

My grandmother was strong.
They followed plows and bent to toil.
They moved through field sowing seed.
They touched earth and grain grew.
They were full of sturdiness and singing.

MARGARET WALKER

by

Briana McLilly

To be born a woman during the Great Depression was hard. It was even harder to lose your mother before your sixth birthday. These two events shaped the life of a person. They changed a once happy childhood into an ordeal. Both of these things happened to my grandmother, Margaret E. Green. She was born Margaret Elizabeth Letcher on July 15, 1930, in Leavenworth, Kansas. The oldest of three children, she had to grow up faster than most children when her mother, Margaret Salena Letcher, died during childbirth in 1936. After the death of her mother, Margaret's father was forced to leave Leavenworth to look for work. Margaret grew up with her grandparents just a few miles outside of Atchison, in northern Leavenworth County. Margaret's grandmother, Mary Patterson or "Grams" as she was lovingly called, was part Kickapoo Indian and lived only a few miles from the reservation.

Following her daughter's death, Grams wanted her grandchildren to live with her. She had raised six children and knew the ins and outs of child rearing. She knew it would be hard for a single man to raise young children. Grams also pushed for Margaret and her sisters to live with her because aunts, uncles and cousins would surround them. When Margaret reflects on her life she remembers her childhood with Grams fondly: "I

Briana McLilly graduated from ESU in December of 2002 with a BA in history and a BSE in Social Science. Currently, she is working on an MA in American history and an MAT in Social Science at Emporia State University.

loved living with Grams. She turned a very shy child into a social butterfly, and she never let me forget that I was special.”

Margaret was born into one of the worst depressions this country has ever seen, as well as one of the worst droughts. But, she says, “I really don’t remember the hard times. I remember that once I moved in with Grams she always had food on the table, in fact she would feed those who had nothing. As for the Dust Bowl you have to remember I was only a girl. I thought it was neat that dust blew around in swirls; I remember Grandpa talking about the low water level in the river. I also remember that it was hard for things to grow in our garden sometimes.” Perhaps following the death of her mother it was easier for young Margaret to focus on the swirls of dust and low water level. She points out that Grams and Grandpa never let them go hungry and they maintained the family better than their neighbors did.

When Margaret was old enough to go to school her grandmother decided that it would be better for her to go to Catholic school instead of the school on the reservation. Grams wanted to make sure that Margaret became a well-rounded person with a lot of different friends. Margaret remembers her first day of school: “When I started at the Catholic school I was a little scared because I did not know any of the children; I only knew those people from church. I really liked the interaction that I got from the sisters who all knew about my mother. My parish was a Black parish. Kansas was once called the state of milk and honey yet Black and white could not live together; we were not even allowed into town after dark. I suppose that this was best for all of us in the long run, it kept people safe. Life was not as bad as it was in the South but we did have two of everything [one for Black, one for white]. The sisters were good to me, they taught me a lot.”

Following this interview I thought about how so many African-Americans came to Kansas looking for a new type of freedom, yet experienced the same hardships as their Southern brothers and sisters. I was not surprised, however, after taking a closer look at Leavenworth. Prior to the Civil War, Leavenworth was a pro-slavery town; it is only logical that following the war race relations would remain the same, because old habits die hard. Another factor I considered was the hundreds of poor African-Americans who flooded Leavenworth following the Civil

War. Perhaps it was not the law that made the schools, churches and other facets of life segregated; perhaps it was also by choice, and gave African-Americans the opportunity to experience life on their own. However it was maintained, segregation shaped the lives of those who lived under it. When my grandmother talked about how she was treated by her white neighbors, she said she found them pleasant and without malice, she even played with their children.

Margaret graduated from high school at the age of 16. Following her graduation she moved to St. Louis, Missouri, to go to school to become a nurse. She had almost completed her degree when Grams got sick. Margaret came home to take care of her. "When Grams got sick, I was almost done with school but I decided to come home to help her. She had cared for me while I was sick and it was only fair that I do the same. It was not so bad that I came back; in fact I met your grandfather when I moved back home."

My grandmother met, fell in love with, and married my grandfather, Albert F. Green, over the course of a few years. They were married in March of 1952. When my grandmother married my grandfather she did not want to move back out to the country. He had different plans for her, however. They moved onto their own piece of land after they were married, and my grandfather, who grew up on a farm, taught my grandmother to love the land. They built a house and started a family. "When I married your grandfather I had no intention of living on a farm or anywhere near the country. Things changed for me when your grandfather bought the land that this house stands on; he changed my whole view of the land. He taught me to love it. We planted a garden, fruit and nut trees, and built this house. I raised all four of my children in this house and I have watched my grandchildren grow up here. I love this house, this land, and I would never change it for the world."

Following the birth of her children Margaret opened a very successful catering business. She often catered parties of prominent officers who lived in Fort Leavenworth. She made the difference between success and failure of several restaurants with her new, innovative recipes and cooking skills.

Following the death of my grandfather in June of 1985 Margaret quit her business to spend more time with her family. She was a caretaker

for an elderly woman until the woman died. My grandmother now watches her youngest grandson during the day. She has instilled in him a love of the land; while I was visiting, she and Brandon were looking at seed catalogs deciding what to plant this year. As I left I heard Margaret begin to sing, "Home on the Range" to Brandon. Home on the range, in a nutshell, describes the life my Grandmother has led so far.

It is very interesting to look back at history through the eyes of someone you know and love. This type of social history allows us to get a well-rounded picture of historical events from the Depression to the Baby Boom. Such glimpses into the past allow us to observe the strength and wisdom that come from living through these historic events.