

Bessie

I asked my Grandma Bessie, "How on earth did you get by with grandpa gone, the Depression on, didn't you just want to cry?"

And she said,

"One day at a time, child. One day at a time. Doesn't pay to look ahead.
Just one day at a time."

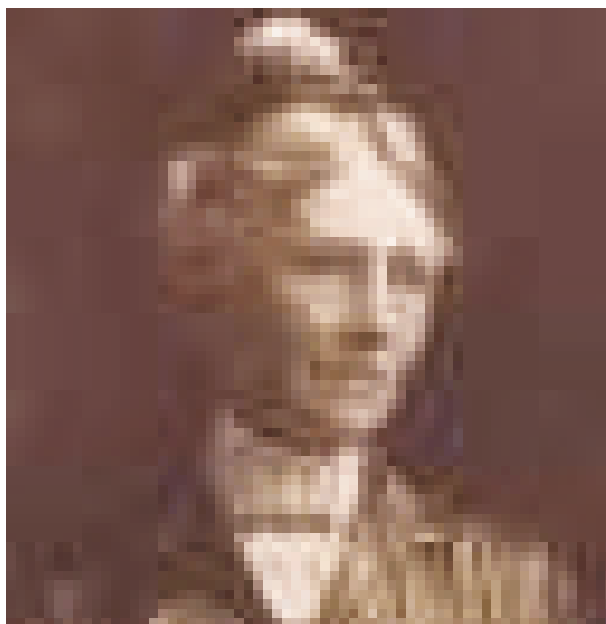
(from lyrics "One Day at a Time" written for the Occidental Community Choir)

In the book Collage, I wrote about deep ancestry in my effort to learn more about family roots and how I might be influenced by them. Exploration of my mother's roots led me to learn about my mother's mother Ida Mae Craig and her mother Permilia Ann Kinne(y), and their roots in Ireland after the famine. I was curious to learn more about Bessie Ellen Gilfillan, my father's mother, who helped raise me during World War II.

The Peabody Kinney family had ancestors in County Armaugh. Today other Kinne(y) family members live around Banbridge outside Belfast in its neighboring County Down. Banbridge is located on the main road between Belfast and Dublin at the bridge over the river Bann. This is not far from County Armagh where Bessie's ancestors, the Mc Dermotts, resided. Her parents also immigrated after the famine. Here is what I was able to learn about the circumstances.

About 1760 after the potato was introduced to Ireland from Americas, it served as an easily grown nutritious protein food especially for the poor and working classes. Ireland was then a colony of Great Britain, and the land was worked by tenant farmers who paid rent to often- absent landowners. A little known fact is that tenant farmers exported more food to Great Britain than they produced for themselves. In 1845 the potato famine began and lasted into 1852 causing the death of over a million Irish in Ireland and causing over a million Irish refugees to flee.

Ann Cosgrove was born in Armaugh Ireland about 1825 as a Protestant peasant. Her husband-to-be, Bernard McDermott, was born there also in the same year but as a Catholic aristocrat. Much to both families' consternation they fell in love . Bernard's father's land was then confiscated by the British when, at twenty, Ann and Bernard were married. Soon thereafter, the potato famine drove them along with 1.8 million others to emigrate. Peabody, Bernard's father, managed to give them money enough to emigrate to New York City. There they birthed a daughter Katherine Jane McDermott about 1859 (seen vaguely here).



[I refer here to an interview transcript with my great aunt, Molly Kelly, Bessies' youngest sister, who shared family lore with my aunts.]

Bernard was pretty helpless as a provider. Moving from aristocratic Ireland to a less civilized America left him floundering. Katherine's mother, Ann, however knew how to make due and make ends meet. She, Katherine, and her siblings did odd jobs to support their mother and father. "They lived poorly off the land in a shack." The family later moved west to Sutton, Nebraska where mother Ann died. A year later, Bernard moved to Omaha where he died. Daughter Katherine moved to Chillicothe, Illinois where she lived, married, and died a year earlier than her father.

Katherine married William Albert Gilfillian of Peoria, Illinois after the Civil War. He was a year younger than she. William and Katherine (Kathryne) formed an Irish Catholic family raising a total of eight children, six girls and two boys. Katherine learned from her mother how to be resourceful by taking in laundry and making sausages to supplement her husband's income. In 1890, she gave birth to Bessie Ellen Gilfillian. This birth was late in her life at the age of 37. Katherine was 42 when she had her last child Molly in 1894 that I quote. *[Spellings change from Jean to Jane, Kathryne to Katherine or Catherine, Gilfillan to Gilfillian, etc. Reading and writing being limited as they were made spelling erratic and tracking lineage slow.]*

William was a dairy farmer and is reported to have had a bad temper. He could not read, but Bessie, who was the first in her family to learn to read and write, read the *Peoria Times* to her father each night. He was interested in following the politics of the day. Like her mother, Bessie also learned to pull a wagon to pick up dirty clothing around town and later to deliver clean laundry. Though very poor, living frugally the family managed to send all their children to school.

As one of the youngest, Bessie was an outstandingly good student. At 18 she graduated from high school then got her teacher's certificate. She taught in a one room schoolhouse twenty miles up the Illinois River in Chillicothe for two years. Her students were 2nd grade through 4th grade, though some of her 2nd graders were rough 16 year old boys. She was known to be serious with a quick intellect, practical, and unflappable. These personality traits served her well throughout her life and her mother grew to rely on her. Bessie recalled to Molly how two of her smartest young students lived in a cave with their drunken father who beat them. They seldom had more than lard spread on bread for lunch; so she would share what food she could with them.

She met her future husband as she walked home from school one day when he rode by in his buggy. He, George LeRoy Snyder, was also one of eight children. At age 18, he was three years younger than she. He was apprentice-baking under his Uncle Charlie in Peoria. George finished school to the 9th grade, but then he preferred to work. George and Bessie fell in love, went to Keokuk Iowa on the Mississippi, and were married. Meanwhile, George did more apprentice-baking there. Unfortunately the German master baker kept all his 'trade secrets'. This necessitated George writing down memories of his observations after work. When they returned to Peoria, Bessie helped out by doing domestic chores for Uncle Charlie after Charlie's wife left him while George worked.



There Bessie gave birth to their first child, my father Richard Vernon Snyder. According to sister Molly, my father was a cute little boy whose personality took after his mother Bessie's. Molly loved to play with him. He used to wander off to seek out his Grandma Katherine where he was welcomed only after securing permission from Bessie. Soon thereafter the family left for Coldwater, Michigan to establish their own bakery in 1916. Four years after Richard, they gave birth to a second son, James, then three daughters Kathryn Rose, Harriet, and Mary Ellen ten years after James. Bessie was then 35.

Bessie's children James and Kathryn chose to be Catholic, but Bessie, Richard, Harriet, and Mary Ellen chose Protestantism like their father George. George died at age 42 of pancreatic cancer but, while in the hospital, he taught his children and wife about the bakery business. Bessie outlived her husband by forty years during which time she learned to run the business through the Depression and raise their five children. She also helped raise her grandchildren during World War II when the men went off to fight leaving their wives to go to work.

When I look at the history of these three women, I can understand how I came to value hard work and a good education. In just a few generations they nurtured the physical and mental well-being of many. Grandma was a devoted learner and praised me for being a "sincere student". My Dad was the first to earn a master's degree. My daughter was the first to earn a PhD. Ann, Ann's daughter Katherine, and Bessie labored to make it possible.

Visiting Detroit and coming to bed in my bedroom with me when I was a girl, I heard her sigh in the dark. I asked if she was OK, and she said, "Yes. I sometimes wonder why I wait so long to lie down." I asked her if she had ever thought of remarrying, and she said, "No. I already have had the best husband a woman could hope to find."



The bakery continued until 1960.
Bessie died at the age of 85.

Martha Diane Masura Rau
(daughter of Richard, granddaughter of Bessie)

