

The Inheritance I Have Neglected

Bridget Bellmore
English 107
9 December 2011

I began asking questions about Mabel Dale Pierson in hope of discovering similar traits between the two of us, an analogous characteristic that would provide a reason for a part of my personality. I knew little of my great-grandmother when she died four and a half years ago in February of 2007, and remembered her only as the smiling old woman who would sit, shaking silently, on the piano bench at family gatherings. I had failed to learn about this woman during the thirteen years she was a part of my life, but now I look to my great-grandmother, mindful of the inheritance I have neglected, for any subtle explanation for the way I act, think, or see the world.

From interviews with her daughter, Barb Barbara, grandchildren (my aunt, Deborah West, and father, Jeffrey Bellmore), and her caretaker,

Sandy English, as well as from books such as Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg's *Domestic Revolutions* and Julie Rae Rickard's *Around Curwensville*, I pieced together my great-grandmother's century-long life and gained an understanding of the times in which she lived. Mabel Pierson was born in Curwensville, Pennsylvania in 1907. She and her four siblings were raised in the dawn of the social transition to the companionate family, centered on emotion rather than economics (Mintz and Kellogg 114-115). When Mabel was eight years old, a speaker accompanied by the Women's Liberty Bell came to Curwensville to evoke support for the women's suffrage amendment (Rickard 27). Nine years later, after graduating from high school in 1924, she went on to a business college, making the twen-

ty-mile train ride from Curwensville to DuBois, Pennsylvania by herself—a habit unheard of for women of the time—every week for two years. Her granddaughter, my aunt, described Mabel as being “one of the first true feminists” (West). Despite her independence, she was married in 1928 to Charles Earl Pierson, an outsider whom she brought back to live with her in Curwensville rather than following him to DuBois (English).

As wife, mother, and then widow, my great-grandmother watched the world change throughout the twentieth century. She lived through two World Wars, seeing her husband off to fight in the second, according to a history of the Dale family written by Mabel’s great-nephew, Douglas Dale. She raised three children during the Great Depression, but judging from what relatives have told me about Mabel’s family in those years, I do not think that the devastating effects of the Depression had much impact on her household. My maternal grandmother remembers Mabel’s children as always being well dressed. Perhaps their father’s job as an insurance salesman kept them out of reach of the Depression, but another reason may have been the social pressures on women in the early nineteenth hundreds. According to *The Green-*

wood Encyclopedia of Daily Life in America, “[a woman’s] love for the husband and children could be proven in the degree of whiteness in clothes, and the strength and stamina of the family” (117). If Mabel considered the proof of her love for her family to be determined by these standards, then keeping her children well groomed and cultivating a financially and emotionally strong family life would have been unquestionable necessities.

The idea of love correlating directly with a family’s strength makes it easier to understand the curious silence that came over Mabel when tragedies took her son and husband out of her life. Mabel’s youngest child and only son, Dale, died shortly before his high school graduation in 1956, when the car he was riding in crashed into a tree. Her husband could not cope with the loss of his son, and less than a year later, he committed suicide. On the day he took his life, Mabel called her son-in-law, my grandfather, whose office was only a block away from their house, and told him that her husband was in the garage with a gun. By the time my grandfather arrived at the house, Charles Earl Pierson was dead. No one knows whether or not Mabel witnessed his suicide. The family did not speak of what happened; if Charles ever arose in conversation, they would

provide a vague explanation that he simply passed away (English). Maybe the thought of his suicide caused too much grief for them to mention, or maybe, mixed in with their grief was shame, and the fear of exposing a weakness of the family.

I spoke with Sandy English, the woman that took care of my great-grandmother during the last six and a half years of her life, who described Mabel as having erased her son and husband from her conscious memory. No pictures of them hung on the wall. One day Sandy found an old photo album and asked Mabel who the little blonde boy in the pictures was. “She got real quiet, then said ‘That’s my son’” (English). Mabel offered no other words and ended the conversation. Perhaps the only way to stop a pain that has not dulled—even after fifty years—is to pretend to forget.

After her husband died, Mabel immersed herself in ways to keep busy, enabling her to cope. She utilized her business degree as a bookkeeper for the hardware store in town, and later became a certified cake decorator, running her own business out of her home. She also made candy to sell during the holidays. Mabel possessed a skill for needlework; she crocheted

Christmas decorations, knitted afghan blankets, and made a quilt for every member of the family. She joined the Curwensville Business and Professional Women’s Club, the Homemakers Club, the Hobby Garden Club (with whom she planted trees in a park just a mile down the river from the site of her son’s accident), and participated in two local bowling leagues. She could talk about any current event and answer any question about Curwensville’s history. She decided to take painting lessons and found she was rather talented. Two of her paintings are hanging in my basement, one of which my father helped her finish (Bellmore; “Curwensville;” English; West).

What I find most remarkable from the stories of my great-grandmother are the recurring testaments to her positive attitude (Barbara; West). My aunt recalls her feeding the homeless who would ride into town on freight trains looking for work or a place to stay. They knew her well and marked the telephone pole beside her house as a signal for others who would pass through town. In spite of the calamities she endured, Mabel found some source of strength that enabled her to consider herself more fortunate than others around her. While she had justifiable reasons to feel victimized and ill-fated, she chose to

endeavor to make her life and the lives of others brighter. “She was the peacemaker, the worker and the doer,” my aunt commented, “And you never really felt like there was ever anything to fight about when Gram was around” (West). My aunt also mentioned that she believes Mabel’s positive attitude and lifestyle were responsible for the length of her life.

After discovering the life my great-grandmother lived, the hobbies she enjoyed, the struggles she went through and her solutions to those hardships and heartaches, I was disappointed when I examined my own personality and found that any significant similarity to hers was completely lacking. I saw no comparable traits. I had expected answers, explanations, enlightenment, and I tried to stretch possibilities in order to create a visible connection from her life to mine. Perhaps her teaching my father to paint influenced his involvement in the set construction for the town’s high school and community theater productions, one in which he met my mother, who was playing the piano for the show. My father mentioned that he applied his grandmother’s painting lessons to the way he thinks about photography, a passion that he has passed on to me (Bellmore). But hypothetical situations such as

these may never be accredited, and only amount to a few of countless curious possibilities.

I do not share my great-grandmother’s affinity for domestic hobbies. I cannot paint, and sadly, I do not possess her strength or her sense of peace. Learning about my great-grandmother provided no explanation for my personality, but rather an example and lesson, an inheritance of character left for my taking. I can picture my great-grandmother, “the last member of her generation,” according to her obituary, recognizing the names of friends and family members in the “Deaths of the Area” section of the newspaper and wondering why she was still here (“Curwensville”). At these times, Sandy would remind her that she “still [had] lessons to teach” (English). Even four and a half years after her death, I find this to be true. I realized that the lack of her traits in my personality is not nearly as important as the history she left for me to understand. She never left Curwensville, the town where I grew up, where my parents grew up; a town small enough for everyone to acknowledge the same moral standards, where I could point to anyone in my class and know which church they attended. Curwensville is a town of generations, traditions, values passed down family lines. If nothing else,

Mabel Pierson and I share a family history rooted in this town.

I cannot, by any means, consider myself empty-handed after this investigation of my great-grandmother's life. I believe that if my original search for characteristic parallels had been successful, as I had hoped, the discovery would not be as rewarding as what I ultimately attained—a history to fill the gap where memories should have been. I never took the initiative to form a relationship with this woman, and guilt pushed harder than curiosity to understand who she was. I am almost five years late, but fortunately, her story is not forgotten. And perhaps if I had taken advantage of speaking with her while she was still alive, I would not have comprehended the strength and optimism for which I now admire her. She would not have told me the story of her husband's death, and even if she had, I may have been too young to grasp its significance. Now I have the story, something I can hold on to and lean back on as part of my own history. I believe this may have been what I was looking for in the first place. With this newly gained knowledge, I also have a responsibility to retell her story, pass it on to the next generations so she will not be forgotten.

History holds the risk of being lost. Memories fade, and the only hope they have of retaining their clarity is those willing to share the stories. Curwensville's high school auditorium is said to be haunted. Those who feel the need to write about it on the Internet claim the ghost is that of a construction worker who fell from the scaffolding, dying upon impact with the cement floor. Sources with more authority, such as the man who directed Curwensville's theater productions for decades, the high school's retired band director, and others deeply committed to the plays tell a different story, which I choose to believe. They say that a spirit, referred to by the town as the phantom, indeed dwells in the auditorium, but not as a stereotypical haunting. They describe him as an embodiment of the passionate efforts exerted by performers of past productions, an amalgamation of their talents and commitment in one lingering presence. My father has told me stories about the strange and unexplainable happenings he experienced during his years in high school, such as how the phantom would appear in photographs as a face belonging to no one. During the 1982 production of *Camelot*, the phantom created a shadow on the stage of the sword Excalibur in the stone, shocking the light-

ing crew as well as the cast. Our retired band director has heard his footsteps in the seemingly empty auditorium, and my father's friend once ran out of the building when he felt a hand on his shoulder while working on the catwalks above the stage. My father has told me of the nights he spent by himself in the auditorium, building and painting the set or fixing the lights for one play or another. He had to keep the radio playing loudly or else he would hear the songs of past performances sung in the voices of the cast, a ceaseless echo.

I witnessed the phantom twice, though subtly. I saw a face inside a stage light, which disappeared upon a second glance, while sitting at a keyboard playing for *Fiddler on the Roof* in 2007, and I watched the shadow of a revolving windmill on the wall of the auditorium during a rehearsal for the 2006 production of *Man of La Mancha*. No other incidents have occurred in the last four years or so. Perhaps the phantom went into hiding when the director retired and a new one took his place (one who did not grow up in Curwensville and did not believe the stories she heard), or when the auditorium underwent renovations. Nonetheless, a presence can still be felt, and those of us who were earnestly involved in the plays were always watching and aware. We

walked on the stage with a humbled respect for the ones who came before us and for the spirit that keeps them in our memory.

Sadly, as time passes and the people now involved with the theater have not heard of the phantom or refuse to believe in him, the history he holds may soon be lost, and this chain to our past will be broken. The glimpses of the phantom ceased in the same year my great-grandmother passed away. Coincidental as this may be, I am able to apply what I have always known about this spirit to what I recently discovered through her. The phantom of Curwensville's auditorium is a willful incarnation of reminiscence, providing his acknowledgers with a way to keep our memories alive, to hold on to something that is no longer with us. Our belief of him is a tribute to what we have created and what our predecessors have accomplished. He guards the history of the school, the town, and the individuals who pass on the stories to those willing to ask and take the responsibility of carrying the weight of what they learn. I cannot allow the chain of my family's history to be broken. I have found and repaired the missing link to my great-grandmother, which ties me to a heritage filled with the potential of what I can become.

Work Cited

Barbara, Barb. "Questions." Message to the author. 8 Nov. 2011. E-mail.

Bellmore, Jeffrey. "MiMi." Message to the author. 1 Nov. 2011. E-mail.

"Curwensville resident dies at age 100." *The Progress* [Clearfield, PA] 1 Mar. 2007. Print.

Dale, Douglas. "Dale Family History." N.d. MS.

English, Sandy. Personal Interview. 27 Oct. 2011.

"The Middle Atlantic States." *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Daily Life in America: The Emergence of Modern America*. Ed. Randall M. Miller. 4 vols. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009. Print.

Mintz, Steven, and Susan Kellogg. *Domestic Revolutions*. New York: Free Press, 1988. Print.

Rickard, Julie Rae. *Around Curwensville*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2007. Print.

West, Deborah. "Questions About MiMi." Message to the author. 2 Nov. 2011. E-mail.