

A STORY OF MY LIFE
By Lydia May Bivens McMahon

Prologue

Lydia May Bivens McMahon was the wife of William Benton "Buck" McMahon. She was one of the daughters of Henry Madison "Mat" Bivens and Mary Ann Cochran Bivens. She was born on December 25, 1876 in East Texas and died on July 9, 1950 in Lake Charles, Louisiana and is buried in the Newton Cemetery. Her siblings were Theodore Calvin "Caf" Bivens born January 12, 1869, Mary Henrietta "Retta" Bivens Trotti born December 29, 1871, and Edwin Hobby Bivens born in 1872. She wrote A STORY OF MY LIFE in 1937 in Newton, Texas.

"I am giving a little sketch of my life, a backwoods country girl. Of course it cannot be interesting as it is so very simple and commonplace. I am also giving our way of living at that time. I shall begin with my early home life.

"The family consisted of my parents and two brothers and a sister, I being the youngest of the four children. My father was a good practical farmer. He knew no other life. He owned about four hundred acres of land, a nice herd of cattle and hogs by the hundred. He always had things he raised on the farm to help relatives that were less fortunate than he.

"My father's land was partly covered with long leaf yellow pine timber, worth almost enough at the time I am writing this to have put us four children through college, but there was no market for timber as there were no saw mills to manufacture it in many miles. The only way to put it to use was making rails for fencing and boards to cover barns or other houses that are necessary on a farm.

"We lived many miles from any kind of market. There were always urgent needs for every dollar that found its way into our home. When my father had more farm work than he and the boys could do they hired hands which were paid with bacon, corn or other things that he raised on the farm. Even the Doctor was paid the same way. Though we seldom had one.

"Our farm home was very much isolated. If it had not been situated on a public road it surely would have been a lonely place, but there was quite a bit of travel and often people would spend the night with us. We would get news papers from the ones that made regular trips our way. Sometimes they would bring my mother books. She was very fond of reading and would greatly appreciate anything that was reading matter. We had no school or church advantages. We had a little schoolhouse some distance from where we lived. School only lasted two or three months in the year. For some reason, my sister and I were never allowed to go. Only my oldest brother ever attended, and that was very little.

"As far back as I can remember my mother was in very bad health. Sometimes I believe her health would have been much better if her children could have attended school and church as she wanted them to. She had ambition and to see us grow up in dense ignorance was more than she could hold up under. Regardless of her bad health she was our schoolteacher and I suppose I can also say our Sunday school teacher, for all we knew about the Bible and religion

was taught us by her. She taught us to read, write and spell. The older children had a few other books they studied.


"We children were permitted to have most any kind of pets. At one time I had a little bear. He was most too young to be taken away from his mother and did not live very long. One time my father gave me a little motherless calf. He told me to feed it and when it got grown I could do whatever I pleased with it. I took the best of care of her as I always loved pets. Finally she grew to be a cow and had a little baby calf of her own. I remember the weather was cold and my little cow was in a pasture almost a mile from home. I carried feed to her almost every day. One day I got pretty badly frightened. I was going along through some tall broom sage and a bob cat or something I thought was one ran across the path just ahead of me. I did not turn and go back to the house. I knew if my cow didn't get her dinner the little calf would not have any milk. The little fellow didn't look any too healthy anyway. He would wobble so when trying to walk.

"During the winter months after my brothers would do up their chores such as cutting wood and feeding the stock, they would pass off the time skating on the pond if the ice was thick enough. At other times they would make traps and catch birds. I also would have to be a trap. They did not seem to care how mine looked; anyway it would hold the birds as well as theirs. They would nearly always take them out of the traps and let them go back to the woods. The birds were mostly red birds. I believe their proper name is Cardinal. They surely would fight when we took them from the trap. Wild life was very numerous near our farm home. There were deer, rabbits and panther, and a few large timber wolves. It was not very unusual for us to hear the mew of the bob cat or the howling of a lonely wolf from the porch at night. I always loved nature and nothing would please me so much as to go walking in the wood with my mother. There would be times when she would feel well enough to take short strolls with us. In the Spring we would gather wild flowers. In Autumn we would gather beautiful leaves and watch the little squirrels scamper through the woods or watch them as they would sit on the branches of the oak trees with their little bushy tails curled up over their backs eating on an acorn they were holding in their paws. My father and brothers never hunted for sport. They would hunt and kill only game that would do to eat. The flesh of the deer is called venison. We had that often, as deer were plentiful. We also ate bear meat and liked it. I believe the custom of eating bear meat in those days was handed down from the Indians. People of today do not believe the flesh of the bear was intended to be eaten, but should any one change their way of thinking and decide they would like to try a nice juicy roast from old Bruin, they would have to go to a circus or zoo to procure it and I doubt if they would be very successful.

"My early childhood days would have been happy if I had not always had the fear of losing mother. She did not conceal her belief that she would not be with us very long. The fear and dread of losing my mother became so deeply rooted in my nature until it caused me to have a fear for everything. In this way, that something was going to happen to me or my loved ones, it has gone with me through life. Try as I might, I have not been able to overcome this handicap of fear. Mother would caution us very carefully on the things we should do and things we should not allow when we grew up. We took care of ourselves in every way. These lessons began when I was quite young, only six or seven years old. I understood real well to be so small. I knew too well why she was telling me those things so early in life. These lessons have gone with me and my sister through all time. We both grew into womanhood with clean pure

lives. I loved my mother dearly. I never wanted to be away from her, not even for a day. I believe people who live in isolated places are much more attached to their family and home than city or town people. I also believe they grieve more from the loss of a loved one. I always loved home. It was the dearest place in the world to me. I think home is the sweetest word in the English language. Some say that Mother is the sweetest, but the words are inseparable to me. Could any place be a real home without a Mother? Mother's health continued to fail and one cold bleak day in November the Death Angel came and took her away. How horrible it all was. It seemed my poor little heart would break. I could hear the soft steps and low voices of the kind good neighbors as they passed to and fro making preparations to put poor mother's body away. There were no undertakers in those days to take charge and do things. It all depended on the kindness of ones neighbors. Our Aunt, mother's sister, took us to live with her. It was mother's wish that she do so. I loved my aunt and she seemed to love me in a way, *she had children of her own. There were entirely too many of us. I was very unhappy. I felt that we were in the way and not wanted. My sister had to work awfully hard. I could see that she was not being treated fair, seeing her imposed on made me feel sad and sometimes very resentful. I was not so easily imposed on as she. I had a way of being a little hard to find until most of the chores were done up, maybe if I had done different sister would not have had to work so hard. I could see things were not working out satisfactory some way. One day my father told us he had rented a farm a few miles from my aunt's. We were going to try to live to ourselves. I did not like the idea very much for I knew we would miss Mother more than ever. We collected our few household goods and moved. This was the beginning of moving in my life. We stayed at that place almost one year. The longest we ever stayed at any one place any more. My sister was just seventeen, a very quiet girl. She seemed to try to take mother's place in making us a home. She never complained or seemed to mind. Though it was a long time in my life when she should have been free and happy. However her willingness to take this burden was very fortunate for the rest of us.*

"Another thing that made us very lonely. Our brothers both left home to go and work and make their own way. We missed them terribly. Well, my father decided to move again. How I did hate to move. Nothing looked so bad to me as to see our household goods on a wagon. Now we were moving every few months. When we first began to move it took two wagons to take our things, but pretty soon one wagon was sufficient. When it took two wagons, my father would drive the horses for one and my sister would drive the other team. I always felt awfully ashamed, I felt like I wanted to go and hide somewhere if it had been possible. As I have said before, nothing looked so bad to me as to see our old shabby furniture loaded on a wagon. It still looks bad to me this day. Now when I see a wagon or truck coming down the street loaded with household things I will turn my head to keep from seeing it pass. Well, there would be nothing left for me to do but get in the wagon. So I would climb up beside sister. I would look at her, she did not seem to feel at all like I did. Poor sister, her life was so drab and abnormal for a girl her age. Still I suppose she would have welcomed any kind of a change. When my father decided to make one of those foolish moves, nothing we could say nor any amount of argument we could put up would make him change his mind. I remember my sister and I were sick with measles, and he decided to move again. He would not wait until it would be safe for us to go. He just put a feather mattress in a wagon and put us on the mattress, covered over the wagon and moved on to another place. I did not mind the way we were fixed



this time as I always wanted to be hid. This did not hurt either of us but it did seem like an awful unwise thing to do. I was only a child but I knew my father was making a poor judgment for he always came out loser after making one of those moves. A very unfortunate thing happened to my father. His eyesight began to fail. He soon became almost blind. My youngest brother, seeing my father was unable to take care of us, came and took us where he was working. We three lived together for two or three years. My sister got married and took me to live with her. She and my brother-in-law were kind and good. After a few months I decided I would go to school. There was a good country school near where we lived. I was seventeen and the only schooling I had had was what my mother had taught me and four weeks at a private school when I was twelve years of age. I knew it would be very embarrassing for I would have to be in classes with small children. To add to my already embarrassment, I was very large for my age and unusually tall. Really a grown girl. The school house was one large room built of pine planks. In the center there was a large heater that burned wood. I suppose it was placed in the center so the heat would be distributed throughout the room. I felt very awkward and ashamed of being so backward in my books. The smaller children seemed to love me very much. They would come to meet me as far as they could see me coming and hold on to me until I could barely walk. This made me happy. I always wanted to be a good girl and wanted everyone to love me. I do not know why the little children loved me as they did. I never made any effort to win their love that I knew of. I would often speak in a way that seemed harsh, trying to conceal my feeling of inferiority. All the other children had parents who were interested in them. I felt completely left out. The school was not graded which was a great help to me. As you understood a subject well enough, the teacher would pass you on to other studies higher up. I learned very fast. Sometimes I carried as many as eight subjects. It was not so very long until I was up with most the advanced pupils in school. I was intending to keep on going to school until I was prepared to teach, however things came up that made that impossible. Later on I married. My husband was very kind and patient. He being one of the oldest of the children in a large family, and I the youngest made things very agreeable, for I believe that the youngest child in a family is most always a little spoiled and selfish, no matter what the standard of life may have been.


"We were the parents of seven children. The first one was a little boy. He was a dear little fellow. We just had him with us one year. He went to a better home than we could give him here. I have always blamed myself with his death, as I knew so little at first about the care of a baby.

"My children have all gone out into the world to make and live their own lives.

"One gloomy day in January, the Death Angel came again, this time he took away my companion of nearly forty one years. This loss has indeed left my life empty and lonely. I shall try to make myself useful wherever I live. I don't know how long it will be -- then I want to go on Home where there won't be any more trouble or disappointments.

"May Bivens McMahon

"Newton, Texas
"Aug. 15th, 1937"





Opheie Mary Aisland - "Yue" McErgerson

1944-1950

GRANDMA MCMAHON'S TEA CAKES

Grandma McMahon, whose full name was Lydia May Bivens McMahon, was one of the children of Henry Madison "Mat" Bivens. She was born December 25th, 1876, in East Texas, and died on July 9th, 1950, when I was eight years old. My mother, Kathleen McMahon Greenwood, was the youngest daughter of Grandma McMahon and William Benton McMahon.

One of my favorite memories of Grandma McMahon was her tea cakes. When she baked a batch, I grabbed a handful, stuffed them in my pants pocket, and munched on them all day while I played outside. For years I tried to reconstruct her recipe and got fairly close. But a recipe I found for "Old Fashioned Tea Cakes" in the book *BOARDIN' IN THE BIG THICKET* by Wanda A. Landry, containing recipes and reminiscences of early Big Thicket boarding houses, helped me get it right.

The tea cakes she made were about 2 1/2 to 3 inches in diameter, almost half an inch thick, browned, and had indentations of three of her fingers as she pressed the dough onto the cookie sheet. They were not delicate or crumbly, thus they stayed whole in my pockets. Eating a few of Grandma McMahon's tea cakes brings back a lot of warm memories of her and the Piney Woods of East Texas.

Tolbert L. Greenwood - April 2, 2011

- 1/2 cup of butter
- 1 cup of sugar (1/2 cup brown and 1/2 cup granulated works well, too)
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 2 eggs
- 1 1/2 cup of flour (sifted before measuring - I usually put in a little more)
- 1 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 to 2 teaspoons vanilla

I do not recall the taste of cinnamon, but if she used any cinnamon, it would not have been much.

Preheat oven to 375. Cream butter, sugar, salt together until light and fluffy. Add beaten eggs and blend until smooth. Sift flour and baking powder together and add to the first mixture. Stir in vanilla. Chill dough for easier handling. Roll heaping tablespoons (1 to 1 1/2 inch) of dough (I remember the cookies being larger) into a ball (flour on your hands keeps from sticking) and press with 3 fingers onto a cookie sheet. Place about 1 to 2 inches apart. Bake for approximately 12 to 15 until golden brown. This will make 15 to 20 cookies.