

# HardisonInk.com

---

## **Mary Gene Bailey French honored by ZTA sorority; *A life well-lived...and still going strong***

By Lisa Statham Posteraro © Jan. 9, 2017 at 1:57 p.m.

**WILLISTON** -- College can be such a daunting experience... living away from home for the first time, trying to figure out where you fit in, learning to adapt to such a totally different environment.



For local retired teacher Mary Gene Bailey French, joining a sorority was a real life saver! And recently, she received a certificate and white violet charm, recognizing her almost-75 years of membership in Zeta Tau Alpha.

**Mary Gene Bailey French, a teacher for many years and an almost-75 year member of Zeta Tau Alpha, holds the certificate and charm she received from the International Office of ZTA, signed by President Carolyn Hof Carpenter. French belonged to the Beta Psi chapter of ZTA at Stetson University in DeLand.**

Prior to going to Stetson University in DeLand, French had completed a year at Georgia State Woman's College (now Valdosta State University) after graduating from Williston High School. She had moved to Williston from

Colquitt, Ga., following her parents' divorce, not exactly the most common occurrence in families in the early 1940s.

At Stetson, French pledged Zeta Tau Alpha, the same sorority to which Stetson's Dean of Women, Etter Turner, a Willistonian, belonged. Her father, the late Gene Bailey, a successful businessman and former mayor, "arranged" for French's dormitory room in Chaudoin Hall to be right next to that of Dean Turner. "Having her right there was like having a parent next door," said French, eyes smiling.

"Being in a sorority helped me go through some family issues as well as adjust to

# HardisonInk.com

---

college. I became more confident. I even learned parliamentary procedure...how groups worked...how to work together with people. I discovered I could be a leader, too,” said French.

At Stetson there were no sorority houses. The campus sororities each had a room on the top floor of the library where they held their meetings, special ceremonies and events. “The sororities I remember being at Stetson when I was there were Alpha Xi Delta, Pi Beta Phi, Delta Delta Delta and ZTA,” recalls French. All the sororities “encouraged involvement in all areas of campus life.”

And another treasure of sorority life for French was lifelong friendships. “Pat Maxie Wilson...Joyce Blackwell...Maureen Peterson...these girls have been my friends since I started college,” said French. “I remember going to Pat’s. Her family had a lodge down in South Florida, and we went horseback riding.” (Wilson and Peterson were in her wedding.)

Daytona Beach was only 20 miles away from DeLand, and going there was quick and easy...especially when your Zeta sister had a car. “And Pat had a car,” said French, chuckling.

After a year in Chaudoin Hall, French relocated to Stetson Hall with suitemates, “Ragsie” Ragsdale, Gloria MacLendon and Wilson. “They were music majors, so I would help with arranging the flowers in the chapel of Elizabeth Hall where the recitals were held,” roomie #4 remembers. (As a recipient of funding from the Southern Baptist Association, Stetson required weekly chapel for all students. The seats were numbered, and each student was expected to be in his/her seat. Those who missed were reprimanded.)

**Seen here is a photograph taken by Frank Anderson of Anderson Photography in Gainesville, a younger Mary Gene Bailey French smiles in her engagement photo. She had accepted the marriage proposal of Royal “Frenchie” French, whom she met first in Georgia before finding herself in college with him at Stetson. They married in 1948.**

So when did Mr. French come into the picture? Mrs. French met Royal “Frenchie” French in Valdosta, where he was born, after he was discharged from the military at the end of World War II. They enjoyed a Coke together at the local drug store...and that was that.

Then, as Fate would have it, their paths crossed again at Stetson. Mr. French had enrolled, using the G.I. Bill to pay for college, and one day, leaving a class, lo and behold! he and



# HardisonInk.com

---

Mrs. French ran into each other. He invited her to the Sailors' Ball, and that was that! This Delta Sigma Phi had met his ZTA love! Together, they thoroughly enjoyed their college experience.



**First Methodist Church of Williston in 1948 became the First United Methodist Church of Williston today. Here in 1948, the interior of the First {United} Methodist Church of Williston provides the backdrop for the wedding photo of Mary Gene Bailey and Royal French. Two of the bridal attendants were her ZTA sisters.**

Keeping up their grades was always an important issue for sororities and fraternities, so study times were crucial. “And I was thrilled to have been honored to be the ZTA representative to be the Orange Bowl Queen contestant from Stetson. Even though an Alpha Xi won, I loved every minute of it.”

Since she'd begun college first, she graduated first, leaving Stetson after graduation to begin her teaching career in nearby Sanford. “I'd accepted a job in West Palm Beach but later declined because I wanted to be near Frenchie.” They married in 1948. She continued teaching in Sanford until Mr. French graduated in 1950.

“Frenchie moved to Williston first because I had to finish up the school year in Sanford. His first job was selling tractors, then he went into car sales...Chrysler, Plymouth, Dodge and Pontiac...and even appliances. Pat Hartley [former sheriff of Levy County] was one of his salesmen,” explained Mrs. French.

Except for the few years in the early 1950s when two children, Debra and Chip, joined the family, Mrs. French taught school at Williston Elementary. “I did teach at Tiny Tot Kindergarten, when Chip was four, before returning to the public school,” said French. This private program was funded by the Williston Junior Woman's Club (Mrs. French was a charter member of the Juniors.) and later disbanded after public kindergarten was incorporated into the public school system.

She retired from teaching in 1985. “I am still so surprised that former students still remember me!” said Mrs. French, with a smile. Former students remember her, indeed!

# HardisonInk.com

---

“A sweet and kind teacher, she never raised her voice. Always had a smile,” Alma Douglas Brinkman recalled.

Elaine Hall Breeding concurred, noting that Mrs. French was one of her favorite teachers, “so sweet and kind.”

Beth Weeks Webb noted, “She was my teacher in 3rd grade. I remember her teaching us how to do subtraction with regrouping, you know, the ‘old fashioned’ way!”

Mrs. French taught V. E. “Pug” Whitehurst three years – kindergarten, first, and third grade. “Mrs. French always expected the best from everyone and treated everyone with the same fairness. She put a lot into her teaching and wanted everyone to succeed. I never heard her raise her voice, but when she talked everyone listened. I remember her slow Southern drawl, and she still has the same sweet voice. All my memories were good, and I appreciate her being such a great teacher during the three years she taught me.”

His older sister, Betty Ann Whitehurst Arnold, also had Mrs. French in third grade. “She was one of the sweetest teachers I had...and she still is a SWEET lady,” said Arnold.

“She was sweet and kind. Very patient and loving with her students. She took the time to help anyone that didn’t understand. We all loved her and still do. She is one in a million,” said Holly Gardner.

A colleague, Donna Helping Lovvorn, remembers, “She was the Title I teacher, I think, when I went to work at JBE [Joyce Bullock Elementary]. She was very helpful to me as I started my career. She was always smiling and pleasant to everyone!”

Former student, Charlene Breeden Couvillon, who also became a teacher and later a principal, reminisced about the impact someone such as Mrs. French has upon young people. “I was lucky to have Mrs. French twice-- kindergarten and 4th grade. She was always so nicely dressed and wore the prettiest lipstick. The ‘thing’ I remember most about her class is her reading to us. She had the best way of reading a story. The Bobbsey Twins seemed like real people when she read to us. When I started teaching 7th grade, I started each day by reading from a novel for five minutes. My goal was to sound just like Mrs. French. When I taught seniors, I read aloud to them, too. I have often

# HardisonInk.com



heard that as teachers we copy the techniques and styles of our best teachers. I know I did, and Mrs. French is at the top of the list.”

Reflecting back on her time at Stetson, Mrs. French reiterated just how important being in a sorority was for her. “Being a Zeta was a life saver for me...I loved every one of my sisters.” It is obvious that this love has been returned, not only by her “sisters,” but also by a great many folks in her adopted hometown of Williston.

Words from the Creed of Zeta Tau Alpha come to mind when reflecting upon Mrs. French’s life: “...striving ever to make our lives a symphony of high ideals, devotion to the Right, the Good and the True, without a discordant note, remembering always that the foundation precept of Zeta Tau Alpha was love, ‘the greatest of all things.’” Congratulations to this special lady (and my ZTA sister)!

**Memorabilia from college includes a picture of the Zeta Tau Alpha crest and a ZTA bracelet. The fraternity was founded Oct. 15, 1898, at Longwood College in Farmville, Va.**

# HardisonInk.com

---

**This close-up photo of Mrs. French's certificate and white violet charm reveals her initiation date as well as the name of her chapter, Beta Psi. In 1995, she received a similar certificate and white violet pin for her 50 years of membership.**

