

Merle Edward Breyfogle

As Remembered by His Grandson Dan Breyfogle



Grandpa Breyfogle, the way I remember him



Merle Edward Breyfogle, my grandfather on my father's side, was a man I did not get the chance to know. He passed away when I was too young to really understand. I do remember his passing, we stayed in his house while he was in the hospital and I can remember parents and family members rushing to the hospital after receiving phone calls. I also remember hushed conversations among adults while glancing at my brothers and me and realizing now they were trying to shelter us from the reality of life, which is that death is part of life.

But that is not what I want to remember about Grandpa Breyfogle. I have some dim memories of visiting him and seeing him sitting at a large roll top desk wearing a t-shirt and smoking a cigarette. I can't remember him without the cigarette and it seemed he coughed a lot. Not a terrible scary cough, but a cough nonetheless. He wasn't a particularly large man but I do remember him having a large barrel chest as the one distinguishing feature and that he had jet-black hair. The color that is so black that in the sun it would look blue like a blackbird. He kept his hair oiled and combed straight back and I have it confirmed by others that he never showed a single gray hair, right up to his death at the age of 62.

Grandma Breyfogle had passed away the same year I was born so all my memories of Grandpa and his house was of him being a single person. The most vivid direct memory I have of Grandpa surrounds his work running filling stations. In his basement was a large piece of plywood on which was tacked all sorts of junk that he had pulled from flat tires over his many years working with automobiles that would limp into his station for tire work. I don't think there

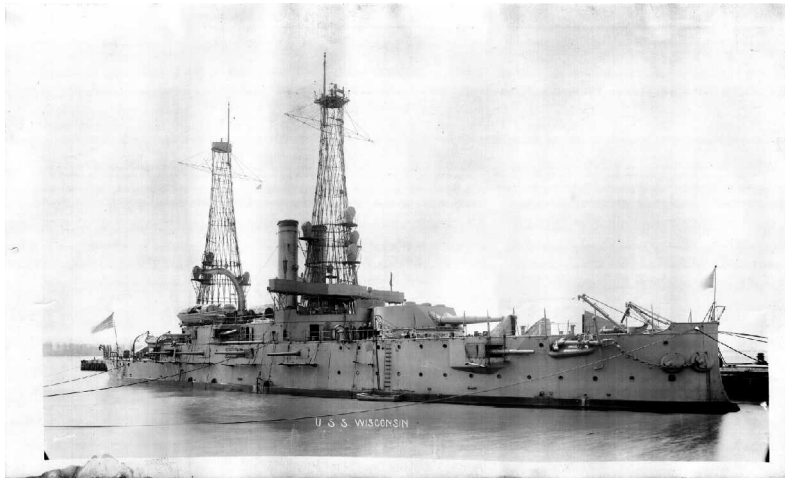
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is a child that met Grandpa that does not remember seeing this board and marveling at the myriad of items that can find their way through the casing of a tire. And of all the junk on this board the one piece that stands foremost in my memory is a piece of wood about 6 inches long.

I also remember his tattoos and his admonitions against ever doing that to myself. These were marks on his forearms that he had acquired while serving in the Navy during the First World War. He was not at all proud of them and would warn us that it was a terrible thing to do to your body. His house was nothing special, but it was fun to poke through his desk sneaking peeks at his treasures. He had lots of cigarette lighters, many of them with colorful images of cigarette brands on them and letter openers that looked like daggers.



I have a faint memory of a large picture on the wall of a navy ship and my brother David said Grandpa once told him stories about the ship, the USS Wisconsin, a turn of the century battleship. I also remember a very special tapestry that hung on the living room wall that I now have in my home. It was something my grandmother made and Dad remembers helping roll the yarn for it. There was also a small ivory carving on a shelf in the kitchen. It was a series of elephants holding each other's tails and walking across an arched shape piece of ivory. Dad told me his Uncle Art brought that back from Japan or China in his travels with the Navy.



Grandpa's Ship Picture

I mention these things because in my memory of him and his house I don't remember anything ever moving from it's assigned place. The furniture and pictures never moved, so on visits it was easy for me to find the favorite things to look at.



I have a picture in my office at work that reminds me of most of the stories I was told about him. He is sitting on the step of his filling station office with my father on one side and my Uncle Don on the other. Grandpa is wearing white uniform pants and shirt and a small black bow tie. His cap is like a fancy policeman's cap with a shiny black bill and a round emblem on the front. He is the picture of what every service station operator of the day looked like.

Mom and Dad would tell us about his stations that were always neat as a pin with the grass neatly mowed and the hedges clipped to perfection. One of his stations had a fishpond, the type that was built partially above ground level, and it contained large gold fish. Grandpa would feed them crackers and oatmeal and all the fish would rush to the surface to gobble up the crumbs he fed them. I never saw the station or the pond while he was running it, but with parents telling the stories I have built a crystal clear image in my mind of this place sparkling in the sun.

My Dad recently told me how Grandpa would hire Dad to mow the lawn with an old reel type mower. Grandpa would make sure the lawn-mowing job was done to perfection and then would pay Dad the princely sum of fifty cents. Dad also mentioned that he liked clipping the hedges but he would occasionally get a little close and Grandpa would need to remind him that he wanted a nice straight line on them.



Selling gasoline was the primary business along with tire repair, but he was also the "Simonize Guy" in town. In the 1930's and 40's the paint on cars was soft and lost its shine very quickly and it took a good amount of elbow action and a can of Simonize to bring back the beauty of those old finishes. Dad would often help buff them out under the watchful eye of Grandpa who would tell him how important it was to do a good job for the customer so they would return again and again. Dad tells how his arms felt like they would fall off after buffing that paste wax into the surface of those old cars but that Grandpa never seemed to tire, as they would work together on a car.

Grandpa had the unique experience of being robbed at gunpoint one evening as he closed the station. He told others that he had hid the day's receipts, as was his habit when two men pulled up and wanted gasoline. Grandpa found it unusual that they asked for Ethel, the higher priced gasoline but following the fill one of the men followed him in the station to pay. The man pulled a gun and demanded all the money. There was just a handful of change but the man took it and

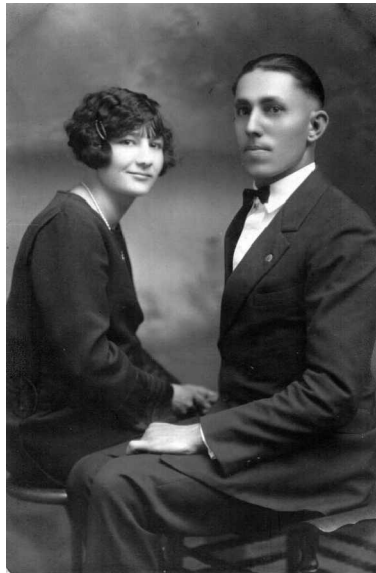
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they made their getaway leaving Grandpa angry that he lost his change and a tank full of the high priced gasoline.

Grandpa was like so many men of the early 20th century, he worked hard at his job, so he could provide food and shelter for his family, he didn't know what a vacation was, and accepted hard work as a way of life. He built his house and Dad tells how he heard stories of Grandpa digging the basement with a horse and what he called a slip shovel. The house was small and Dad remembers helping Grandpa add onto the house when Grandpa received a bonus check.

Grandpa showed Dad how to nail-on lath for plaster and Dad tells how Grandpa could lay wood shingles so fast that his hammer sounded more like a trip hammer. He would have the nails in his mouth and could lay and nail shingles at a very fast rate. Grandpa once told us boys how to find roof leaks, you go into the attic with a handful of twigs from a tree. When you see sunlight from below you push a twig up through the hole so when you go up on the roof you can see the bad spot.

And for the most part, this is what I know of Merle Edward Breyfogle. It is unfortunate that I didn't get a chance to know him better, but with the help of parents sharing stories about him I have an image of a hard working man who was dedicated to his family and who could ask for more?



Merle and Emma Breyfogle

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