

45th Storyworth: Have You Any Particularly Vivid Memories Of Your Grandparents?

My Father's Dad is mostly a blur to me, except I know now that he was a bigamist, keeping two separate families who knew nothing of each other until after his death. They have since become distant friends. My Dad's Mom was always a kindly soul, although there is little about her which is highly memorable except that my sister, Veronica, is the most like her in the family, and reminds me of her every time I see her, with her ability to smile and make others happy even while we know she suffers some personal pain.

My mother's parents are an entirely different "cuppa tea", to quote the Irish brogue which was their background. I well recall that both of them admonished us to consider public service jobs, which is odd considering that only my sibs who went into the military (Franz and Mary) or with volunteer organizations (Barb, with her husband Mickey, in the Fire Department) could be said to have done any such thing. Of those, the only one to actually retire from such service is Franz, while Mickey & Barb made a business from it.

But "Booie", my Grandma, and my Grandpa were both retirees from civil service; Miriam from a clerical role with NYC and Dan as a Fire Chief with the NYFD. In fact, he had been the Chief at the infamous fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory where so many young girls plunged to their deaths because the ladders could not reach the 9th floor and there were no external fire escapes, which eventually became mandated as one of many results from that tragedy.

Grandpa never dwelt on the gory details, except to tell us a lot more about the background story there, about which I learned a lot more when PBS featured it on an episode of "American Experience". It is worth watching. I have written before about my Grandpa telling us about how he had from the age of at least 16 been able to harness and drive a 16 horse team, which was necessary to haul the pumper wagon used at the time, because they had no motorized conveyances as they do today. I use that as an example of how things change over time, and how each successive generation has the technologies which are common for it, which prior generations find astounding, but contemporaries handle almost effortlessly. I use the example of computer programming, which I do, but Grandpa couldn't, while I "might be able to identify a horse, but never harness one".

Visits with them were always looked forward to, because my Grandma would always find some sweet treat for us to munch on, while Grandpa would always give each of the kids somewhere between a quarter and a dollar, before we would settle down to playing cards with Grandma, while Grandpa would fall asleep in his chair following some tale of workings in the Fire Department (recall that NYFD was a paid service many years before he was even a Chief, while many of those who serve our less metropolitan communities today are still volunteers, except for their typically professional EMT staffs and station managers ;-). The most popular card games we played were cribbage and pinochle, neither of which I could do today without a refresher course.

They lived in a small bungalow on a small plot of about 1/8 acre in The Bronx, along a minimally travelled road off a main drag. We would drive down in the family station wagon, which was always a Ford with a three on the column manual gearbox and no power ANYTHING including A/C, which became a REAL hassle starting with their green 1968 Country Sedan Wagon with gold vinyl interior and side-folding rear seats so it could actually seat up to 10 individuals. The steering wheel in that had CLEARLY expected that NO car that size would be built without power steering. What a beast that was to take for my driver's test to get my license when I was 16. In fact, my family took that car to Disney World as my High School Graduation present from my Grandparents, which, except for the accident caused by my Dad's typically aggressive driving, was a mostly fun experience for me, with my first ride on the Monorail, especially riding in the lead car, as well as Epcot.

It typically took us about two hours each way to drive to my Grandparents from home, and Mom (Dad rarely joined us) would often visit one of the multiple graveyards with loved ones near there or on Long Island as part of the trips. So they were all-day affairs. And we usually ate a meal with my grandparents before we left, which often caused we kids to fall asleep before we got back anywhere NEAR our home in Hyde Park.

Because they had downsized from their larger home with three kids, two of whom had been Polio victims, my Grandparents had given to their kids many of their belongings. But considering that the two of them lived to well past 90 years old, they literally DESTROYED the actuarial tables on which their pension benefits had been based, and so they lived a comfortable if modest existence.

But my Grandma had never treated my Mom as I might have expected. I suspect, because she arrived after her sister and brother, named after my Grandparents, were both teens, that Grandma did not look favorably on her, and Grandpa knew it. So when she pre-deceased him, he had the personal integrity to have HIS will changed immediately after Booie's death to assure much more of their assets were left to my Mom, because SHE had been their supporting family member in my Grandparent's old age. My Grandma had wanted everything of hers to be left to the Grandkids. But with Grandpa outliving her, the law stipulated it all became his on her death, and he definitely changed who would receive what once HE passed on, for which I commend him. That was merely one of his traits which, despite civil service rules, would have made him a good Captain.

Because technology did not exist which could have hoped to enable such record, I have no visual evidence to support nor refute any of my Grandfather's stories. However, I am confident that most of what he said was ultimately true, and he was lucid until the very end of his life. I would suggest that I am most like my Grandpa; he "bought his first horse when he was 16", which was when I bought my first power equipment for my yard care business, and my career led me to independent leadership roles even if none of them was in civil service.

My Mom had worked both sides of the professional fence, in addition to spending a LOT of years as merely a "Mommy", which was the traditional role for most women in her time. I was always sad that she had not completed a college degree, because it was she who assured her kids got the best education available to any lower middle class family of the time, which I am sure required plenty of sacrifices on her part raising her six kids. Eventually, all except Barb, our oldest living sister, have received Master's Degrees, something about which I know my Mom and her parents would be delighted. Ultimately, only my Mom's first, Peggy, who was born with hydrocephalus and died at age seven in an institution, has so far been lost. The rest of us are continuing to pollute the earth, or as I like to describe it; "converting unburned hydrocarbons into global warming at an alarming rate" ;-)

That, too, was my tongue in cheek way, so reminiscent of my Grandparents, of expressing how we generally exist on this fragile planet. They could always see the humor in daily life, and enjoyed the disarming way of understating with hyperbole what was actual reality. They knew how to laugh and enjoyed every opportunity to do so with vigor, a trait passed on by my Mom, and subsequently by me to MY offspring, even though she is a LOT fewer than MY parents pumped out ;-). And Jess and HER daughter, Ainsley Lynne, certainly know how to laugh and enjoy life. I think my Grandparents would consider both of them to be exceptional additions to their memory and their remarkable story ;-)

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