

Charles William (Billy) Coleman
(April 21, 1921 – March 26, 2002)

Born: Mount Airy, North Carolina
Veteran: SSGT US Army World War II (November 4, 1942 – November 24, 1945)
Deceased: Wake Forest Medical Center, Winston-Salem, North Carolina
Buried: Skyline Memorial Gardens, Mount Airy, North Carolina

Billy was the only child of Andrew D. Coleman (1888-1932) and Deanna Griffith Coleman (1898-1985). As a young child, Billy and his mom and dad lived in the home Andrew had built at 641 Sunset Drive, Mount Airy, North Carolina. When Billy was only 10 years old, his father had a stroke and passed away leaving Billy's mother a young widow. At that time, Deanna rented their home on Sunset Drive and she and Billy moved in with her parents John D. and Sallie Griffith at 145 Banner Street, Mount Airy. Deanna never remarried.

In 1942, Billy met Martha Alma Blair, daughter of William Bunyan Blair (1884-1964) and Minerva Rosella Taylor Blair (1887-1969) of Pilot Mountain, North Carolina. Billy and Alma, as she was called, worked at a textile manufacturing plant in Mount Airy. (*I Think the Company was Renfro.*) They were both smitten with one another and they dated a few times before Billy entered the Army on November 4, 1942.

Billy was trained and served at Camp White and Camp Adair in Oregon before he was sent overseas in April 1944 to North Africa and later to Italy. He was promoted through the ranks to Staff Sergeant with Company C, 363rd Infantry. Billy's family have told me that one day two (2) military men showed up at Deanna's door to tell her Billy was missing in action. Cries and screams could be heard as Deanna feared her son was dead. Pieces of a telegram recently found with Billy's military items indicate that on October 17, 1944 his infantry was reported as Missing In Action. On April 17, 1945 Billy was seriously wounded in battle in Italy. While in a hospital in France, Billy asked a nurse to write a letter to his mother to let her know he was okay. The nurse was kind enough to do so. As a result of this injury, Billy lost one of his kidneys. On May 14, 1945 he was awarded a Purple Heart for the wounds received in action against the enemy. He wore the Combat Infantry Badge (CIB), the Good Conduct Metal, the Expert Marksmanship Badge and numerous other ribbons and metals of distinction. On November 24, 1945 he was given an Honorable Discharge from the Army.

Billy and Alma had written to each other almost every day while he was in service. Alma has said she fell in love with Billy through those many letters. During the war, Alma worked at the National Carbon Company, Inc. in Winston-Salem, NC. Between 1943 and 1945 this company tested and manufactured submarine batteries and underwater detonators for the US Navy. After World War II, National Carbon Company left Winston-Salem and is now part of GrafTech International in Ohio. The plant in Winston-Salem was acquired by Western Electric Company.¹

When Billy returned home, his community, family and friends welcomed him. He had been thinking of Alma Blair for three (3) years and surprised her by showing up on her doorstep still in his uniform. When he arrived, he picked her up and twirled her around the room. She said she almost fainted and thought he was the most handsome man she had ever seen. On June 29, 1946 Billy and Alma were married. They moved to the Coleman house on 641 Sunset Drive and asked Billy's mother to move back into the home Andrew had built for them. Deanna, Billy, and Alma lived at this residence until they were deceased. Billy and Alma had a very happy life together and were married 55 years.

¹ Local Historical Landmark Program, Forsyth County Historic Resource Commission, Historical Landmark #129

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Billy and Alma did not have any children of their own; they extended their love to Alma's siblings' children. They pampered their eight (8) nephews and nieces and were always there for them in a supportive role. Through the generations, the number of nephews and nieces grew through marriages and births of children. By the time Billy and Alma passed, there were over 70 nephews and nieces who they claimed as their own.

Billy and Alma were also very close to their first cousins and to Alma's siblings and their spouses. They had many fond memories of growing up with them and stayed close to them in their adult life. This was also the case with Billy's first cousin Andy Griffith who moved away and became famous as a recording, TV, and movie star. Andy never forgot His cousins; Billy and Alma could depend on hearing from him and receiving that Christmas card each year.

Billy was highly skilled in electronics. In the late 1950's he entered a partnership with Glenn A. Thacker and opened Riverdale TV Sales & Services located on South Main Street in Mount Airy. In 1975 Billy and Alma purchased an adjacent lot to their residency and built a TV Storage and Repair Shop. In his semi-retirement, Billy enjoyed helping others with sales and repairs of radios and televisions.

Alma stayed busy with her love for family, flowers, gardening, reading and J C Penney. She was employed by J C Penney in Mount Airy for over 55 years and was well known for her friendly and loving approach to retail sales.

Billy loved baseball, antique cars, fishing, spending time with friends and family and traveling. They didn't get the opportunity to travel much but they loved visiting Alma's sister and her family in Florida. They also loved their annual trip to Myrtle Beach. They would always stay at the same family motel, "Darlington Apartments," and made a lifetime friendship with the owner and her children.

Billy and Alma were members of Haymore Memorial Baptist Church in Mount Airy. Billy served as deacon in that church and in numerous other capacities. They loved their Lord and Savior and walked the talk in their Christian life.

On March 26, 2002, Billy died from a hematoma to his head. This resulted from a fall he had in the bathroom several days before. At the time he was undergoing chemo treatments for lymphoma. Alma passed 17 years later as a result of a malignant neoplasm of her right lung. Things were never the same for Alma after Billy passed as she dearly missed him. A woman of great determination, Alma continued to live at their home and devoted her time to her work, family and hobbies. The last few years she had private caregivers around the clock. These ladies also became part of her loving family. Alma passed away on August 27, 2019.

Billy Coleman was a quiet, friendly, reliable, kind and steadfast man. He loved his Lord, country, community, family, and friends. He truly exemplifies "The Greatest Generation." He would be deeply humbled to be recognized in the Museum of Regional History in Mount Airy, North Carolina.

Submitted by
Brenda Blair Dalton, Niece of Alma and Billy Coleman
January 21, 2021