

Dedication

This book is dedicated to three individuals who have had significant influence in my life. One happens to be my Grandmother, one is a past President of the United States, and the other is my Lord, Jesus Christ.

To my Grandmother Cleo Shockley, who demonstrated to me that love and a kind spirit are the ways to a peaceful life. My fond memories, and the lessons I unknowingly received from her, have and always shall be a guiding light for my life here on earth. My boyhood memories of “going to Grandma’s”, and the subsequent years visiting her with my own family, yielded a true love for this quiet, loving woman, and the beautiful country near Iberia, Missouri.

To President Jimmy Carter, who through observing his life and learning from the books he has written since he left the Oval Office, has demonstrated to me that every elderly individual is so unique and has so much additional potential, not only to live an enjoyable life, but to significantly influence individuals and even possibly nations.

And finally to Jesus Christ, my daily companion, who always loves me, guides me, and puts up with my crazy ways.

Introduction

I first met Helen Bybee in the autumn of 2001. At the time, she was a resident of 'Wilshire at Lakewood', an elder care facility in Lee's Summit, Missouri. I had been visiting my wife's grandmother, Hildred Clark who was also a resident at Wilshire. Sitting with Grandmother Clark one day at the noontime meal, I glanced up and saw Helens radiant smile. On subsequent trips to visit Grandmother Clark, I would often see Helen and make it a point to smile at her and say hello. I took note one afternoon at the similarity between Helen and my Grandmother Cleo Shockley. It seemed that both woman possessed the same gentle spirit that so easily slays me, and enlists my deep honor and respect. A short time later, I introduced myself to Helen and we had a wonderful conversation.

Towards the end of 2001, I decided to pick three areas of my life that I wanted to focus on. The first was to study pasta. I wanted to learn the different types, how to make it by hand, and eventually create delicious meals for my family and friends. The second was to exercise more. I had turned 41 and Mother Nature was definitely winning. And finally the third area was writing. Prior to this time I had many people in my life encourage me to write a book, or just keep a journal.

So it was during this time that the idea came to me, that maybe I should write a story about Helens life. One afternoon I mustered up the courage to walk into Helens room to discuss this with her. I didn't realize that her daughter was in the room, but it was too late. I stood before both trying to explain what had been going through my mind, and how I thought that I would like to take a stab at writing Helens life story. The questions which immediately followed came from Helens naturally protective daughter and were, 'who are you', 'do you have any experience', 'why my mother', and 'what will you do with this book'. During which interrogation, Helen just sat there smiling. Finally a deal was struck, and that is how this great work began.

The information in Part 1 of this book is the result of weekly interviews with Helen, which I have transcribed as best as I could. Part 2 is quite a different story, as you shall see.

Part One

Beginnings

I was born on March 3, 1911 in Flat River, Missouri. Flat River is a small town about 75 miles south of St. Louis, Missouri, and it is known primarily for its mining history. (It must have been something in its day, as evidenced by the following song, written and sung by Ferlin Husky).

Flat River, MO

Flat River, MO, Flat River, MO.

It's been a many day since I watched her waters flow

If I ain't a got the money to pay

I'm gonna walk every step of the way

Cause I gotta go, back to Flat River, MO.

The clothes on my back have been friends with the ground too long

And my foolish dream of wealth and fame is gone

Each day the hand of failure, wakes me up at the break of dawn

And tells me to go back home to Flat River, MO.

I wonder, if Mary's heart has ventured and grown fond

I wonder, if the baby calls her Mom

At night when the city lights and neon signs come on

They don't shine like the moon back home over Flat River, MO.

Family

My parents were Mildred Pritchard McDaniel and Horatio Herbert Hamilton.

My Mother was a good work. She was very pretty with dark hair. I would describe her as little and quick, very efficient and hospitable. She was spunky, a very hard worker, most women were back then of course, they had to be. She was 5'2" and weighed 90 lbs. She had 4 sisters and 2 brothers, one named Grover Cleveland.

My Father was born in Dark County, Ohio. I remember his birthday was June 22 because that was when the wheat started to be ready. I remember his nickname was Resh.

I had two brothers. Harry, who was two years older than me, and Norman who was 22 months younger. Both of my brothers are now deceased. Norman died of a heart attack at age 63 and Harry lived into his seventies.

We were closer to Mother parents, the McDaniel's.

My grandfather on my fathers' side was Joseph Hamilton.

Early Days

My parents moved to Detroit when I was very young and father worked in a grocery store.

My parents later moved near Harper, Kansas when I was about 7 years old. We actually lived half way between Harper and Anthony, in the country, on a farm.

My fathers' brother had a wheat threshing machine, and father would go from farm to farm during the harvest and thresh the wheat. Father also raised wheat on shares. Mother said she couldn't kill a chicken, but she did raise 600 chicks a year in an incubator, and later sold the eggs and the chickens. Daddy was the one who killed the chickens; it wasn't hard for him at all. Mother never did like it much on the farm in Harper. And father never really liked farming much.

My fathers' sister also lived in Harper. She had three daughters and I remember they all had long hair. They would let me comb their hair and they would pretend I was their little sister. I remember they had a neighbor name Gillespie, who had a daughter my age named Margaret. We used to play jacks together.

Schooling

I went to kindergarten in Detroit. I remember there were two boys who would fight to see who got to walk to school with me.

When we moved back to the farm near Harper, Kansas, I began attending a small one-room country school called the Enterprise Country School. My first grade teacher was Mrs. Rider. She had white hair, which she wrapped in a bun, and she always wore a high-necked blouse. The Enterprise County School let you go as fast as you could. I finished 1st and 2nd grade the first year, and 3rd and 4th grade the second year. It took me a whole year for 5th grade. The school had an old organ, and I loved to sing songs. It had a large field next to it that the children would play on. It also had a cistern outside that we would pump water from. My fondest memory though of this time was picking the little blue flowers that grew behind the school.

My parents moved into Harper at the beginning of my 6th grade classes. That is where I met Sally. I had been sick a few days, and during this time new neighbors moved in, which I didn't realize. I found out later that they had a daughter my age. I was so excited to know her that I ran down the road to meet her. We are still good friends. Her name is Sally Dusenberry. She lives in a Wichita nursing home now. We still write letters. She married Keith. They had 72 years together.

Sally and her parents lived on what was called the County Farm- a large care center, with 22 rooms. We would play there a lot. We would cut pictures out of old Sears and Roebuck catalogs, and we would make "families". There were a few older people that I remember. One was Big John – we acted like we were scared of him.

I attend Harper schools until 11th grade. Then my parents moved to Kingman, Kansas where I graduated. We lived at Avenue C West. It was a much larger town, with about 4000 people living there.

Church

My parents were both Christians. We never missed a Sunday. I remember going to church from the time my feet touched the pews till the time they touched the floor.

We attended the Christian church at Harper. I remember the choir, Sunday School classes and the occasional potluck dinners. I still remember the day I made confessions. I was baptized in the church.

We had revivals 2 or 3 times a year with visiting evangelists. Churches would attend each other's revivals. Some had hell, fire and brimstone preachers. I still remember those!

After church, all the family would come out to the farm for Sunday dinner.

Working Years

I graduated from Kingman High School on March 17, 1928. Then I began working at a Ford Agency called the A. D. Rayl Motor Company. I worked for the owner Ashton D. Rayl. Ashton's father was an accomplished bricklayer who laid the brick in many homes. The model A was then being sold. My work included general secretarial duties such as stenography. During this period I took advanced classes in the secretarial field. I worked there 7 years.

During this period, I also began to pursue my interest in art by attending night courses at Wichita. I had a friend whose father owned the Chevrolet Agency and she used to get new cars all the time. She would often drive me to class. I took art classes for 2 years. We would draw real models. Sometimes there they were even nude. This was awkward at first, but I got used to it.

Art Hiatus

After working at 7 years at Rayl, I quit to further pursue my interest in art. I moved to Kansas City and began attending the Kansas City Art Institute during the summer session.

I roomed in a 3-story home near 39th and McGee. The owners were Mr. and Mrs. Harbrook, who were in their eighties. Mr. Harbrook had done all the plumbing at Union Station. The house was loaded with nice furniture and very roomy. It was also within walking distance of the Institute. And I remember there was a Katz store on the corner. My roommate was Laurie Baird.

This was a very happy time of life for me. It might have just been the new freedom, but I was just enjoying art and people so very much. I remember trips to the zoo and the Nelson Atkins Museum. I was most happy drawing.

At the Institute we would paint nudes, onions, animals, Egyptian figures – everything you could think of. My daughter in Springfield has a lot of my paintings – she is an artist also.

After my first summer at the Institute, I was awarded a scholarship for another year. This was good because I had run out of money.

Dating

My first boyfriend was a young man by the name of Harold Hilbig. I met him when I was living in Harper. He was very bashful, and had twin sisters.

Although Harold was my first boyfriend, I fell in love for the first time when I moved to Kingman, Kansas in my senior year and met George Edward Burket, whom I called Ned. We dated on and off for about four years. Ned left to attend college in Santa Barbara, and he later went to medical school at Kansas University. He is now retired and lives in Wichita. We still correspond, and he still holds a special place in my heart.

While I was at the Kansas City Art Institute, I met and began dating Frank Steinman. Frank was a nice man. He once gave a pair of red boots and a straw hat to my niece Lucille (Normans daughter) when she came to visit me. He later married my best friend after I left the Institute.

Back To Work

After studying at the Art Institute for 2 years, I went back to Kingman. I took a job as a girl-Friday, filling in temporarily for secretaries who were sick. I usually worked at attorney's offices. I eventually was hired on full time at the Cragun Abstract Company. Marlin Wallace was the owner then. He had purchased the company from Oren Murphy. I worked there for 4 years. While there I did a variety of thing including writing letters and filing abstracts at the courthouse. I still remember the large ladders I had to climb to retrieve or replace abstracts.

During my days at Cragun, I met B. A. Welch, a banker in Kingman. He was later appointed by the Governor, to the position of Kansas State Bank Commissioner. Mr. Welch asked me to come to Topeka, Kansas to be his personal secretary at the capital in Topeka. I took him up on his offer.

While working in Topeka, Pearl Harbor was bombed. The Governor called all his staff into his office to hear the Presidents announcement. Everyone was shocked. Patriotism spread quickly. I remember all the boys disappeared overnight. Harry was overage, and Norman had a child so they both got exemptions.

I joined the USO. The girls would often go to dances at Forbes Air base. Each person in the USO gave their unique contribution. Mine was doing sketches. I would sketch the soldiers and then give them the pictures. They usually only took me 20 minutes. I did this one night per week.

Match Maker

Upon High School graduation, my brother Harry and a friend named Bob Wright decided to head west, doing odd jobs along the way including picking apples. When they returned Harry began working at the Rayl Motor Company in the parts department. He began dating a girl that I didn't like very much and I told him so. He said, "Well why don't you find me another then", and I said, "I will". I introduced Harry to Belma Cross. She was ushering at a High school event where Helen was then a senior. I pointed out Belma to Harry and he said, "that fuzzy haired girl?". Well he must have meant it as a compliment because they went on to be married 50 years. They had no children of their own, but adopted twin boys and girls.

My brother Norman was introduced to his future wife by a friend at church named Velma Amerman. She told me that she had a niece named Lucille Hall who lived in Kansas City, and if Norman came to visit, she would introduce her to him. That introduction finally occurred and it was if two firecrackers exploded when they laid eyes on each other. They were married and Norman worked at a grocery store and later a hardware store. They had one daughter who looked like Elizabeth Taylor. She is still living with 4 children of her own in Lawrence, Kansas.

Part Two

A Turn of Events

My interviews with Helen were proceeding well during this time. I was really enjoying listening to this very sweet lady, and I was amazed at how clear her memory was. I felt we were becoming good friends. Then, a very unfortunate event happened – I was laid off from my job. This was quite a shock to me as this was the first time that this had happened to me.

After much thought, on my next visit to see Helen, I explained that due to these circumstances that I would have to focus my time on developing my resume and looking for another job, and that I would come for further interviews as time permitted.

Unfortunately, my job search was a very emotionally draining and long drawn out process. It took me almost 4 months to find another decent job. The weeks and months since my last visit with Helen began to multiply, and after a time, I was quite frankly, too embarrassed to go back. So I didn't. This is one of the decisions in my life that I still regret to this day.

Then one Sunday morning a few years after I had stopped visiting Helen, I saw the following in the Kansas City Star Obituaries:

**Helen Penrod Bybee passed away on
November 5, 2004 at the age of 92.
Memorial services were held in the
home of Carol Unnewehr. Her ashes
were scattered at Brown Cemetery in
Harrisonville, Missouri.**

Support From My Family

Later that day I shared with my family how I had discovered that Helen had passed away. They all understood years ago, how I was embarrassed for not going back to see Helen. And now that I had read Helens Obituary, they all understood my sadness.

But they encouraged me to go back through my notes and do two things.

The first was to write the book about Helens life, understanding that it would be a very limited snapshot. But they thought that based on my descriptions of the time I had spent with Helen, that hers was a life that others should hear about. And maybe the family would appreciate. This I have summarized in Part One.

The other thing my family encouraged me to do was to summarize what I had learned.

What I Have Learned

Life is unpredictable.

That lovely people do inhabit this earth.

That I shouldn't hide from mistakes, but face them head on.

That Helen Bybee was my friend.

