

Will Kelly McClain - A Lifetime Legacy

Will Kelly McClain's life was about much more than being a lawyer. And certainly about more than one case in 1967.

Early Life

His youth was shaped by a number of influences. He was born in Lebanon, Tennessee and lost his father when he was still a boy. Will, his brother George, and mother Rita went to live with her mother's family on a farm in Lebanon. He grew up after that as a country boy in the Cook family with many cousins to whom he became a brother. His older brother George had fallen ill with a high fever as a child and experienced some mental challenges as he grew up, but he was capable and had his own special talents. As an adult, George sold men's clothing at a shop on the Square called the Toggery. He was well known in Georgetown for his sense of style as well as his kindness. Everyone called him "Uncle George."

After her husband died, Rita McClain got a job as dietician and dining room director at Cumberland University in Tennessee where her cooking and etiquette were quickly recognized and appreciated. During her tenure there, she played hostess for a large conference of university presidents and "put on the dog" for them. Her grandson Martin says she was a disciple of Fanny Farmer and her own mother's cooking, and had learned to cook well for a great many people while on the farm with a number of laborers to feed.

As it turned out, the President of Southwestern University was so impressed with her style that he offered her a job. He promised her that as a bonus, they had just finished the first hall for women and had the best kitchen in the Southwest! She would have a large staff and even a very nice apartment as the housemother in Laura Kuykendall Hall. Granddaughter Meredith says as soon as she got the offer, she put her hat and gloves on and got on a train to Texas, which is how they ended up in Georgetown.

Living in Texas

When the Depression hit, Will Kelly had recently graduated from law school and took a job with the Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas. He didn't like it much; he wanted to be a lawyer and be out on his own. He came back



The McClain family at their Georgetown bungalow: William "Martin", Will Kelly, Meredith, and Rosamond.

to Georgetown because Rita was receiving a good salary, plus he had dining privileges at the college so he could keep body and soul together while working to become a lawyer.

George and Will Kelly were able to live for a short time in her apartment but even back then, living with mom sometimes had its disadvantages. Rita's goal was to choose the richest girl at SWU for Will Kelly. She even held regular card games in her drawing room and invited all the richest and prettiest girls to meet her handsome son. But Will Kelly had already fallen in love with a beautiful poetry writer at Cumberland named Rosamond to whom he was eventually engaged. She was the oldest of ten children and grew up "poor as a church mouse" so she was also practical and they waited out the terrors of the Depression before getting married. They were finally wed in 1936 and went all the way to Round Rock for their honeymoon.

Political Dreams

Will Kelly decided when he came to Georgetown he needed to make some friends in the Courthouse. He did and there were several in particular who gave him sage advice to help him succeed in politics: Judge Sam Stone; County Surveyor Dor Brown, County Clerk Stiles Byrum, and possibly most important, District Court Judge W.H. Nunn.

They said he needed to

go out to the country communities, where people spoke German or Czech, and join an insurance lodge. He learned one important phrase in German, which translates to "I thank you for your vote."

Will Kelly had always been well-liked in town and he went one Sunday each month to the meetings so when the votes came in, he won by *viele* votes.

In Taylor he was in charge of WPA projects and established a sawmill where workers cut walnut and other hardwood from Williamson County, sawed them into lumber and made furniture. He provided many jobs for people in Taylor and success for the sawmill and furniture factory. The craftsmen presented him a handmade walnut desk when the WPA project was complete, which he kept for the rest of his life.

Because he was creating and supporting jobs in Taylor and had a good rapport with the outlying communities, he was easily elected DA when he ran. He held office for ten years.

Judge Tim Wright, who was McClain's law partner in later days says Will Kelly made friends all over. There was a man who sold cold drinks and newspapers on the south side of the city square and Kelly always let him know when he would be doing a closing argument. On hot days, the courtroom windows were open to keep the air moving and the newspaper

man stopped work just to listen to Mr. McClain's booming voice coming over the breeze. He smiled to picture him waving his bible and thundering at the jury to make his case.

Hanging A Shingle

McClain remained in the DA's office during WWII. But when the troops returned, he went into private practice and became a defense attorney with great success. He continued to do political work and helped several prominent figures in their elections, including Lyndon Johnson, for whom he served as County campaign manager.

He was a great Roosevelt Democrat. There was a big political fracas in Texas in 1948 about the wellhead tax on gas and oil. The oil companies were against it, of course, and fought tooth and nail but McClain was an advocate of the wellhead tax. This is important because Will Kelly ran for Johnson's vacated congressional seat in 1948 against ten other candidates in the enormous 10th district. He covered it by car with his young son Martin along to nail placards in every dusty store and on every dirt road. McClain was second place in the primary and was honored to participate in a runoff. At that point he was offered support from an influential Austin group but they insisted that he give up the wellhead tax. He said he would not, tossed them out of his office, and his opponent won the seat. Still, Martin says,

Weir agrees that they were great dancers and Will Kelly was a good caller.

Meredith says, "Mother loved plants and flowers and went to arranging classes. She entered competitions and did weird things with vases to make them stylish." She loves the fact that she grew up with a mother who was an accomplished gardener. Rosamond was the President of gardening club and in recognition of her efforts and her kindness, the club planted a tree in her honor in San Gabriel Park.

Family Legacy

There is still a lot of the McClain family in San Gabriel park, even literally.

The most visible contribution was completed when Will Kelly was president of the Georgetown country club. In the 60s it was "a big old funky house with a swimming pool with a good barbecue guy and eight-hole golf course." Under his presidency, the first low-level causeway was built over the river so members would not have to drive their cars through the water to get there.

Will Kelly was also instrumental in pouring the slab that was then used for square dancing in the park.

Finally, as a tribute when Will Kelly and Rosamond passed, their children spread their ashes into the river at the country club.

But while they thrived in Georgetown, their house was a fitting gathering place for the many people who loved and admired them. They had a dining room with doors that opened in all directions, and the lower floor was basically one big room. Both McClain children have many fond memories of Georgetown and it was all the better for their family having been so much a part in building it through the mid 20th century.

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