

MEMORIES OF GRAMMY – MARY ESTILL BURGESS ALEXANDER PERRY

Grammy told me lots of stories when I was a child. I'll try to remember them here. It's funny, but I feel I know more about Grammy than I do my dear Mother. She was sick so much of the time.

When Grammy was a little girl:

She remembered helping the blacksmith out at the ranch sorting nails. She was a very small child then.

On cold days, she would not put on a coat but go out and run all the way around the block on Belknap St just to feel the good air. Her Papa would fuss at her because he was afraid the Gypsies would steal her.

The Gypsies were known to be in town from time to time. Stories of child kidnapping and horse stealing were often told of them, (There were, and perhaps still are, Gypsies in Texas during the '50s – my brother worked for a short time for a funeral parlor in Fort Worth and a Prince of the Gypsies died. One of the Gypsy Kings told the funeral parlor not to worry about any damage done during the wake – that they would pay for it. Bob, my brother, said many, many people drove up in Cadillacs and other big cars. The wake was a wild party, but they did pay for all the damage done.)

The Rag Man also came by, down the alley behind the house. He had an open bed truck pulled by horses and would gather old clothes, etc. and sell them for rags.

Once, Little Mary's Mama made her a dress. Mary thought it was very ugly – her Mama was not an experienced seamstress. She and her Mama had a big fuss that day and her Mama made her wear it to school. When she came home, her Mama said, "You'll never have to wear that dress again."

She had never seen waffles before. The lady across the street brought some over. She thought they were incredible – just think, that lady had poked her finger into the dough so many times to make the indentations!

Once she ate too many of the neighbor's green apples. She got sick and her Mama told her, "You shouldn't have stolen the apples." I remember her saying more than once, "There's nothing in this world worth stealing."

When she was 11 or 12, she had some sort of abscess in her abdomen. Her Mama stayed up long hours rubbing her stomach with (oil and kerosene? I do not remember). They were going to have to operate. All she could hold down was scraped steak, well-cooked, and orange juice. The night before the operation (which would probably have been fatal – opening the abdomen usually was then), her Mama was rubbing and started crying, "It's dissolving, it's going away." And it did.

Grammy's middle name was Estill. She was named after the lady who lived close by whose name was Estill and helped her get born. This was out at Blue Mound Ranch in 1887 - April 7. Mrs. Estill's son, Cal, became a lawyer and did Grammy's income taxes for years. Her daughter, Katie, married Mr. Thayer and turned out living close to Neill, my husband, in Denison, Texas. He visited her a lot when he was a kid. Somehow, she gave him (or his mom) crocheted doilies that her mother had made. So

I have some doilies made by the woman who helped deliver my grandmother. It's a small world.

Once, when she was about ten years old, Little Mary went to church (in Kentucky). She remembered what she was wearing that day: a white dress with a big straw hat and a blue ribbon. She must have been a lovely child, very blond with beautiful blue eyes. Behind her, a young man considerably older than she, was sitting with his fiancée. He began to tease his fiancée about the beautiful child saying, "See that pretty little girl? When she grows up, I'm going to marry her!" He kept this up until his fiancée got mad and broke off the engagement.

A few years later, she was in drawing class at Hamilton College, the women's college attached to the University of Kentucky. (She had first gone there when she was 14.) She was drawing a picture of a horse and was writing a boy's name over and over in the margin. A friend came in and said, "You'd better erase that name, Mary, and write Tom! I'm going to introduce you to Tom Alexander!" Turns out he was the young man who had sat behind her in church that day, though it was some time before they made the connection.

She well remembered her first day at Hamilton College. Her dear Papa had driven her there. She remembered him driving away in the buggy. She had watched until it was out of sight – it was the last time she'd ever see him. He was dead and buried in Texas before the family let her know he was even sick. He was said to have died of liver cancer – he was out riding and the pommel of the saddle poked into his stomach when he had an accident. She was broken-hearted.

She used to go with him to church on Sunday evenings. They would sit in the back corner with all the old men who every now and then would call out, "Amen!" Thus, it was known as the Amen Corner. She loved talking to the old men.

When she was maybe 16 (I don't know) she was asked to the Governor's Ball and had a dress specially made for it. I still have the dress. It is well-corseted with a charming décolleté neckline. I could fit into it when I was 16. At the last minute, she was also named Sweetheart of the Confederacy and was asked to go to the gathering on the train with many of the Confederate veterans. She chose to do that; she thought she would enjoy it a lot more! So the dress was never worn. She said the wool for their uniforms was beautiful material, of fine quality, and that the old men "were great company to be around!"

She and Tom Alexander decided to run away and get married when she was 17. They crossed the Ohio River and his brother, John, a minister, performed the ceremony. She put a piece of paper on which she had written "18" so when they asked her how old she was, she could "honestly" say, "Well, I am over 18." She was totally unprepared for marriage and knew nothing about the marriage relationship.

Uncle Tom was born in 1906 and Mama on February 3, 1908. Tom Alexander died when Mama was eight months old, so Grammy was left a "widow at 21 with two babies."

Grammy had several "ghost stories" she told. She and Uncle Guy (Perry) had courted in the graveyard. "It was nice and quiet there," she said, so she wasn't afraid of spirits. There are three stories I remember. Once, she was at a house with several other ladies and a hat sailed over the banister to the downstairs. No one had seen the

hat before. I said once that Aunt Anne (Jarvis) was the one who reacted to it – the more I think about it, I think it was Aunt Floy Brown (Burgess). She began screaming and had to go home right away. She knew something terrible had happened to her son. A hay wagon had fallen over and killed her son. (Two women named Floy married brothers of Grammy's so their maiden name was always included when you talked about them: Aunt Floy Brown and Aunt Floy King.)

Another time, she got up in the middle of the night and saw a white, shining specter in the doorway of the next room. She knew immediately that Hugh Stockton and his family had been killed in the great Galveston flood.

In the big house in Haslett, when one wing was being built, a worker accidentally died. After the house was built, they would often hear knocking on the door leading to that wing of the house. No one was ever there. There was a huge storm. A tornado ripped through. Grammy hid under the big walnut dining table with the kids. Nothing in the dining room fell, even the cut glassware on the hutch there. The entire wing, however, was destroyed. No one ever knocked on the door again.

Grammy believed in prayer, but one prayer she had answered broke her heart. Tommy, her first born, a beautiful, bright child, grew into a talented young man. He went to Texas A&M, then to Boston Conservatory of Music. They found him wandering the streets of Boston, saying his name was Herman. No one knew what had happened to him. He came home and had double-typhoid pneumonia (I'm not sure if he had it before or after he went to Boston). Grammy said he was so close to dead that "his eyes were set in his head." She prayed for his survival. His body did survive, but his mind didn't. He was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia (whatever that diagnosis meant then) and spent the rest of his life in a mental hospital. Grammy wrote him every week and sent him a dollar or two for the commissary so he could buy some little thing he might want. After Grammy died, Aunt Floy Dauenhauer took over the task and did it faithfully until Uncle Tom's death. He was greatly gifted in science and music. I saw him twice – once when Grammy and I went to San Antonio on our way to Corpus Christi – a handsome young man who didn't know we were there, bronzed from working outside. Again, Neill and I went to Texas and met a courtly, extremely well-mannered older man – who talked of people being buried under the floorboards. What a tragedy! However bad reality is, dissociation from it is worse.

Grammy showed me once the dress she had worn when she married Uncle Guy (Perry). It was a strong blue and a strong green. I had never seen those two colors together before and said so. "Think," she said, "of all the flowers. All the colors go together, especially with green!"

I loved to hear Grammy sing lullabies to her grandchildren. "Old Rugged Cross," "Come to the Church in the Wildwood," "Up on the Housatop Reindeer's Paws," "Beulah Land," "I Come to the Garden Alone," – wonderful, sweet songs. She was told once when she was a young lady that her voice was good enough to train for the opera, but she married young instead.

It was a hard life on the Texas ranch. She had only a hot plate and some sort of little oven to cook with. Many of Uncle Guy's relatives would come over for dinner every night, but did not think to bring anything or help out. She said she had to

start cooking chicken and gingerbread cake early in the morning every day to have enough. Old Jane, a black woman, helped her. “Lawsy, Miz Guy, you come put your short, fat fingers in this pie and sweetin’ it up!” she would say. (Two women named Mary married into the Perry family, so they became ‘Mary Guy’ and ‘Mary Hayde’.) Ira (Irey) was the black man who helped out. Once, he nearly cut a toe off in an accident with an ax. “Doctor Mary” saved him and the toe. She did a lot of doctoring there. Twenty-five Mexican families lived on the place. Uncle Guy would come storming in, “Those damn Mexicans planted that damn weed (marijuana) between the cornrows again! They smoke that damn stuff and don’t do a lick of work!” The kids, of course, picked up the “damns” and all the other words he let fly. They’d use them in front of their father and he’d be off again: “Mother, you make those damn kids quit that damn cussin’!” Since Grammy never used a swear word in her life, she’d just say, “That’s your job.” (As was true for many couples, they rarely used each other’s first names. She would often call him “Mr, Perry” or Papa?Father?Daddy? I don’t remember.)

He liked for her to set a good table. “Hell, I don’t want the ribs on my children or my stock to show!”

Once, when my Mama was 11 years old, Grammy was pregnant and about ready to deliver. The doctor had been there for more than a day but had to leave to tend to other patients. Grammy went to the bathroom and said, “Mr. Guy, come quick! I’m having this baby!” Uncle Guy delivered the beautiful baby girl and helped her back to bed (he’d delivered stock often enough to know what to do). Grammy said, “After a baby was born, I always loved to rub my stomach and feel how much flatter it was. I yelled out, ‘Daddy, come quick – there’s a big lump in my stomach!’” Guy came over: “Lump, hell! It’s another baby!” And a few minutes later, Aunt Gussie was delivered. January 1, 1920.

Mama said she came in the room and Grammy was cuddling this sweet little baby. “Come meet your new sister,” Grammy said. Mama went over to see the baby – then heard the other baby cry in the bassinet across the room! She was so excited! Aunt Edna and Aunt Gussie – twins!

I’ll try to remember some other things – I’m sure they’re there, running around in my head. I hope you all enjoy this – I think it is accurate – a short visit with dear little Mary.

Nancy Anne Forman Ward
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