

Oral History Project – The Women in My Mother's Family

(Note: I wrote a lot here to put down on paper as much as possible what my grandmother has told me. This written record is the only one that exists for my mother's family. My grandmother is the only person who can pass on the remaining bits of the oral history of both her family and my grandfather's family. My grandmother and I enjoyed this assignment.)

My mother's family has been in Southern California since the late 1880s and, although the women in her family did not have a life as physically demanding as Lily Casey's, their lives were also filled with struggles and disappointments. On my mother's side, I have one grandmother, one great-grandmother who died in 1944 at the age of 38 and one great-grandmother who died in 1975 at the age of 70. The information I have gathered about my female relatives in the US comes from conversations with my grandmother and my grandfather. From listening to my grandmother's stories, I notice she speaks about the women in the family but rarely mentions a man. Divorce and absent fathers and husbands seem common. Knowing only the stability of my parents' marriage and that of my grandparents', it surprises me to hear of divorce, single parent families and mothers and fathers who died relatively young.

I have a close relationship with my maternal grandmother, Claire R. Even though she is on the American side of my family, I call her "Oma." Oma was born in Los Angeles in 1938, and her childhood was significantly impacted by the death of her mother, Kate, when she was only five. Kate died of a stomach illness that had afflicted her for several years. After her mother's death, Oma was raised by her father's family and in particular by her Aunt Florence, the older sister of her father. Oma's father was a merchant marine and almost never at home.

Oma does not know a lot about her mother. After Kate's death, Oma did not have any contact with her mother's family. Oma does know Kate did not have a high school education or a skill. Kate was, however, relatively well off because her father invested in real estate and had given her some property. The financial situation of Kate's family enabled them to avoid hardships other families faced during the Depression and WWII. Kate's marriage to Oma's father was her second marriage. Kate also had two sons from her first marriage, which had ended in divorce. Shortly before her own death, Kate was devastated by the death of her son on a warship during WWII in 1942.

Oma and her younger sister, Katherine, spent their childhood going back and forth between their Aunt Florence's house during the week and their grandmother's house on the weekends in a normal working class neighborhood. Oma's grandmother, Isabel, had 14 children, but Oma only knew seven of them. Aunt Florence was married and had one daughter. She had a nice house, and Oma shared a bedroom there with her sister and they even had a small black and white television in their room. Aunt Florence could drive, and she worked as a waitress with one of her sisters at Paramount Studios. Oma remembers they both got good tips at work. At her grandmother's tiny house, Oma and her sister slept in one bedroom with their grandmother and two aunts. One aunt was divorced at least three times and had no children and the other aunt was divorced with one older child. One of these aunts made gold-leafed items, such as frames, for a company. Oma had no chores to do while growing up, but at her grandmother's she helped in the garden and took care of the ducks and chickens.

Oma and her sister went to church every Sunday with their godmother, Aunt Sarah, who was another sister of their father's. They were both baptized in the Catholic Church and had their first Communion. My Oma, however, is not a very religious person. She did not like listening to church services in Latin and never felt connected to the church.

Although Oma feels she was never integrated into her father's family, she was not neglected and did not feel ashamed of her circumstances. She lived in the same manner as others living in her area. When I described to Oma how Lily Casey lived, she found it hard to imagine such a life. A big difference seems to be that Oma's family was in a city. Oma's family always had a house, electricity, toilets and a black car. While growing up, Oma also always had enough to

eat. She remembers eating fruit from her grandmother's garden, such as peaches, apricots and strawberries, and a lot of tomatoes. Oma has happy memories of her childhood. She loved her dog, and there were a lot of neighborhood children to play with in the street. Oma also went to the movies and to the beach a lot.

No one in Oma's family put an emphasis on education, but Oma did graduate from high school. Going to college was never an option for Oma. Oma did not even consider getting a job that required a skill or more education. Oma got her driver's license when she was 16, but she did not get a car. While she was in high school, Oma worked for the telephone company. After high school Oma got a job with the City of Los Angeles and shortly thereafter she married my Opa. Oma was 18 and Opa was 20. Oma stopped working when she was pregnant with her first child in 1959. Soon thereafter Oma was busy raising three children while also fixing up houses she and my Opa bought from the bank and re-sold for a profit. Oma remembers putting her three children in one room to play while painting the rest of the house. Like Lily, Oma sees herself as my Opa's partner in marriage.

Oma does not remember many political events up to the 1970s. Besides knowing that her father served in WWI at the age of 16 and that her half-brother was killed in WWII, Oma does not remember anyone talking about the World Wars or the Depression. Once Oma got married, she was busy raising children who were born at the very end of the baby boom. Oma did not participate in demonstrations in the 60s because she was not interested in such political events. Oma does remember her neighbor rushed out to the street when President Kennedy was shot. The first time Oma voted was for Kennedy in the 1960 Presidential Election. Oma also remembers Opa mentioning someone at work knew someone who was fighting in Vietnam or who had died fighting. Oma and Opa, however, did not know anyone directly involved in the Vietnam War. Oma also did not have any interest in the Apollo Space Missions and did not follow them in the news. In the early years of her marriage, Oma lived very frugally and kept track of every penny. Oma does not remember her first airplane trip, but when she moved to New York in 1967 for a year with Opa and my mother, she travelled by train from California. It was probably in the 1970s Oma started to travel by plane.

While Oma was growing up in one section of Los Angeles, my Opa was not too far away in another section of Los Angeles. Opa's family, however, suffered more through the hard times. Opa's mother, Mary, was born in 1905 in Ohio and died in 1975 in Los Angeles. Mary had some schooling but did not go to high school. She was a skilled seamstress and milliner. Mary moved from Ohio to Chicago and then came to Los Angeles. While in her 20s, Mary divorced her first husband in 1933 even though she was pregnant at the time. Mary's mother pressured her to have an abortion, which she did. Unfortunately, due to inappropriate medical care, Mary became partially paralyzed as a result of the abortion and lost her ability to talk and some movement in her hands. At the time, Mary was living next door to Frank, an actor and beach lifeguard, and he taught her how to speak again.

Mary and Frank got married in 1934 in Mexico and had my Opa, M. C., two years later. Unfortunately, soon thereafter Mary's mother committed suicide, and in 1941 Frank died at work at Columbia Ranch (later Columbia Studios) from a heart attack. Just as Oma lost a parent when she was five, Opa lost his father exactly on his fifth birthday. In Opa's family, however, there was no one to take care of him or his mother. In addition, Opa's mother was not allowed to collect any pension money or social security of her husband's because their Mexican marriage was not recognized in the US. After Frank's death, Mary sold everything she could, such as the car and Frank's tools, for whatever money she could get. Without a car, my Opa and his mother usually walked everywhere and did not take the bus too often.

Mary was not able to find work as a seamstress due to her paralyzed hands. However, with WWII going on she was able to get a job at a defense plant in Los Angeles. Opa says the war was their "saving grace". They were very poor and lived in a very tiny house. They spread newspapers over the holes in the linoleum floor, and Opa remembers lying on the floor reading the newspaper. Mary also cleaned houses and Opa took the bus with her to the houses. Marion did not hesitate to put Opa to work at the age of five. He worked as a child actor at the local studios, sold magazines door to door, and sold newspapers on a busy street corner. Opa also

picked apricots from local trees to sell door to door and berries from bushes in the alley to bring home. Even men sold newspapers at this time because there were no jobs. At times, Opa delivered newspapers on his bike door to door before school and then in the evenings sold newspapers on the street corner. For the morning paper route, the papers were dropped off at 4 a.m. and Mary rolled the papers and put a rubber band on them for him. Opa delivered the papers by bike before school. When Opa was in junior high school, he hitchhiked to school and home from school to save time.

Opa and his mother had it tough. Sometimes they ate only ketchup sandwiches or pancakes at night. After her husband's death, Mary allowed her father to move in with them so he could help pay the bills even though she did not like him. Her father worked at a deli and was sometimes able to bring home meat, which was rationed. Meat stamps had to be used to get meat. A lot of things were rationed at this time, such as tires, gas and food. There was also a black market for everything. During the war, Mary's father was a stamp collector, and he received mail from all over the world, including Germany and Argentina. The FBI came to the house one day and took Mary's father for questioning about his mail, but he was returned home the same day. When WWII was over, Opa remembers there was a celebration in the street. Mary's job at the defense plant ended, but she found a job at a local bakery sewing kitchen mitts and working in the shop.

Mary was very frugal. Opa's Aunt Louise, his father's sister, used to say: "Mary could bite a nickel in half." Mary talked to Opa about the Depression and how bad it was. Once when Opa bought some model airplanes from the store, his mother made him return them. Opa told me he was always scared as a kid. He was often in fights, mostly with Mexicans who fought in gangs. He remembers once an older Mexican man stole his stack of newspapers and beat him up until one half of his face was black. Other times older kids would beat up Opa and steal his bike. Opa remembers people telling him to "go peddle your newspapers, boy". Opa thinks his mother and him survived the tough years only because they were both constantly working.

Opa took the train twice with his mother to Chicago and Ohio to visit her relatives. Mary never flew in an airplane, but she did learn to drive a car. She also enjoyed going to the movies. In the late 1950s, Mary's house was confiscated to make room for a freeway, and she was able to buy another house in a somewhat better area. Even after Opa had a decent job, Mary never asked him for money. She saved her money and was able to take care of herself.

Mary did not place much emphasis on education. Opa went to school, but more importantly, he always had at least one job. Work was very important to Mary, because that meant survival. Doing homework did not put food on the table. Mary did not even encourage Opa to finish high school but he did. Opa joined the Marines at 17 while in high school and one week after high school graduation he left home for the Marines. He stayed in the Marines for two years during peaceful times. Opa says joining the Marines was the best thing he ever did. In the Marines he realized how important education was and for the first time was able to see a completely different way of life. When Opa returned home from the Marines, he remembers some friends from the Marines came over to his house and were shocked to see how he lived. They were rich kids from the Midwest and after they saw where he lived they avoided him.

After the Marines, Opa attended college while also working at night. His tuition was partly paid by the government under a law similar to the G.I. Bill. Opa's mother was against him continuing his education and told him he should consider taking the full-time job he was offered at the packing company where he worked part-time. His mother was not excited about him going to college. Nevertheless, Opa chose to finish college. After graduating from college in 1960, Opa got a job in finance. Through hard work and with the work ethic he learned from his mother, Opa has been at that job ever since and is still working there. Opa was the first one to get a college degree in both his family and Oma's family. None of my great-grandparents even had a high school education.

My mother, Lynn, is the youngest of three children and was born shortly after the baby boom. In comparison to her parents, my mother had a stable family life. She went to local public schools, played with neighborhood kids and was left alone by her parents to do what she wanted. My mother did not have a lot of toys growing up, and the family did not go on vacations until my mother was in junior high. A big outing each summer was a day trip to Disneyland with Oma

and Mary. My mother's childhood memories are of hanging out in the neighborhood with the other kids, playing hide and seek with everyone at night outside and being outdoors most of the time. She watched Bonanza on television on Sunday nights at her grandmother's.

My mother was often on her own with her brother and sister. They walked to church alone on Sundays, spent the weekends at their grandmother's, and got ready for school by themselves because Oma was driving Opa to work in their one car. My mother wore clothes sewn by Oma and hand-me-downs from her sister. My mother did not see themselves as poor, but simply as average. They lived as most other families in the neighborhood lived. Growing up, my mother remembers seeing President Nixon on television during Watergate. She also remembers collecting photos at the gas station from the Apollo Space Missions. In the 1970s she remembers long lines at the gas station and that you could only get gas on certain days depending on the license plate number. My mother also remembers cars without seatbelts, a television without a remote and life without computers and mobile phones.

My mother's parents were not involved in her schooling. During high school, my mother worked at a local movie theatre and at a deli as a hostess. By the time my mother graduated from high school, it was assumed she would go to college like her brother and sister. My mother, however, was the first in the family to get an advanced degree. After studying she worked in Los Angeles at Sony. A few years later she married my father, and since then they have moved three times between Germany and the US.

Conclusion

Looking back on the women in the families of my Oma and Opa, I see a few differences between them and Lily Casey. Lily loved teaching and learning. She was also concerned about the future and how her children would earn a living and take care of themselves. In neither Oma's family nor Opa's family was there a woman who was interested in education or that really thought about the future. It seems for their families the emphasis was more on having a job to pay the current bills without any thoughts towards improving one's situation. Oma does not think anyone in her family ever thought about her future, who she should marry or how she should take care of herself later. With hindsight, one can see it was Opa's college education along with his work ethic that changed the lives of Oma and Opa. Opa's college education enabled him to get a job which opened up opportunities for him to further advance in the work force. Furthermore, although Oma and Opa were not directly involved in my mother's education, they gave her the opportunity to concentrate on her studies rather than working. My grandmother and great-grandmothers did not have this opportunity, so they made other choices and faced other challenges just as Lily did. Their lives were at times filled with insecurity, tragedy and worries, but the women in my mother's family have shown persistence and survival as Lily did.