

Grandma Bevins

By Dan Breyfogle

Most kids my age grew up with two Grandmothers, but I only remembered one, and the entirety of my memories of my grandma were developed before I reached the age of seven. My Grandma Breyfogle passed away shortly after I was born and neither of us ever met, not that I would have remembered it. So for me, the picture of a grandmother is embodied in my maternal grandmother Bevins.

Grandma Bevins (Beulah Bell (Lock) Bevins) remains in mind as a woman with gray hair wearing a big apron. I was told that she was short in stature, but to a young boy I never noticed that. What I do remember is that her heart as big as she was. We would visit her several times a year and I remember going to stay with her one summer with Mom and my brothers. We got on a Gray Hound Bus and rode from Estherville to Cherokee, IA.

I remember the bus ride as an adventure without any real knowledge of why we were on it. We got to set up high and look at the cars passing us and of course to a bunch of young boys there was the adventure of "checking out the bus bathroom." When we arrived at the bus depot in Cherokee Grandma picked us up in her blue car, which I think was an early 50's vintage Chevy. Grandma had her dog Cheater with her. Cheater was a Boston terrier I believe, the little pug nosed variety with block spots.

When we would see cows in the fields as we would drive Grandma would holler "Count the cowies Cheater, count the cowies." The dog would jump up against the windows and go crazy barking. I remember thinking that the dog could actually count them. I don't remember playing with Cheater once we got there, which is unusual because we were always crazy about dogs as kids.

I'm not sure how many of my memories about her happened in that one visit. Perhaps some of what I will mention here occurred over several visits, but they are the little glimpses I have of her so many years later. Grandma lived in the town of Quimby, IA. I knew it was a small town, not nearly the big city like Estherville where we lived. I of course say this tongue in cheek; Estherville was a small rural community of 8000 people. But in my mind it was a city whereas Quimby was a wide spot in the road. But it was a town that was fun to visit. There were three streets in Quimby based on my early childhood recollections. Actually there were more, but my experiences only led me to recall three of them.

First there was the street from the highway to Grandmas street. I know we would turn off the highway leading to Quimby and drive on this street that ended at Grandmas driveway next to the house. Grandma's street ran the opposite direction and if you turned right out of her front door and walked a long way (remember I was 5 or 6) you would end up on the other street, which was "downtown." The downtown street had a small post office, Browns Grocery, and a beer hall. If you turned right on the downtown street you ended up at the big river bridge.

Grandma's house was painted white and it seemed old to me. It had a big front porch with a roof over it. Inside the front door with its big oval glass was the dining room which had a big oil stove, the only heat in the house. Leading off this room to the left was Uncle Bill's bedroom. This was a small room with a small bed and we didn't go in there much. On the other side of the oil stove was a door to the bathroom. Directly opposite the front door was the kitchen door and to the right of the front door was the living room.

Grandma's bedroom door was in the living room beside the door that led upstairs. Upstairs there was Uncle Jack and Uncle Rogers' bed, right beside the stairs and then another room that I wasn't really clear about who called it theirs. I would usually sleep in the bed by the stairs and in the morning I would snooze in the dresser that set against the handrail. Jack, a former Marine and heavy equipment operator, had neat stuff in the drawers, bullets and stuff a kid would like to look at.

Grandma made rag rugs and had this big huge loom that would set in the dining room. It was full of ropes and strings and had a big shuttle that she would slide back and forth, as her feet would work the pedals. Other times when we would visit it wouldn't be there. The dining room didn't look like most dining rooms that a person thinks of. It rarely had a table in the middle of it but it seemed like we would spend a lot of time in there horsing around.

The old oil stove had a smell all of its own and of course we were to stay away from it when it was hot. But in the summers it was always cool and we could mess with the vents on the side. It was a great place to pinch a little guy's fingers as I remember. Beside the oil stove was a chair where Grandpa would put on his shoes and as an adult I suppose it was the warmest place in the house to remove those shoes when coming home cold from work.

As I mentioned, Bill's room was a small room off the dining room and unlike the room we identified as Jack and Roger's, Bill still lived in this room. He was a confirmed bachelor and was a great storyteller that we looked forward to seeing on our visits. I think we would occasionally sleep in here when we arrived too late to disturb others by going upstairs, but it was a rare occasion at best.

The kitchen in this house was perhaps the noisiest and busiest place in the town of Quimby. It seemed that everything in the world went on in that kitchen and all at once. Perhaps the noise was based on the fact that my 3 brothers and I spent more time in this room than the others and that voices seemed to echo around the room that had a wall of white steel cabinets. Or perhaps it was because whenever we were there many of our cousins and their families would come to town to see us.

But regardless of the noise and confusion the room was full of the smells that mark my memories of the house. Like so many families at this time, fried food was a primary part of every meal. The minute I walked into the kitchen I could smell fried bacon, regardless of the time of day. Now my mother did remind me later in life that grandma, like all

good cooks of the day, had a can of bacon dripping setting on the back of the stove and never hesitated to use it for frying any food that hit her skillet.

Many people have fond memories of a special dish or style of cooking that their grandmothers made for them. And so it is with me. Grandma always had fried chicken for us, either fresh out of the skillet or cold in the refrigerator for a snack. But unlike my mothers fried chicken (which I still think is the best) Grandmas had a unique taste that I could not identify. It took me until I was an adult to finally identify a taste that I remembered from my childhood.

We visited an aunt who fried chicken for us and aside for the same smell the minute I bit into it I knew instantly it was my grandmother's chicken. And as an adult my tongue immediately told me that the taste was black pepper, lots of black pepper. But to a child it was simply Grandma's chicken.

Holiday events at the Bevin's house always brought out the best dishes and somehow a huge table would appear in the dining room. I'm not sure where this table was most of the time, but at Christmas the room was filled with this huge table and many chairs. As big as this table was, it simply didn't have enough room for all of us. So my three brothers and I would eat at the kitchen table with our cousin Rick. It seemed like we were being shunned, but later in life we understood that it was better to let us have a table to ourselves than to try to fit into a crowded table where conversation sometimes interrupted the meal.

And the referee for these roukus events was grandma. Somehow she had a way of controlling the over six-foot tall men that would always find something to disagree about. This short round little lady would get in between the brothers and peace would return with a few well-chosen words from grandma.

In one visit with grandma my older brother Dave and I got into a spat over something and Grandma did her best to calm us down without raising her voice. But whatever we were arguing about seemed more important than her quiet words so we were very soon back at each other. So grandma sent us to the chicken yard to pull weeds. On this particular visit there were no chickens in the fenced in area so the weeds had grown up into a thicket.

I don't remember her voice or exact words, but I am sure her thought was something like, "if you have enough energy to fight then you can work some of it off pulling these weeds."

I was having trouble pulling the very tall weeds and instead of just working on the weeds I could pull I started crying about it. Grandma must have been at her wits end with us and she came out into the fence, pulled the weed I was having trouble with and gave me a swat on the hind side with it. She sent me to the dining room to set in grandpa's chair and told to calm down.

I was hurt, Mom wasn't here to protect me and I sat on this chair all alone sobbing over the swat and the hurt of having grandma being angry. I probably wasn't more than 4 or 5 at the time and didn't set there for more than a couple minutes when grandma came back into the house. She gently pulled me off the chair into her arms and turned to set in grandpas chair. She had me on her lap and hugged me closely while rocking back and forth. I can remember to this very day the smell of her perfume and her gentle voice soothing me. She didn't apologize for the swat, but I knew in my child's mind that all was right in the world.

And that was grandma, as I said at the start her heart was as big as she was. I have one other memory of interacting directly with grandma. I had fallen and skinned a knee and she wanted to apply some ointment to my wound, that I am sure was nothing more than a minor thing at best. I was afraid it would sting and grandma said, "well if it stings I'll throw it out in the yard."

This seemed to be the key to allowing its application. And sure enough, it stung, and true to her word, she took my hand and led me to the back door. It was dark outside but from the light by the back door I watched as the white glass jar arched high into the air as grandma threw it outside. Somehow this made the sting go away and I never mistrusted what she said again.

I have one final memory of grandma, and it was when a highway patrol officer stopped her as we drove from Cherokee to Quimby. I don't think she was stopped for an infraction of the law, I suspect it was a routine check of the vehicle and license. Grandma turned the car off, pulled the keys out of the ignition, and opened what looked like a bullet attached to the keys. It was one of those hollow plastic barrels with a chrome bullet shaped cap and her license was rolled very tightly inside it. I remember the officer saying something about it and grandma responded, "I never loose it this way."

The final memory of Grandma is very sad; it was when I found she had passed away. It was early winter and very cold, the snow was melting making icicles on everything and I was coming home from school. I turned the corner in front of our house when dad stepped out of the back door. He was never home at this time of day and it shocked me.

His words were simple and to the point, "Go inside and be a good boy, grandma Bevins has passed away."

I knew what this meant and I remember the cold chill of the air on my face and the coldness I felt in my heart. Our visits with her were infrequent and short, but in my heart were thoughts of this wonderful grandma who cared about every child that entered her home. But there was no reality in her death at that moment. My parents protected us from this part of life by not taking us to funerals, and for that I think they were very wise. My last picture of grandma was not a body in a coffin, but a short round lady in a big apron frying chicken.

Christmas arrived and when we gathered for the holiday it just wasn't the same. The house was quieter, I think out of respect for the fact that she had passed away just weeks before, and I don't remember any loud conversations between the brothers.

There was of course plenty of food cooked by my mother and aunts, but it just wasn't the same. When it came time for presents I was handed a gift that was marked "To Dan from Grandma." I stared at it, it was almost scary to look at it and I really didn't understand how this could be. Of course as a child we don't understand that Christmas shopping begins long before the actual day. It was a toy truck and although it was painted a bright shiny red, in my mind it had no luster or sparkle, and I think at that moment I knew I'd never see Grandma again.