

The Snapshot

By Sandy McCune Westin

While my mother and grandmother chatted downstairs in Grandma's pie- and coffee-scented kitchen, I climbed the steep steps to my grandmother's attic. I looked forward to this childhood privilege whenever Mother and I would make the 20 mile trip from our farm in southwest Washington to her mother's home in Vancouver. In those modern days of the late 1950's, Grandma's home was a page torn from the 19th Century. The hypnotically swaying fringe of small glass beads decorating the bedside lamp nudged me to sleep at nap time. A scent of dust and mothballs permeated her dark living room. A well-used treadle sewing machine stood ready in the corner for Grandma's next project. Large, oval, hand-braided wool rugs made from scraps of old blankets and coats lay on the floor, as many as three deep in places.

"Why do you cover the floor with so many rugs, Grandma?", I ventured one day.

"Why, child, that's because walking on them is the best way to get them to lay down flat once when I'm done making them," she had responded. "I just never get around to taking them up."

The hot, stuffy and dimly lit attic enveloped me like a comfy old quilt. Under its steep gables I explored the contents of old trunks and boxes filled with ghosts of a time long past. In one battered cardboard box I found a collection of sheet music illustrated with women in funny hats and fancy scrollwork. Some had "Ralph" written on them, the name of my grandfather who had died a decade before. On top of the stack of music was a very special find – a shiny metal slide flute – which I quietly experimented with. Grandpa must have been in a band!

Sitting cross-legged on the dusty floor, I creaked open a small chest which held albums of old photos, some with faded pastel colors. Names were scratched on their backs in thin lines. One without such a comment caught my eye - my mother as a beautiful young woman, her hair a short-cropped, dark and wavy bob. She held a baby in her arms and looked into the camera with her chin tucked down, a bashful smile on her face as if to say, "Look what I did!" Puzzled, I peered at the snapshot in the dim light for a long time, examining the image of a tall young man who had his left arm around her in a protective, possessive way. That wasn't my father. Confused, I scrambled over to the steep staircase and carefully made my way down, clutching the photo in my hand.

Daring to interrupt my mother and grandmother's coffee chatter, I innocently pointed to the small snapshot and asked, "Mother? Who is this?" Mother's eyes widened in a look of horrified shock, quickly followed by a cold look as solid as a door slammed shut. Her crisp rebuff startled me. "We'll not

talk about it now. Go back upstairs.” Confused, I started to say “But...?” only to be met with a stern look that clearly said I’d best not ask further. A suppressed chortle came from my grandmother. I had stumbled on a mystery!

An hour or so later as we drove home, I timidly tested the waters.

“Can you tell me about that man now?” I chanced.

Mother made a brief and brusque statement in a tone that made it clear there would be no further explanation.

“I was married once before I married your father. Your sisters, Betty and Ruth, were born of that marriage. The baby in the picture is Betty.”

Startled at this totally unexpected news, I quietly stared out the window at the scenery going by. Two of my five older sisters were not really my full sisters? The story of Cinderella crossed my mind, but wait, those were stepsisters. How was that different, I wondered.

Later, I stood before our family’s piano and examined the five photos hanging above it, my sisters’ high school graduation portraits. Thanks to the brief introduction to genetics gained in my 7th grade health class, I considered how Mother’s revelation might explain why my two eldest sisters didn’t look entirely like either my other three sisters or myself. Their noses were longer, their hair darker, their teeth straighter, and they didn’t look near as happy as the rest of us. I couldn’t help but wonder what other secrets I, as the youngest and latest to join the family, was not supposed to know.

Over the nearly six decades since I discovered that skeleton in our family closet (or attic), I came to understand a good deal more than I could have at the age of twelve. Some of the story I learned from my sisters in our own conversations over coffee. Some my mother would tell me much later when she was in her twilight years and less guarded in sharing stories about her life. With a degree of fictionalized mortar built around the factual bricks I was able to garner, I pieced together an understanding of my mother’s early life.

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I, Marie Edith McMannama, was born the only child to Della and William McMannama just six years after the turn of the Twentieth Century, and eleven years after Washington officially became a state. It was mostly horses and carriages you would see on the roads and streets then, occasionally frightened by the noisy new automobiles. The huffing and puffing Northern Pacific Railroad was always an exciting thing to see coming through town, tying the Pacific Northwest to distant parts of the country.

I graduated from Stadium High School in Tacoma at the age of 16 and went on to attend the University of Puget Sound. I had hoped to become a teacher, but when a handsome young man swept me off my feet and ardently proposed marriage, my plans were interrupted. Three years later, I was busy raising two young daughters, one still in diapers. He worked in a Tacoma bank and was very active in the local Masonic order. The principles of the latter apparently escaped him, however.

One morning shortly after the crash of October 1929, when he left for work he secretly took a suitcase of essentials with him, along with all the cash I had been saving for a washing machine. I had dreamt of being able to have a wringer washing machine of my own to reduce the drudgery of all that two children, a husband and home required.

Later that same day I was visited by officers of the bank where he worked. Hats in hand, and with cold, unfeeling eyes, they stated abruptly that my husband had embezzled a great deal of money from the bank and disappeared. Did I know he was going to do this? No! Did I know where he had gone? I had no idea.

After they left, I leaned against the door in dismay, then dashed to the kitchen to check the sugar jar where my carefully collected savings were stored. Not a penny. Later I went downtown to draw some funds from our bank account. It was cleaned out as well. I had nothing left but bills and two small, hungry mouths to feed.

After the first month, I realized that decisions had to be made. I hated to do it, but with no other options available to me I moved the three of us in with my mother and father. He was a 64 year old carpenter at the time, 15 years older than my mother. She would help with babysitting while I searched for work. It also provided us with a home, though there was precious little room or privacy for any of us. I was grateful to find a job as a gift wrapper at the local Meier and Frank department store. Its meager pay, plus my parents, would at least keep us alive.

A few months later, I learned my husband had been arrested and was in jail. I dressed the girls and myself in our finest Sunday clothes and we took the trolley downtown to see him. I was hoping for at least some show of contrition, and to learn how he planned to provide for his family. Instead, I found him laughing and chatting with several of his Masonic buddies. He hardly paid the girls and me any attention.

His lodge brothers managed to wangle a deal with the judge (who was also a Masonic brother) to get him off with just a small fine and a promise to leave the state, which he promptly

did. He left no word of how I could reach him, nor anything in the way of child support. I waited a year, but found I had no choice but to file for divorce and start a new life alone. Being a divorcee in 1930 was not only rare, it was seen as a disgrace!

I had known Gene McCune back in high school and remembered dancing with him often at our Friday night socials. We were friends, though I would not go out with him since he was a year behind me in school. I laugh when I remember having him riding me to school on the handlebars of his bicycle.

After graduating from Stadium High, Gene had gone on to attend Washington State College to become a veterinarian. That career choice had been a compromise to satisfy his mother, since she had wanted him to become a doctor but he wanted to be a farmer. His father being the President of the Tacoma Chamber of Commerce, his mother enjoyed her position as part of Tacoma society. Her sense of propriety was only somewhat pacified by his career choice, but at least he would be some kind of a doctor.

Gene had kept tabs on me through our common friends, so knew of my situation. When he graduated from WSC in 1931, he looked me up and forthrightly said, "You wouldn't go out with me in high school because I was too young for you then. Will you now?" I hesitantly said yes, and in due time he proposed, to which I responded "But I have two children. That wouldn't be fair to you." His response was, "That gives me a ready-made family. I love you and want the whole package. I will adopt your two girls and make them my own," so I said yes and we started our new life together.

Gene's mother was even less enthusiastic about her son's choice of a divorcee as his wife than she had been about his choice of career. When it became clear I had divorced because my first husband had become a convicted criminal, his mother would offer only a compromise. She would accept me and my children on the condition that we would not be welcomed as part of the greater McCune family henceforth. The other members would know nothing of Gene's family, nor he of theirs. That was a harsh sentence, but we have lived on those terms ever since. It was a small price to pay for the happiness we have known together.

My father and mother went on to grow their family to a total of six daughters, just as she had predicted as a high school student. They enjoyed nearly fifty years together before his passing in 1978 at the age of 72, and her own in 1999 at 93, but to this day there is no awareness of the entire extent of the McCune family by any of its members on either side of that divide.

As I became increasingly aware of my family's backstory, it cleared up some mysteries yet brought others into sharp focus. My mother had been married twice, and her own mother had remarried after being widowed at the age of 50. Of the six of us girls, only two managed to have storybook "ever after" marriages. An eloped first marriage of one was annulled through our father's intervention; another experienced two divorces and one widowhood; the third had a series of divorces and remarriages, as have I. Rather than giving us compassionate counsel and encouragement borne of her own hard experience, Mother always saw her daughters' news of yet another divorce as not only regrettable, but somehow as scandalous evidence of a lack of character.

The world had changed around us during those years since Mother's own painful experience as a young woman. Like my grandmother's braided rugs, Mother had hoped and expected her daughters' lives would somehow settle down and conform to the ideals of her own upbringing. While that had not played out as she had anticipated, our lives did show a persistent commitment to finding a marriage as happy and solid as our parents'. Most of us were fortunate enough to eventually do so, each in our own time and way, cobbling together the scraps of whatever life brought us.
