Genealogy Moment – Shirley Anne Brown Compeau

The story of Shirley Grandma or subtitled - "Jeffrey you talk too much"

My maternal Grandmother had a very interesting and well-traveled life. She was completely different in many ways to my paternal Grandmother Isobell, but like many grandmothers as she got older, she was very similar to her in many ways.

Shirley Anne Brown was born in 1921 in Watertown. Her birth parents (Ernest and Violet Hawley Clark) gave her up for adoption early in her life and she was adopted by John Brown and his wife and lived with them on Chestnut Street in Watertown. However, I'm told that she really spent more time with the neighbors across the street – The Barbens (Henry and Thurzie) – and lived with them (for reasons unknown to me, but I believe them to be that the Brown's were out of town frequently).

She graduated in 1939 from Watertown High School and not long after that met and married my Grandfather Donald Lindsey (who was from Brownville). In 1942 my Mom Darryl Lindsey was born. Due to the war my grandfather was sent to Italy while in the Army, and "Shirley Grandma" as we liked to call her, took a job with the government and was sent to Washington D.C. While the war was going on my Mom lived with Kermit and Alma Bowman in Brownville.

Not too long after the war Shirley Grandma and Donald divorced – I believe sometime after 1950. Grandma took a job with the Alex Bay Chamber managing their youth program. While in the Bay she met and married a local river rat and fishing guide Harold "Bart" Simpson. From this marriage my Aunt Barbara Simpson was born in 1956. At this time the family lived on Number 9 Island at the mouth of Goose Bay. My Mom has many stories about Number 9 Island and articles were written about her life on the Island as a teenager and how that affected her life at the time. (For another article…)

Eventually that marriage didn't last either and Grandma left Alexandria Bay and moved to Watertown. She married her third husband Cecil Merchant in 1966. That marriage lasted until Cecil died from a heart attack in 1974. They lived on the Black River Road near Partridge Berry Inn. Cecil reminded me very much of Archie Bunker. My biggest memory of Cecil is that he liked to play cards and smoke cigars. At this point I entered the picture and Cecil and Grandma used to have us over frequently for dinners and Christmas of course. Shirley Grandma loved to cook Italian dishes, and she also made it a Christmas tradition to come over on a weekend we were free and bake Christmas Cookies. She did this as long as I can remember until she sold that house in 1979 and moved to Florida.

After Cecil passed away Grandma kept busy working at the Youth Activities Center on Camp Drum (now Fort Drum). The Youth Center was near the Wheeler Sack Airfield, and the building the youth center was in is now the 10th Mountain Division Museum. I would go there in the summer with her and do Arts and Crafts and other activities. This kept me out of trouble, I'm sure. Sometime during this time, she started dating Earl Compeau (a widower as well) and married him in June 1976. I found out later from Grandma that her and my grandfather used to go on double dates with Earl and his wife before any of them had any children. I grew fond of Grandpa Earl – he liked to play golf – and I enjoyed all of the time I spent with him and Grandma when we visited them in Deltona Florida until his unexpected passing in 1992.

Yes, Shirley Grandma was married 4 times, but two of those marriages ended when her husband passed away. Shirley Grandma loved the Arts. When she moved to Florida, she started taking formal painting classes (watercolors were her favorite), and after she mastered that craft, started teaching classes out of her home as well as Daytona Community College. The lesson here is that it is never too late to start a new career or to do something you really love. She painted hundreds (possibly thousands of paintings), and everyone in our family has many of her paintings that she gave to us as gifts. She sold many of her paintings and used that money to travel around the country and visit back North every summer. When Grandpa Earl and Shirley Grandma first retired, they sold their house, took their camper and traveled across the country and Canada. One of her favorites was Nova Scotia. This gave her a ton of photos that she used to eventually paint different landscapes over the years.

Like my paternal Grandmother she also loved to cook. Italian dishes were popular with her, and her specialty was Shrimp Creole. Once when I was in my early teens, I commented how much I loved her Heavenly Hash (similar to 24-hour salad), and you guessed it every year at my Birthday or Christmas Heavenly Hash was on the menu. While Grandma Wood stuck to the "stick to your ribs" favorites – meat and potatoes – Shirley Grandma introduced me to more exotic dishes like Shrimp Creole, seafood in general and other "exotic" dishes.

For those of you that know me I'm not shy and have an opinion on just about any topic. Oh, and I like to talk. Well, Shirley Grandma was an old school Grandma, and those traits as a teenager don't jive well with my grandmother's background and etiquette. I'll never forget a very animated conversation at her dinner table one night on Black River Road, where apparently, I was "dominating" the conversation. I can still hear her saying to me – "Jeffrey, you need to be quiet, you are dominating the conversation, and the adults need to talk too".

As I grew older however and became a young adult I was allowed back into the conversation, and after Grandpa Earl passed away, I would have very long conversations

with her – sometimes for hours – that I'll never forget. She would often ask me for advice, and that meant a lot to me. The circle was complete.

She also was a musician and loved to play the organ. She always had an organ of some sort in her house. I never did get to play along with her – that's one thing I wish I did. So, I attribute much of my creative talents to her. My left-brain side of me if you will. My Mom inherited these traits as well – Mom has made many elaborate and beautiful stained-glass pieces which I have some of them along with many of Shirley Grandma's Paintings.

Next to our parents, our grandparents are extremely influential for many of us. I was fortunate to have had all my grandparents for more than one half of my life. Shirley Grandma passed away in 2007 at the age of 86, and I was 45. (Grandma Wood passed away a year later in 2008). If you can spend quality time with your grandparents, please do. Ask them questions, find out what they liked to do when they were younger, how did they meet each other, what did they did for fun. You might be surprised.

Shirley Anne Brown Lindsey Simpson Merchant Compeau lived a unique and exciting life. She loved to travel, paint, dance, play music and cook. She touched many people (more than I know), and taught me to try different foods, mind my manners and travel while you can – you won't regret it.

Here are some photos of her through the years (there is a big gap 😊). The first one is her in the 1940's, the 2nd her and my grandfather Donald Lindsey, the 3rd was a fashion shot from the forties, the fifth one is her and my brother Steve and me at Cloverdale Apartments circa 1972, The fifth one is her and my daughter Danielle around 1991, the sixth one is her with Dani showing off an art project she won a ribbon for (she used to paint with Dani a lot) in 1999, and the last 4 are some of her many, many paintings that I have.







Addendum!

Looking into the ancestry.com data about my Grandmother, I found that on the 1930 U.S. census she was listed as a boarder living with the Barben's (across the street from the Brown's on Chestnut Street). I remember Grandma talking about them but didn't really understand why she was living with them and not the Brown's at the time.

So, I started digging deeper and found some interesting information that I wasn't aware of. I did know that the Brown's adopted my grandmother, and I recall a conversation that I had with her one day when I asked her if she knew why she was given up for adoption. I could tell from her answer it was a sensitive subject, and she didn't really know the exact reason, other than the fact that her biological father was less than a stellar citizen. (There was at least one instance of petty larceny and another article on smuggling liquor as prohibition was in effect at this time).

I dug around trying to find out more information on him. I know he's buried in the North Watertown cemetery, and he died in in 1960 at the age of 61. He was a World War I veteran and married Violet Hawley in 1919 at the age of 20. He was frequently in trouble with the law. Ernest and Violet had a son – Ernest – born in 1920, and who died in 1923. My grandmother was born in 1921. Sometime after my grandmother was born, he abandoned the family, or was in trouble with the law and wasn't around. It was at this point in time that Violet gave up my grandmother to the Salvation Army. It was through the Salvation Army

that the Brown's – who were 47 and 39 respectively were looking to adopt a child as they had none of their own.

This is where the story gets interesting. I found a newspaper article from 1924 that Violet had submitted a writ of Habeas Corpus through a court in St. Lawrence County to get my grandmother back. She said that the Brown's stole her, and she did not want to give her up for adoption. The Brown's said that when they went to get my grandmother she wasn't being properly fed, clothed or taken care of. They stated she couldn't walk even though she was old enough to. This is what the story was in the Dec 6th 1924 edition of the Watertown Daily Standard:

"WOMAN ASKS FOR RETURN OF HER DAUGHTER"

Mrs. Violet Clark Claims Local People Hold 4 Year Old Girl Illegally

Claiming that John C. and Fannie J. Brown of Chestnut Street are holding her daughter illegally, Mrs. Violet Clark of Cranberry Lake now seeks through a habeas corpus proceeding, the custody of her daughter, claiming that she can provide Shirley Clark, four years old, with a proper home. The writ is returnable before Justice John C. Crapser at Massena next Saturday. Attorney Ray W. Merrill appears for the mother and Attorney John B. Rogers for the Browns.

The history of the case reverts to a time when Shirley was less than two years old. The Browns wished to adopt a girl and went to the Salvation Army where Mrs. Wall, then in charge of placing children through the organization, referred Mr. and Mrs. Brown to the Clark home on the North side.

At the time the Browns called at the Clark home, the child was unhealthy and improperly clothed, it is claimed. The father was also under arrest at the time.

It is claimed that Mrs. Clark was anxious to her her child properly cared for and gave Mr. and Mrs. Brown the custody of the infant. By proper nourishment and medical treatment the child is now claimed to be in a healthy condition. No formal adoption papers were ever prepared.

Mrs. Clark avers that she has made several demands for the child and that on one occasion on October 30 in this city that when she tried to take it, that it was wrenched away from her.

Mrs. Clark in her petition, claims that the child can be properly cared for in the home of her aunt, Mrs. Edgar S. Wilson, of Pyrites as the latter has expressed willingness to care for Shirley.

It is said that the Browns feel as if they had a perfect right to the child inasmuch as they have given it so much needed attention and that an understanding was has with the parents at the time it was taken from its original home.

Eventually the Brown's prevailed as the Judge sided with them and Violet lost the case. I remember Grandma talking about her from time to time, and that Violet was how Grandma thought she got her artistic genes from. Violet died in 1983 (I was 21), but we never saw or met her.

But why was she living with the Barben's in 1930 and not the Brown's who fought and one the right to keep her and adopt her? Well unfortunately Fannie Brown passed away in 1928. At this point John Brown couldn't properly take care of her due to his work, so the Barben's took her in. Thurzie and Henry Barben raised her from the time she was 8 or 9 until she graduated from High School.