

PROFILE

Ruth Bell Graham – missionary, writer, mother, grandmother and wife of evangelist Billy Graham



Ruth McCue Bell was born June 10, 1920, in Quingjiang, Kiangsu, China, the second daughter of Dr. L. Nelson and Virginia Leftwich Bell, medical missionaries at the Presbyterian Hospital 300 miles north of Shanghai.

Ruth and her three siblings Rosa, Virginia and Clayton, grew up in China. During much of her youth, she experienced the harsh and crude realities of a country that was locked in a bloody civil war between Nationalist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek and communist rebels.

Late in the spring of 1927, when Ruth was seven years old, the civil war in China forced the Bells and other missionaries to return to the United States, where Dr. Bell performed surgery and served as a lay minister in Virginia, West Virginia and Texas. When China re-opened to missionaries the following year, the Bell family returned to Quingjiang, only to discover that soldiers had ransacked the hospital and their home while they were away.

Although surrounded by unspeakable hardship – pestilence and plague; the loss of a baby boy; unstable political and military turmoil; communists and Japanese invaders – Ruth and her family considered China their home. Their love of the Chinese people and their abiding faith in God sustained them during the dangerous – and often lonely – times on the mission field.

As a young girl, Ruth enjoyed drawing and writing poetry and she kept regular journals. She was an unusually spiritual child, who cultivated a deep faith in God as well as a strong desire to serve Him once she became of age.

When she was just 13, Ruth's parents sent her to the Pyeng Yang Foreign School in what is today Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, where she spent most of her high school years. While attending boarding school, Ruth became terribly homesick, and her journal writing and poetry began to adopt a sad and lonely tone. (She later reflected that her initial separation from her parents would serve as her "spiritual boot camp" for the years that lay ahead when she would be separated for long periods of time from her famous evangelist husband.)

In 1935 the Bells furloughed to the United States and rented a house in Montreat, N.C., near Asheville, where Ruth finished her senior year, graduating in 1936. Barely 16, she returned to Korea for a year of post-graduate study because her parents thought she was too young for college.

Despite her loneliness at school, Ruth developed a strong sense of independence and self-assuredness that would prove invaluable as she matured. She even vowed never to marry, so that she could serve as a single missionary in the mountainous nation of Tibet upon graduation from college.

In her journal, Ruth writes:

“By 1937, I had my future securely planned. I would never marry. I would spend the rest of my life as a missionary in Tibet. But on July 7 of that year, the Japanese attacked Chinese troops at the Marco Polo Bridge near Beijing, beginning the occupation of northern China. And while my father prepared for war, my mother prepared me for college in the United States. I argued that all I needed was a utilitarian knowledge of Tibetan and the Bible. I certainly didn’t have to sail halfway around the world for that. My parents simply smiled and put me on a boat to the United States. I was not happy.”

At the age of 17, the spunky and resolute Ruth left the Far East to attend Wheaton College in Illinois. As she contemplated her avowed spinster existence on her way to the United States aboard the USS McKinley, she penned these now prophetic words:

“If I marry, he must be so tall when he is on his knees, as one has said, he reaches all the way to Heaven. His shoulders must be broad enough to bear the burden of a family. His lips must be strong enough to smile, firm enough to say no, and tender enough to kiss. His love must be so deep that it takes its stand in Christ and so wide that it takes in the whole world. He must be big enough to be gentle and great enough to be thoughtful. His arms must be strong enough to carry a little child.”

Despite her vow never to marry, Ruth couldn’t refuse the “fascinating” William F. “Billy” Graham, who proposed in 1940, just three months after they met. However, it wasn’t until 1941 that she actually accepted the proposal, having turned down many other suitors during that time.

Ruth and Billy Graham were married Friday, August 13, 1943, at the Montreat Presbyterian Church in Montreat, North Carolina. In *Footprints of a Pilgrim*, Ruth includes the following reflection of her wedding day:

“With this ring I thee wed...” your strong, familiar voice fell like a benediction on my heart, that dusk; tall candles flickered gently, our age-old vows were said, and I could hear someone begin to sing an old, old song, timeworn and lovely, timeworn and dear. And in that dusk were old, old friends – and you, an old friend, too (and dearer than them all). Only my ring seemed new – its plain gold surface warm and bright and strange to me in that candlelight...unworn – unmarred. Could it be that wedding rings like other things are lovelier when scarred?

Never let it end, God, never – please – all this growing loveliness, all of these brief moments of fresh pleasure – never let it end, let us always be a little breathless at love’s beauty; never let us pause to reason from a sense of duty; never let us stop to measure just how much to give; never let us stop to weigh love; let us live – and live! Please God, let our hearts kneel always, love their only Master, knowing the warm impulsiveness of shattered alabaster: I know You can see things the way a new bride sees, so never let it end, God, never – please.

After a brief honeymoon in Blowing Rock, North Carolina’s oldest travel attraction, the Grahams headed for Hinsdale, Illinois, where Billy had taken a pastorate at the Western Springs Baptist Church.

Soon, Billy’s speaking schedule would separate the young couple, but Ruth kept busy with her writing and daily Bible readings and study. In the mid-1940s, Billy resigned from the pastorate, applied for an army chaplaincy, and then became a full-time evangelist for Youth for Christ. The Grahams then moved to Montreat, North Carolina, to be near Ruth’s parents, who had returned from the mission field. In 1950, The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association was founded and Ruth found herself alone more often.

In 1954, the Grahams purchased a 150-acre homestead in the mountains of western North Carolina, called Little Piney Cove, and Ruth settled in to make a home and raise a family.

Of her children, Ruth writes:

“Five I have: each separate, distinct, a soul bound for eternity; and I – blind leader of the blind – groping and fumbling, casual and concerned, by turns...undisciplined, I seek by order and command to discipline and shape; (I who need Thy discipline to shape my own disordered soul). O Thou Who seest the heart’s true, deep desire; each shortcoming and each sad mistake; supplement and overrule, nor let our children be the victims of our own unlikeness unto Thee.”

Over the years, family life was often pressured and Billy’s travel schedule horrendous, but Ruth felt it her calling to stay home with the children while they were growing up. Although she was very supportive of her husband and had an enduring influence upon his ministry, Ruth was also very independent. She had enormous energy and loved adventure – she even broke an arm once while hang gliding and tried to hide it from Billy. She did not, however, hide her opposition to Billy being involved in politics, and she writes that, “I reminded him of this whenever I could.” Ruth felt strongly that Billy should limit advice to moral and spiritual issues and stay out of politics.

Only Ruth’s love of people could outweigh her love of life. With grace and the gift of hospitality, she endeared folks with her welcoming spirit and wacky sense of humor. One time, Ruth’s grandson, Aram, challenged his fiancé by claiming his grandmother’s blackberry cobbler could beat her grandmother’s in a taste test. At the scheduled bake-off, Ruth presented a dead chicken and claimed, “Did you say ‘cobbler’? I thought you said ‘gobbler!’”

In 1974, Ruth suffered a spinal cord injury and concussion from a 15-foot fall out of a tree, while helping hang a rope slide for the grandchildren. Although she suffered from chronic pain after the terrible accident, she resumed most of her activities and continued to travel with Billy to his crusades around the world until the late 1990's, after which she spent much of her time at her beloved house that became her base of operations.

In *Footprints of a Pilgrim*, daughter Gigi writes of her mother, "No, her nest is not, nor has it ever been, empty. Her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren all gravitate to this loving, accepting, encouraging, unselfish, fun-loving, positive, and very spunky little lady whom they call Tai Tai (a very respectful term for little old lady in Chinese)."

Ruth is the author of many Christian books, as well as a regular contributor for newspapers and magazines. Her biography, *A Time for Remembering* (later reissued as *Ruth: A Portrait*), was an early work of her friend, novelist Patricia Cornwell.

Ruth and Billy Graham's five children are Virginia (Gigi), Anne, Ruth (Bunny), Franklin and Ned. The Grahams have 19 grandchildren and numerous great-grandchildren.