My mother, Doris, was one of the five "Drake Sisters" from Hendersonville, North Carolina. They were the daughters of Ned and Mary Drake. The "sisters" began singing at a young age. My Aunt Bunny was only 4, Aunt Dixie 6, Aunt Joy 8, my Mom Doris 10 and Aunt Becky was 12. They sang at local revivals and church picnics in Henderson County starting about 1937 and became so popular that they were asked to sing for the "Farmers Federation" of North Carolina. As I understand it, the "Farmers Federation" was quite popular at the time and their picnics were a mixture of entertainment and education for the people of Western North Carolina. A picnic was always a day of friendship and goodwill. The purpose of the gatherings was twofold: to educate people about the programs offered by the Federation and to encourage the musical talent of the mountains. The first picnic was in the 1930s.

These gradually became large gatherings of 800 to 1,000 people in attendance and sometimes even more. It was said, "The girls" may have been young, but they sure could sing their hearts out." The crowds always loved them and were asked to return over and over. My Grandpa Ned became so busy managing his daughters that he no longer had time to accompany them on the piano. That's when their older cousin, Elaine Drake (daughter of Flave and Nettie Drake), started playing for them. With their church

background, singing was mostly "toe-tapping, knee-slapping" gospel and only a ballad thrown in now and then for good measure. People always remembered that they ended their performances with their own special rendition of "God Bless America."

The girls seemed to be loved by everyone. It was during this time that Mitchell Drake, the girls' uncle (brother to Ned and son of Nathan Drake) wrote the song "The Democratic Ship."

Democracy's
THEME SONG
Sung by
"THE CAMPAIGNETTES"
THE DRAKE SISTERS
of
HENDERSONVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA
"In the Land of the Ship"

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELTHENRY A. WALLACE

From left to right: Burnette, Elaine, Dixie Lee, Rebecca, Joyce, and Doris Drake

— NED DRAKE, Manager, HENDERSONVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

Burnette, Elaine, Dixie Lee, Rebecca, Joyce and Doris Drake.

A catchy little tune, the girls would sing and although only three verses long, it became the theme song of the Democratic Party in the area. Soon they became the singing voice for Franklin D. Roosevelt who was vying for his 3rd term (only President to hold office for 12 years) and J. Melville Broughton (soon to be Governor of North Carolina 1941-1945). They performed at numerous fundraising events around the state and started traveling all over the country performing.

While they didn't have much money, the girls were rich in love for each other, a love they carried throughout their lives. I once asked my Mother how much money they made while singing, and she told me "a quarter; Daddy gave us each a quarter when we came off the stage." I thought that was a small amount of money for all that work, but she told me "remember, we had a big family and Grandpa had many mouths to feed." Also the depression had just ended and the war was just beginning." It was difficult to support large families at times, being Hendersonville was a "seasonal" town.

Their father Ned drove them from state to state for their performances in the old family car. Mama said when one of them was thirsty and there were no rest stops in sight, they would sing to keep their minds off their thirst. Of course, being typical siblings, that's when one of them would start to sing "Cool Clear Water" just to irritate the others. Aunt Dixie told me, "They all loved singing except Joy." She was the one closest to Joy and would push her out on stage each performance although nobody ever knew this.

The crowds loved it when the youngest, Bunny, would stand on a chair just reaching the microphone as she belted out "On a Wing and a Prayer." There wouldn't be a dry eye in the crowd. She had a voice that would bring down the house.

There were actually six Drake sisters; Elizabeth, being the oldest, was never as interested in singing as the other girls. Being older, she had already started working when they started singing. It was at this time, early during World War II, that their only brother Frank went overseas in the Marine Corps. At that time the girls were asked to go on tour for the USO and began entertaining our troops all over the U.S. and Canada. By the time the war was over, they had moved to California since it was closer to Hollywood, the center of the entertainment industry. They recorded numerous songs such as "Some Sunday Morning," "Pretty Kitty Blue Eyes" and "Put Your Arms Around Me Honey." At this time they started singing and performing Vaudeville in theatres. At the Temple Theatre in Jacksonville Florida, they were on stage with Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, Bob Nolan and the Sons of the Pioneers. They were the only act that was brought back by popular demand for three different appearances in 1941. At the Lyric Theatre in Salt Lake City, Utah (see below) they were asked to perform numerous times. About that time, on a tour through Canada, my Mother Doris and Aunt Becky, the two oldest girls, grew homesick and decided they wanted a more "normal" life of husbands, family and children. They left the group and took a bus back to California where my Mother married my Father and one and a half years later, I was born. Ned took the remaining three girls back to Hendersonville. Aunt Joy, Aunt Dixie and Aunt Bunny all graduated from Flat Rock High School, married and started their own families.



Lyric Theatre, Salt Lake City Utah

My fondest memories of my childhood are the train rides every summer from California to Hendersonville. I knew I was going to see all my cousins and visit Grandma and Grandpa Drake. Aunt Dixie and Aunt Tee would come from Florida, Aunt Becky from Georgia, Aunt Joy and Aunt Bunny from South Carolina and Uncle Frank lived in Hendersonville. We always had such a great time and ALWAYS everyone would sit around on the floor and the "girls" would sing. It was so great to see them laughing, cutting up and teasing each other saying the other one was off key. They truly loved being together and singing. We always had a great time. When the "sisters" were through, as it was when they were young, the last song they would sing was always "God Bless America" and again, even with us, it didn't leave a dry eye in the crowd.



Frank, Tee, Becky, Doris, Joy, Dixie and Bunny Drake.

Genealogy

Ned Valentine Drake was born December 28, 1893 in Henderson County, North Carolina. He was the son of **Nathan "Teet" Drake** and **Emma Julia Anders**. Ned died August 10, 1984 in Tampa Florida while he and his wife Mary were living with his daughter, Dixie. He was buried at Myrtle Hill Memorial Park, Tampa, Florida. During his life, he was a Corporal in the North Carolina Nation / National Guard Artillery Division, a Fireman for the Railroad, and a Ranger for the Department of Forestry, Henderson County. He also owned a Sanitation Service in Hendersonville.

He married **Mary Keziah Hill** born June 14, 1894 who died about six months after her husband Ned on January 2, 1985. They were married on January 27, 1917 in Salisbury North Carolina. She was the daughter of **Joshua Hill** and **Mary Ellen James**. Ned and Mary had seven children and one infant son born October 23, 1918 who died at birth. The children include:

- **Elizabeth Valentine "Tee" Drake** born November 25, 1920 in Salisbury, N.C. who married **Henry C. Hourtal** and is currently living in Las Vegas, Nevada. She has one son, **Steven Hourtal**.
- **Frank Dill Drake** born August 21, 1922 in Hendersonville N.C. and died on September 14, 2006. He married **Virginia Lee Black**. He had one daughter, **Linda**, and three sons, **George, Burney, and Robin Drake**

- **Mary Rebecca "Becky" Drake** was born June 8, 1925 in Hendersonville N.C. and died on May 17, 1996 in Temecula, California. She married **John Williams** and later **Fred Glad**. She had one son, **John Williams, Jr.**
- **Doris V. "Dottie" Drake** was born on July 16, 1927 in Hendersonville N.C. and died on July 19, 2006 in Las Vegas, Nevada. She married **Charles R. Dobbins**. She had three daughters, **Cheryl, Shelly and Dixie Dobbins**.
- **Joy Ingold Drake** was born on July 10, 1929 in Hendersonville N.C. and died on July 5, 1985, in Tampa, Florida. She married **Julius H. Yelton**. She had one daughter, **Melinda**, and two sons, **Michael and Mark Yelton**.
- **Dixie Lee Drake** was born on May 21, 1931 in Mount Dora, Florida who married **Nolan Walker** and is currently living in Lake City, Florida. She has one son, **David Walker**.
- **Sarah Burnette "Bunny" Drake** was born in Hendersonville N.C. on October 30, 1933 and died on August 1, 2001 in Spartanburg, South Carolina. She married **Ansel N. Page, William Coleman, and Donald Hargrave**. She had four sons, **Rick, Bobby, Tim, Steve**, and one daughter, **Joy Coleman**.

Additional Genealogy: **Nathan "Teet" Drake** was born June 19, 1856 and died May 23, 1936. He was the son of **James Drake** (b. March 15, 1810 d. abt January 1870) and **Keziah** (b. abt. 1835 d. January 26, 1887). **James Drake** was the son of **Hezekiah Drake** and **Elizabeth Barton**. Elizabeth Barton was the first person buried on what was previously Drake land and known as "Drake Cemetery" but is now known as Pleasant Hill Cemetery. Hezekiah was the son of **John Drake** and **Winifred Massey** (early settlers in Henderson County).
