

Grandma's Story

I was born May 23rd, 1912, and named Thelma May. "Thelma" came from a book Mom had read before I was born, and she liked the heroine's name, Thelma, of course. Mom said her mother's name was Lilly May, so my middle name was after her. It was years later that the name May was spelled Mae. It was also the month of my birth.

When I was 6 weeks old, Mom and a friend took me on the street car to Summit Beach Park. The park was located on the edge of Summit Lake in Akron, Ohio, where I was born. I was taken on the merry-go-round. In later years when this story was told, the boys [brothers] would say I was dizzy and that the merry-go-round trip caused it.

My earliest memory was when I was 2 years old. I was asking [Mom] one day if the event I was talking about happened in Zanesville. (I told how I remembered walking in a hilly place, coming to a bridge, Mom and I stopping, while she showed me the big goldfish in the pond below. We threw pieces of bread in the water and watched the fish gobble it up. When the bread was gone, we left the bridge and went left, up a steep hill. At the top, we stopped under a small tree, and Mom said, "Your sister is buried here.") Mom said that [this event] happened just a month or two after I was two. Arvedia [sister] died in Akron at age 15 months. She was buried in Zanesville, Mom's home.

When 2½ years of age, I recalled looking out a low, but large, window. It was raining very hard and I was watching chickens in the back yard. They had feathers down their legs. I called out excitedly, "Oh look, these chickens have stockings on." Another time, we were visiting in Zanesville. Grandma had turned the 2nd floor of their home into a "flat" (an "apartment," now-a-days) when Mom's brother, Uncle Chris and Aunt Edna lived. I was in the cupboard, eating apple butter with my finger, and Aunt Edna, who always loved to catch me in the wrong, came into the kitchen. "Oh Thelma, you shouldn't do that." I just kept on and said, "This is my Grandma's house," as if it was OK with Grandma, which it was. [Note along the edge of the paper, can't be read.]

My brother, Sherman, was born when I was 18 months old. I not only bossed him about as soon as he was old enough to play and walk. [But] Mom said I "mothered" him so, the poor kid didn't know who his mother was. Called her "Mom" and me "Mommer" until he started school at 6 years. Other kids made so much fun of him that he soon stopped it.

About that time I heard two teachers talking and saying how beautifully and well-dressed I was. I didn't think so - most of my clothes were made from Grandma's old clothes. Actually they weren't old - a dress maker moved into Grandma and Grandpa's home twice a year to make new clothes for Grandma: Always a new suit twice a year - a spring suit, and a fall & winter one, plus a new spring coat one year, a winter one the next. Plus several summer dresses [were made in the spring]. And in the Fall, her winter clothes were made. Mom discovered that the out-of-season clothes were packed in trunks in the

attic. She told Grandma she'd love to use the beautiful material for me. So 2 or 3 times a year, a large package would arrive. Most of the material was either plain [or] small prints, stripes, etc., that could be used for me. The long skirts had plenty of material for a girl's dress. I went to school, one day, crying - the teacher sat me on her lap & wanted to know what was wrong. I really began to "bawl," then I said "I half [= have] to wear my Grandma's - Grandma's old clothes." The teacher said I had beautiful clothes and everyone thought so. I still didn't think so, and after school I'd run and call our new puppy - he'd jump up, grab the bottom of my dress, and rip a piece out of it. This happened several times before I was caught. The dress was ruined, and only then did I realize how nice my dresses were.

Until 5 years of age, we had oil lamps, but we moved to a larger home with gas light. I remember black brackets on the wall, that Pop would light at night, and it seemed almost as light as day.

We moved again the summer I was 7. It was really a big house and we had electric. I had never heard [about] or seen an electric light until we moved there. By that time there were four of us kids - I, the only girl. The youngest was just under 2 years old.

Three of us would run through the downstairs, turning on the lights to the tune of, "Turn off those lights," by Mom - we didn't stop. We didn't stop until Pop caught us - and his, "Stop that right now." I am sure we were all afraid of him - he was mean and very loud. As the kids got older - he would beat them with a razor strap for the smallest thing. One time he made a "cat of 9 tails," as he called it. It consisted of a two-foot (or so) handle and three 5-6 foot-long, 1½ inch [wide] leather strips. He used it once - it was horrible. The kids were on the floor screaming, and he kept hitting them. They were full of welts. I was about 11, and made up my mind I'd find it and cut it up, no matter what happened to me. I never found it, but he never used it again. If one of the boys didn't get rid of it, then Mom did.

She [Mom] was as afraid of Pop, as we were. When I was 4, I came into the house and heard Mom crying, and saying, "Stop, stop." Pop had his razor strap and hit her across the shoulders and back, till I watched the blood running. I remembered thinking I'll stop him - but can't remember another thing about it, as things got black. [?]

When I was 15, I hurried to pack the boy's lunch and got them off to school, because Pop had stayed home from work that day with a headache - yet he could scream at everyone as loud as he could. I hated the days he got headaches. I knew Mom was in for trouble that day, and didn't know what to do. [I] wanted the boys out of there, because he usually beat them when he was "out of sorts." I was packing my lunch - no time to eat - and Mom was getting Pop's breakfast - he wanted pancakes, eggs, sausage and coffee. I wondered how he could eat all that if he was sick. She was dishing it up when he stormed into the kitchen, yelling, "What the h---' keeping you --- ----- -----. " I heard Mom say, "It's ready" - then no sound, until I heard her choke. I looked - she was on the floor, turning blue, and he was choking her. I had a pan with hard-boiled eggs (for my lunch), so I dumped them out and went around the round table. He was on his knees. I raised the

pan high and brought it down hard as I could [on his head]. He dropped Mom and started to chase and curse me, as I ran around the table. I suddenly realized I had to get out of there, and ran upstairs and locked my bedroom door. He beat on the door & ordered me out. I told him if he touched me or Mom ever again, I'd have him arrested and tell the police how he always beat us and Mom. Finally I said I was coming out, and if he touched me, he would go to jail. He quieted a little, got dressed, and left the house. I didn't go to school at all that day - too upset.

I never spoke to him for almost 3 years, and didn't eat at the table when he was there. He had the habit of talking all the time he ate, and we couldn't interrupt to ask for food to be passed. I was tired of leaving the table hungry because of him, so I kept asking for someone to pass the peas. He just glared and wouldn't do it. I said, after the third time, "Please pass the peas, I'm hungry." I was on his left. He put his arm back and hit me in the face as fast and hard as he could. The chair and I fell. When I was able to move, I got up, left the table and went to my room. I never ate at the table when he was home after that. This is just a small sample of his meanness.

We always had outside toilets and wells. People began putting bathrooms in their homes, and city water, as soon as the city put water and city sewers under the streets. That was a mess - dirt streets were bad enough, but digging deep ditches for tiles and pipes kept everything in the house dusty. Pop wouldn't put in the water and sewer - he said Mom wanted it just because she and us kids were too lazy to pump water. Of course, he never did it. Wash day was a nightmare.

Neighborhood boys all seemed to get bikes when about 13 - girls got skates. We got neither. His reason: we might break an arm or leg, and that would cost him money. I had been wondering what he did with all his money, but found out he had women friends, and spent it on them.

I enjoyed school - even got to teach 1st or 2nd grades when teachers didn't come in that day. (I was in 7th grade at this time.) Once I taught 2nd grade for 2 weeks and kept-up my studies. The principal told me how surprised and pleased he was, to have the regular teacher find that her class was up-to-date on their studies, and had learned a lot. Of course, that couldn't happen now - and I wonder why I was chosen. Surely it was illegal then, maybe the school couldn't find a substitute.

I've always had a garden. How we kids hated to pick peas and beans! We always had a bushel or a bushel-and-a-half, when we picked. We had to string the beans, and they really had strings - not like the stringless beans of today. Our fingers would get sore. But I was glad to have peas, corn, tomatoes, beans, carrots in the winter. We had lots of cherry, apple and peach trees. One year - I was 17 - Mom and I seeded and canned 90 quarts of cherries. The boys picked them. The stores didn't have the fresh vegetables and fruit in the winter, like we do now. At Christmas time, we had oranges, but no other time.

We usually had steak on Saturday nights. Mom took a streetcar to Akron every Saturday morning. Sometimes I went, too. [She] would buy any clothing that was needed, and also

a shopping bag full of meat. We had fresh steak that night, a beef or pork roast and sometimes chicken, on Sundays, and usually cornstarch pudding for dessert. Cake and pie was for holidays and birthdays.

Sometimes Pop would take us for a ride in his Ford touring car, on Sundays, but only if Mom gave him \$5.00 for gas. It was years before we discovered our rides took about 2-2½ gallons. Mom's youngest brother lived with us after Grandma died, when I was 5, and he was 12. Grandma left Mom and her brothers money. The court gave Mom \$5/week for Cecil's board, plus his clothes. Pop didn't give Mom enough money to run the house, so she kept spending her money [from Grandma], so it was gone when he [Cecil?] left, when I was almost 16.

We kids couldn't stay after school for any reason, or visit our schoolmate's homes. I was married 2 or 3 years before realizing that other families had such a different home life. Before that, we kids thought all men were as mean as Pop was. It's surprising we survived as well as we did.

Life was simpler then - young people might be better today, if we could go back to a simple life.

We had nice Christmases - for a couple hours in the [morning]. Pop would be yelling, by afternoon, and beating someone. Trying to stay out of his way, spoiled every Sunday and holiday. It was easier weekdays, because the time together was shorter, and he often went away in the evenings by himself.

Note: This account was written by my grandmother, at my request, to give us an idea of what life was like, when she was young. But it is not what we expected, for - as we found out later - thinking about her childhood brought many painful memories.

The 2nd-to-last paragraph was apparently an attempt to change the tone of what was being written - to move away from the painful memories, and toward the type of reflections that most people talk about, when mentioning the "good old days." But the last paragraph shows that this attempt was unsuccessful: The "good old days" didn't exist.

This account was never finished. I did not receive a copy of it, until after her death, when it was found among her belongings, with my name on it.

This type of pain is often transmitted from generation to generation. As mentioned near the end of the story, her childhood experiences influenced her expectations of what the man she would marry should be like. Perhaps the same thing happened to her mother, and her mother's mother - on back through unknown generations. And it would probably have

happened with my mother, and with my sister. But God began working to change the family when my mother was young. And he continued working in my own generation.

I have heard very little about what life was like, when my mother was young. For the most part, it is hidden from me. (I know more about my grandmother's childhood, than about my own mother's childhood.) I have been able to glean only a few bits of information, from isolated comments made down through the years. But those few comments suggest that reflection on those days would bring mostly pain. What I myself saw, in later years - even after God had begun to make changes, and conditions were better - would seem to confirm that.

Living under such painful conditions affects not only the daughters - the future mothers. It also has an effect on the sons - the future fathers. They, too, learn what to expect from women, and how to interact with the one they would marry. And so, the pain is transmitted from generation to generation, through both son and daughter.

For myself, my grandfather was one of the greatest influences in my childhood. Most likely, I would have been just like him. It took his sudden death, to break the "chain" of pain. His death was the first of four life-changing events in my life, but it was years before I understood this. In keeping with his promise, God uses all things to accomplish good in the lives of those who love him - and this was no exception.

But that's another story.