

## **A New Outlook on an Old Subject**

As I pull into the driveway of a house that is full of Christmas memories, birthday parties, and sorrowful tears, I can't help but think that I am about to embark on a journey that I am not sure I am ready for. I know that my great-grandmother is an amazing individual, but I am not sure I am ready to hear about the trying times in her life, the struggles, and the uncertainties. I have the idea that my great-grandmother has always been that, a great-grandmother. I am perfectly content with the image in my head of her being grey headed and always wearing long dresses, frowning on the growing popularity of pants being worn to church. Seeing her in a different light is a giant leap into adulthood for me.

To be honest, I am scared to death of my great-grandmother. She has always been cold. Not to the point that I didn't think that she loved me, but cold none the less. I guess with over sixty grandchildren and great-grandchildren it is hard to find a way to make everyone feel special. She has been alone for the greater part of her life. Not in the sense that she did not people around her, but the emotional closeness to someone lacked in her life for the large majority. My great-grandmother was the oldest of ten children. She was born in 1920, when as she describes, life was hard. People worked hard and fought for everything they had. Her mother was a mere 16 years old when she was born and her father barely 18. Like most of the people in the small town of Richlands, Virginia, she was born to a barely getting by coal mining family. Her father, James, worked everyday in less than satisfactory mining conditions to make \$0.25 a day. Their house was nothing more than a shack and with holes in the roof and walls. She explained that the old adage, "Love will keep you warm when you have nothing else" just didn't apply in this

situation. “My parents loved me and I knew that, but I was such an adjustment for them, they were just teenagers-it was hard.” Being five years old and having to find food to feed yourself is something that happened everyday. With this understanding I am beginning to see where her strong, confident spirit comes from. When she was six, the family welcomed a set of twin boys. Great-grandma explained that having other children in the house was a blessing and a curse. She was not the one who was to blame for everything, but she did end up being the person who took care of children. Six years and three more children later, her mother went to work to help the family financially. Great-grandma was thirteen and ready to take on the world. Schooling during the depression was unnecessary in her mind, helping her family was more important. In 1935, at the age of fifteen, my great-grandmother decided to quit school, against her parents’ wishes and take up ironing to help her expanding family.

In 1938, she met the man that would become my great-grandfather. She was a strong woman, not looking for a man by any means. She was hard-headed, making her way in a world where men were dominate. By this time, she had returned to school and had plans of becoming a nurse. Apparently, love just bit her in the butt. She worked hard to stay independent while being married and having a child at the ripe ole’ age of nineteen. This strong and determined woman had a child every two years for the next eight years of her life, all while working as the top nurse in the county. She was content with her family, job, and lifestyle and all of this seemed to show in the interview. I was beginning to wonder why she said she felt so alone for most of her life. I mean how could she? Her mother and father had just expanded their family to ten, not to mention her own five children. Apparently this question was written all over my face as she began

to explain. “People were always around me, I always knew I was loved, but your great-grandfather always had so many irons in the fire. He was constantly starting a new restaurant or trying to bring a movie theater into town. Ovie (Great-Grandpa) thought he was doing the best things for the family and by many standards he was. However, I needed him to love me, support me, and want me to succeed in my dreams of being a doctor.” At this very moment tears started running down my face. She reaches me a tissue and asks me why I am shedding tears over things that happened over 50 years ago. It was at that moment I realized exactly what my grandmother missed out on in her life. I always knew she was a nurse, and I thought she loved that job. I had no idea her passion was to be a doctor. I asked her if she thought that her being a woman prohibited her from chasing her dreams and she simply replied, “No”. There was no explanation and I could tell I was to stay off of that topic with her. I can see in her eyes that was precisely the case. Great-grandma grew up in an era where women couldn’t have dreams for the future that went beyond a frying pan in one hand and a baby in the other. She didn’t live in a city where opportunities were knocking at the door for women in the 1930’s and 1940’s. If anything she pushed the envelope in becoming a woman working outside of the home. If she had wanted to further her education even more, she would have been black-balled by her stay-at-home mother and would ultimately begin to feel guilty about leaving her children without a mother most of the time.

With that out in the open, she almost shuts down at this point in the interview. I can tell I have hit a spot that has been closed off for years. I push some buttons by asking questions that I am not sure will even be responded to. I look great-grandma in the eyes and ask her if she considers herself a feminist. She drops her head and then slowly raises

it while asking me a question in return. “Do you consider yourself a feminist?” I am so shocked that she would turn the tables on me that I have to take a breather. I gather my composure and then responded with a firm yes. Great-grandma gives me a quick smile and says, “Let’s just say you got that from me.”

Not only did my great-grandmother push the envelope in the 1930’s but she is still pushing it today. She has been widowed over 20 years ago and is self-sufficient. She didn’t stop working at the local hospital until the doors were closed permanently. Being alone in the later years of her life seems to echo the way she has felt for her 88 years here on this earth. I can’t help but feel ashamed that I have not spent more time with her and not listened to her more closely when she talks. Maybe I could have played some small role in her life, like the major one she has played in mine.

Looking back on this interview it has been a life changing experience for me. I thought that I knew everything about the woman who changed my diapers and taught me to feed myself. I understand more about why I feel so strongly about the things in my life. It is in my genes!