

Blanche

My grandmother Blanche was a strong woman. Not related to us by blood, she worked just about every day of her life until literally falling over dead at almost 70 years of age while ironing someone's curtains on a sunny morning in late October of 1957. They took her to Faxton Hospital and she never came home.

Born in Utica in 1882, she was removed from school in the third grade and dumped in one of Utica's knitting mills where she ran from spool to spool to keep the machines humming and to add to her family's meager income. When the Child Labor Laws were enacted in the 1890's, Blanche became legally too young to perform the job she had excelled at and so was banished to the street where she lost track of most of her family when they split up and headed out in all directions of the compass looking for work to feed themselves.

In just a few months her prayers were answered as she was about to be evicted from a boarding house on Oneida St. where it had never been clear if she was the laundry girl or a paying guest. Mr. Right, a 22 year old worker in the cutlery factory on lower Sunset Ave., had taken an interest in her. She may not have been of legal age to work, but she could get married. After their civil ceremony, he beat her up weekly. Blanche successfully employed most of the methods known to womankind of that era to prevent any possible conception from coming to fruition. They were successful, but regrettably she was never able to have children of her own afterward.

Surprising for that time...and it was never clear how she was able to accomplish it...she obtained a divorce from him when she was about 18. As a divorced woman just before the turn of the 20th century she was instantly persona non grata in any church, factory, office or even grocery store that knew about her "scandal." So down she

walked to Bagg Square where she caught the train for Chicago.

Blanche did not travel west to see some long lost relatives who might have invited her to come and stay with them during her time of crisis. By no means. She descended upon the married sister of Mr. Right and said, "he beat me, you can take care of me," or something like that. Evidently the sister and her husband agreed with my grandmother's assessment of Mr. Right. They took her in for a few years and they became her life-long friends.

Mr. Right died during the war in France in 1918. That was the year Blanche chose to return to Utica, but not to the mills. She was now 30 years old and had married her second husband in Chicago and lost him to the Influenza. Arriving in Utica she boarded in a house for single woman and widows and hired herself out doing housework, laundry, and other domestic chores. She worked at some of the larger homes on Rutger St. up at the top of John St., but also for other less fortunate souls who needed assistance at various residences on "the Cornhill."

At the boarding house on Arthur St., Blanche met a young girl named Mary whose mother had died in childbirth and whose father was on the road during the week installing those new-fangled coal furnaces in the homes of people who were brave enough to have one built in their cellar. His sales technique included spending the first 2 nights in the cellar with the new furnace so that the family upstairs felt safe enough to go to bed. Mary's late mother had been married before she married Mary's father, but lost her first husband to sickness. There were other children. Mary's father had also been married before and lost his first wife to sickness. He had other children in the care of his first wife's family. Staying healthy and continuing to breathe was a challenge in those days. Between the Influenza and the war, mixed and re-mixed families were common. Families cared for orphaned children in arrangements that were not always the best. But no one had room for eight year old Mary, so she spent weekdays in the boarding house and went to be with her father Bert on weekends.

At the boarding house Mary fell in love with Blanche, who took on the roles of aunt and older sister. When Mary would go home on the

weekend, she would talk incessantly to her father about Blanche. Nothing but Blanche all weekend. Mary decided that Bert should marry Blanche and the three would all live happily ever after. My grandmother was a pretty good looking woman....I've seen her pictures when she was young....and eventually Bert decided that Mary was right. Bert and Blanche were married in 1922. Young Mary would grow up and become mother to myself and my brothers.

Blanche was a woman of principle. Perhaps she had seen so much unprincipled behavior in the world that she decided to be different. That would definitely suit my memory of her. As an example, Mary had been born Catholic and that's the way her mother had wanted her to continue, according to Bert, who was an Episcopalian. Blanche was a Presbyterian and she thought that Catholics were strange folks whose ministers sang in a foreign language at their services and claimed the power to forgive sins. So here were two Protestants obligated to raise a child Catholic. Blanche was doubtful, but went ahead and met Mary one day after school and walked with her to St. Francis' school on Eagle St. to meet with a nun to discuss Mary receiving Catholic Religious Instruction each Wednesday afternoon for an hour. When the nun realized my grandmother was a Protestant, she crossed herself and sat farther back behind her desk. Mary was whisked down the hall to a classroom and Blanche went outside to pace back and forth in front of the school, fretting about having just placed her little friend and step-daughter in the hands of a woman weird enough to dress like a danseuse in a medieval ritual. Unfamiliar with the rosary, Blanche couldn't for the life of her think of how the giant 3 foot chain and musket balls slung from the waist of Sister Gloomata could be used for anything but torture. But when Mary came outside an hour later visibly unchanged and her clothing not disturbed, Blanche sighed with relief and took her for an ice cream cone.

My grandfather Bert began his own furnace business in the back of their house on Steuben St. next to a bar on the corner of Louisa St. (I remember it later as The Hollywood, but wish I could remember the Irish name it went by for years before that.) Blanche helped him with the business but continued to hire out.

After Bert died in 1948 she came to live with us in our three bedroom flat on Taylor Ave. I have a vivid memory of my mother and grandmother on a late summer afternoon giggling like young girls while they sat at the kitchen table stripping peas and peeling potatoes for supper. They were indeed girlhood friends. On Sunday mornings we would go to Mass, dropping my grandmother off at the Presbyterian Church on Howard Avenue on the way. Blanche continued to work and even tried to pay rent to my father who would not hear of it. So instead she brought home cookies and donuts from Hemstroughs Bakery whenever she got paid. We all grew a size.

Blanche had a minor stroke in the summer of 1957 that left her lip with a permanent twist. Eating and drinking became noisy problems for her. Though it pains me greatly to remember and admit it, three young boys at the table with her in the evening could hardly keep from giggling at her slurping, even though we did feel bad for her. My mother watched Blanche with growing concern, her attention wavering only to sometimes get up and slap one of my brothers. Or me, of course.

That morning in October Blanche was ironing curtains for a lady on Louisa St. who had not been able to do her own housework for many years. I don't know if she ever took any pay for that job. The woman remembered my grandmother saying to her, "My husband Bert and I used to live around the corner, don't you know." The woman thought that was a strange thing to say since they both knew it very well. And then Blanche collapsed, taking the ironing to the floor with her.

My grandmother's life contained everything that really mattered. It wasn't full of riches or socially important particulars, but it was a full life. It had all the good and bad, all the joy and tears and pain and even the awe, I imagine, that a body could take. All that makes us human.

David Griffin

copyright 2007

The Windswept Press
Saugerties, NY

Write to me. I'd be happy to hear from you. davidgriffin@cisbec.net