



Betty Ruth Kemp

May 5, 1930 - July 7, 2024

Betty Ruth “Bet” Kemp of Joplin, Missouri passed away peacefully on July 7, 2024 at the age of 94. Renaissance woman is a title which could well be applied to Betty. Her convictions concerning social justice, adult education, Christian ministry, the value of the public library as a service to citizens came from her liberal arts education at University of Oklahoma, the social principles of the United Methodist Church she was raised in, and her upbringing on a subsistence farm—well-managed by her Chickasaw parents on Chickasaw lands—in southern Oklahoma’s Tishomingo area, on the Blue River. Her other interests were similarly broad-ranging: she had a passion for photography, gardening, Native American crafts and culture. Most notably Betty was a nationally recognized pioneer in genealogical research of Native American ancestry. Betty loved to travel. And family was everything for Betty. She combined the two passions—family & travel—by regularly visiting far-flung relatives. Trips to Hawai’i and Germany to visit her sister, brother-in-law & kids living the peripatetic Army family life. The Pacific Northwest for visits with her brother, sister-in-law & kids. Always fun-filled, extended visits so enjoyed by her nieces & nephews. Aunt Bet was “the fun Aunt” family always looked forward to seeing! Betty lived and led many of the iconic events and movements of the mid-Twentieth Century. Her childhood was experienced during the economic deprivations of the Great Depression. She was a teen during World War II while her beloved older brother fought across Europe. As a young career woman, working in a “woman’s profession” the pay was low.

Dedicated to family though she was, she had to leave her beloved home state of Oklahoma to pursue her library career. She pushed beyond the subordinate positions women were expected to settle for at the time. Indeed, she broke “glass ceilings” before there was even such an expression. She always credited her mother, Mamie—a Chilocco Indian Agricultural School graduate—with the drive, intellect and wherewithal to push through to success. In retirement, Betty returned to Oklahoma to apply her knowledge and leadership skills to further the development of her ancestral Chickasaw heritage and community. Betty’s strongly held vision of libraries as a public good was realized because of her leadership. She left a legacy of new and upgraded public library facilities and enlightened citizens everywhere she served. Her drive & career trajectory were set early on: In 8th grade her teachers wisely stood aside and let her manage the tiny library at her three-room country school in Plainview, OK. Her high school principal at Wapanuka, OK was a smart man, meaning, he was happy to let her take charge of that library as well. She went on to earn a master’s degree in library sciences in 1965. Betty was appointed Director of the Cherokee Regional Library System headquartered in Lafayette, Georgia. She eventually moved on to a bigger library system, completing her career as the executive director of the Lee-Itawamba Libraries, headquartered in Tupelo, Mississippi, the heart of Chickasaws’ ancestral homeland. A dream job location! And named after her ancestor Itawamba to boot! There she worked closely & tirelessly with other civic leaders to expand & modernize each region’s library system dramatically. As a strong professional leader, she encouraged her staff members to improve their own educational attainment. At her urging, countless of her staffers returned to college and finished graduate-level library school. Several are now in positions of authority themselves. The key ingredient to those successes of the people & institutions she served was Betty Kemp’s passion, dedication and leadership. Betty was the first, enduring Chickasaw link from Oklahoma back to the ancestral homelands in Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee in the twentieth century. By the time Betty had begun her sojourn

in northeastern Mississippi as library director, the people of the region had long written off the Chickasaws. In their historic imagination, the Chickasaws had just...disappeared...post-removal. For their part, the Chickasaws, now in Oklahoma, the original homelands in the southeast were only known in abstract, historical terms; even that knowledge was not well-developed. Betty re-established the link, many generations after the Trail of Tears her ancestors had endured. Her efforts ushered in a new era of recognition among Mississippians that yes, through the adversity, the Chickasaws are still alive & well. She leveraged her leadership in her profession, her civic standing in the community, as well as her prominence in her faith community to create an understanding of the shared interest in developing a cultural heritage that included the region's first nation, the Chickasaws. She was, for all intents & purposes, a diplomat between two nations. Her early efforts were carried out with no remuneration or official appointment. Her efforts were self-driven; to cultivate her heritage and establish peace and goodwill between communities. Eventually, as Chickasaw governors Overton James and Bill Anoatubby strengthened the financial basis for Chickasaw cultural activity, the "diplomacy" between the Chickasaw Nation and the homeland was formalized. Betty's pioneering efforts in building bridges has been repeatedly recognized on the various Chickasaw Nation-sponsored "homeland" tours back to Mississippi. Betty's renown for her efforts at re-establishing Chickasaw ties to the area resulted in her being an honored invitee to The Festival of the Singing River, an event established by residents of Florence, Alabama, to celebrate their heritage. Chickasaw leader George Colbert's early 19th century homesite and ferry crossing of the Tennessee River along the Natchez Trace was one of the central features of the festival. This was especially meaningful for festival organizers and attendees since George Colbert was also Betty's ancestor. Everyone from political leaders (from northeast Mississippi and northern Alabama communities) to former subordinates at the library (who are now leaders), to local farmers (who own

tracts of land that were formerly lands of the Chickasaws), to faith leaders and curators of Chickasaw physical artifacts and sites (National Park Service personnel and archaeologists) all turned out to welcome Betty and the Chickasaw groups she led back to Mississippi. The appreciation & plaudits from all parties was palpable. Betty was a true believer in civic activism through her membership in many professional, faith, native art and heritage organizations. Betty co-founded the Chickasaw Historical Society. She was active with the Purcell (OK) Chickasaw Community Council. She won awards at the Chickasaw Annual Meetings for her hand-crafted native shawls. During the 1980s she served in successive leadership roles in the North Mississippi Conference—United Methodist Women: Secretary, Vice President and President. Mississippi Governor Cliff Finch recognized Betty's leadership talents in appointing Betty to the Mississippi Library Commission—the governing board for public libraries in Mississippi. In 1961, Betty joined the American Library Association and remained a member until her death. She was secretary of the Southeastern Library Association, 1966-1992. She also served in leadership roles in the Public Library Section and as Mississippi Library Association Secretary, 1977-78, and Education Committee Chair, 1979. She was an active member of the National Society Daughters of the American Colonists, United Daughters of the Confederacy, Dames of the Court of Honor, Continental Society Daughters of Indian Wars, United States Daughters of 1812. Eventually, Betty's tireless work cultivating Chickasaw heritage and her professional leadership was recognized in her 2013 induction into the Chickasaw Hall of Fame. Nobody deserved it more. She was born and raised a Chickasaw during a time when the tribe had been officially extinguished by federal policy. She was part of the Chickasaw's revival as a federally recognized tribe. She, like so many in the tribe through many generations, persevered, through adverse policy and attitudes, to build a better world for all. Her family would like to thank the dedicated and caring staff at Joplin Gardens. She loved you and you all made her final years golden!

Betty is survived by her sister, Peggy Kemp Barrett, brother, Charles Kemp (Karen), nephew, Michael Barrett (Pamela), nieces Tracy Wallace (Joseph), Ann Courtney, Heather Kemp, Alyssa Poteet (Morgan) and grandnephews, Maximillian and Felix Poteet and a host of cousins.

She is predeceased by her mother, Mamie Hughes Kemp, father, Raymond H. Kemp and brother, Joe Carr Kemp.

In lieu of flowers, please consider a gift in memory of Betty to the United Methodist Council on Relief or your local public library.

Funeral services for Betty Kemp will be held at 10:00 a.m. Friday, July 19, 2024 at DeArman-Clark Funeral Home (305 E. Main Street, Tishomingo, OK 73460). Family hour will be held at 9:00 a.m. prior to the service for family to greet friends. Interment to follow at the Tishomingo Cemetery in Tishomingo, Oklahoma.

Cemetery Details

Tishomingo Cemetery

Tishomingo, OK 73460

Previous Events

Family & Friends

JUL 19. 9:00 AM - 10:00 AM (CT)

DeArman - Clark Funeral Home
305 E. Main
Tishomingo, OK 73460
(580) 371-2338
dearmanclarkfh@gmail.com
<https://www.dearmanfuneralhome.com>

Funeral Service

JUL 19. 10:00 AM (CT)

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Tribute Wall



“ DeArman Funeral Home created a Tribute Video in memory of Betty Ruth Kemp



DeArman Funeral Home - August 14, 2024 at 10:09 AM

AW

“ Betty was always so very kind and sweet! I met her at the Purcell Chickasaw Community Council meeting and found her to be very knowledgeable about the Chickasaw Nation. It was a pleasure to know her! So sorry for your loss.

Angie Wallace - July 25, 2024 at 05:30 PM

MN

Thank you, Angie. This means a lot to us all. She so enjoyed her involvement with the Purcell Community Council. She was so passionate about our Nation!

Michael Barrett, Betty's Nephew - July 26, 2024 at 04:31 PM

DW

“ Always a pleasure to read of a life filled with dedication, success, insight and action. A true Chickasaw Elder!
Dede Williams, niece of Overton James and daughter of Chenena James Roach (CHS)

Dede Roach Williams - July 15, 2024 at 01:22 PM

MB

*Hello Dede,
This is Mike Barrett, nephew of Betty. Your comment is so very appreciated by the family. I don't know if you know this, but Betty's brother—my uncle—Joe Kemp, and your uncle, Overton, were good buddies at Wapanucka High School! So this is super meaningful!*

Michael Barrett - July 15, 2024 at 10:58 PM

MB

*Also, Governor Overton came to my Uncle Joe's funeral some 25 years ago. That, too, was so meaningful for our family. His taking the time to pay his last respects for Joe Kemp has always stayed with me. All the best,
Mike*

Michael Barrett - July 15, 2024 at 11:02 PM

MB

Correction: Governor James!

Michael Barrett - July 15, 2024 at 11:02 PM