

Family Secrets

By

Merrie Sue Holtan

My grandpa, Dan, was a complex character. He was a sweet Norwegian gentleman who liked to fix, build and fish and a persuasive salesman who could negotiate tough deals. He was a town mayor who argued for a community swimming pool for kids in 1917 and a musician who sang with the local opera company. He was an entrepreneur, innovator and community activist. Years after his death, people told me that our town would never have been the same without grandpa and his brothers.

Grandpa's father, John Eggen, and his four sons brought the first wagon company to our town, and in 1911, they became the first automobile dealers. I remember my grandpa telling me stories and showing me scrapbook clippings about the day horseless carriages came to our town. The newspaper report said, "Wonder of Wonders! An automobile was seen on our streets last week and many of our people haven't got the rubber out of their necks yet." One year later a clipping read, "This town is likely to be dubbed, 'the automobile city' if our citizens continue to acquire horseless carriages at the rate established during the past three months. No less than three cars have found owners here since May 1st."

Not only were the brothers businessmen, they also promoted the arts at the local opera house. The brothers sang with the city operetta company while my grandma Kate accompanied on piano. I was most intrigued when Grandpa showed me a picture of the entire cast with painted black faces. Grandpa told me it was called a black face comedy, and he even gave a playbook so I could practice jokes about Roscoe and Rastus.

Most of Grandpa's career was spent at the wagon company, but before retirement, he left the company and operated a filling station. Grandpa wanted to have a filling station to top all filling stations. He wanted a station to bring people to town and had a unique marketing strategy. Next to the station, which sat a crossroads of two main highways, Grandpa hand built a fieldstone cage. He supplied the cage with three monkeys and a squirrel to entertain tourists. The squirrel had a bare looking tail, because the monkeys constantly pulled out the hair.

Grandpa's most brilliant idea was to order alligators from Florida to keep in the pond near the stone cage. He had seen an advertisement in the newspaper, so he sent off for the gators, which arrive in town by train. And arrive they did. After a community-wide naming contest, the gators were christened Tydol and Ethyl, after gasoline brands of the day.

It was good news – bad news, however. One day Ethyl took a hike. She was gone, never to be seen again, escaped into the river, which flows into the Mississippi. Grandpa felt Tydol became despondent, and so he ordered another gator.

In the winter, the squirrel and monkeys came home to live with my grandparents. The fur creatures, in a cage on the third floor of the house, chased around, rang toy bells and threw food at all hours of the night. I never knew what happened to the gators.

My best days with my grandma and grandpa happened when my mom was gone. I got to walk across the street from the school to their house, where there was an abundance of ice cream and crackers to eat and solitaire games to learn. I never understood the mix of ice cream and saltines together, salt and sweet, but it worked on the taste buds. After playing Maltese Cross solitaire and rummy, Grandma would read to me from *Grit* magazine, usually the Uncle Wiggley stories. Uncle Wiggley was some kind of animal, rabbit maybe?

Most times Grandpa wasn't home yet. In his retirement, he spent time with other men at the Wild West Club. I still wonder what mysteries happened at the Wild West. It was a spooky looking place, located in the basement of the post office and could only be reached by going down a long, dark stairway. It was a place only men could enter, explained my grandma. The windows were always covered with paper or boards.

Grandma thought they smoked cigars and cigarettes down there, talked about "men things" like fishing, discussed politics, played cards and had a few "snorts" of whiskey. I was curious but too scared to want to enter the Wild West. It seemed like a sacred *men* place and I knew I didn't belong. Nor did I want to.

Another secret place where my grandpa went on Monday nights was the Masonic Lodge. Talk about a mystery. One year my mother was Worthy Matron and my grandpa was Worthy Patron of the Eastern Star. The women dressed in white gowns and the men in suits, and they practiced serious rituals in some kind of foreign language behind closed doors. The kids of the "star people" were dragged along to meetings but had to stay in the basement while the secrets happened upstairs. It was freezing down there, and usually I practiced my baton in a small stone-walled room with a very low ceiling. We could hear piano music as we strained to hear what was happening upstairs. Then the footsteps. Clomp, clomp, clomp. Then silence. Then inaudible words. Then more music, footsteps, clomping, silence, words. This went on for about an hour. We "star kids" had all seen the Wizard of Oz, and we began to conjure up stories that our parents might be good witches, since they all dressed in white and talked in a different language. At least we knew they were not wicked like the Witch of the West.

One Monday night, I was allowed to read a bible passage during the ceremony because my mother and grandpa, the Worthy Ones, were being honored. I was in awe of the holy

atmosphere, the candles, the gowns, and the ornate chairs. It was as if our friends and neighbors who were members of the “star” had been transformed into heavenly beings, all in white. And they were sitting at north, east, south, west positions, as if representing points of the star. Even though this experience in the holy place had broken part of the mystery of the “star” for me, I was still glad to be out of there. At least I felt reassured that my mom and grandpa weren’t witches as I had sometimes suspected.

There were even more mysteries at my grandpa’s house. The best part about being there were all the secret places to explore while Grandma worked for hours with her flower garden. The first place I usually searched was the candy containers on Grandma’s porch. I found the round red tin full of the special occasion white snowball candy, Divinity. I stuffed myself with three pieces. It was so sweet it made my teeth itch. I ignored the fact that I felt sick to my stomach from the candy and headed for other explorations. I rummaged through jewelry boxes and old scrapbooks. I found and learned to light my first matches in the basement workshop. I made perfume from all the ointments in the bathroom medicine chest. Somehow they all came out smelling like Absorbine Junior. I searched through old clothes and found the Zane Grey series of books in a cedar chest at the foot of the bed in my grandparent’s bedroom.

In all my explorations of Grandpa’s house, I would have to say his personal closet was best of all. I didn’t go near the closet much, because it had an aura about it. It seemed to hold the most family secrets. I could sense these were his most precious treasures. It was like being part of the Wild West or the “Star.” It felt and even smelled like Grandpa in there. The sense of mystery excited me. Where should I start? This particular exploration, I set two suitcases on top of each other so I could reach the summit. I would start with the box on top. It was an interesting box, a rectangle. I thought it must have been clothing.

I hauled the box on to the bed and worked away at the taped ends. He had sealed this one up really tight. What I thought would be the essence of my grandpa's soul in this box turned out to be nothing but a bunch of folded sheets. Well, since it had been so much trouble to open, I thought I'd unfold it. Might be something else in the bottom. They weren't sheets at all. It was some kind of robe like the people wear to sing in the Episcopal Church choir on Sunday mornings. I figured it might be something for "Star" until I found the tall white hat. It looked like a dunce cap, tall and pointy. And the scariest part was two holes cut in the hat for eyes, like a grotesque mask. I hear the back door slam. Grandma was done with her flowers and was coming to start supper.

As fast as I could, I stuffed the fabric back into the box and scaled the suitcases to return the parcel to its proper place. After descending the suitcase tower, I closed Grandpa's close door forever. I would not explore here again. Now my worst fears were realized. My Grandpa was a witch.

Grandma Kate's Divinity

"So sweet, it'll make your teeth itch"

Combine 2 ½ cups sugar, 2/3 cup light corn syrup, ½ cup water, ¼ tsp. salt in a 2 quart saucepan. Stir over low heat until sugar dissolves. Cover tightly and boil 1 minute to melt sugar crystals on side of pan. Uncover and cook gently, without stirring, to 265 degrees on candy thermometer, or until a little mixture in cold water forms a firm ribbon that bends when lifted from water. Beat two eggs in large mixer bowl until stiff. Pour syrup in a thin stream over egg whites, beating at high speed until mixture loses its gloss. Add 1 teaspoon vanilla and ½ cup chopped nuts, if desired. Drop by teaspoonfuls into greased shallow pan. (Do not scrape the saucepan.)