

MAXINE BOWMAN-STALEY

By

Heather Bowman Wright

My grandma, Maxine Bowman-Staley, is 77 years old and has lived in several places in Kansas, such as Humboldt, Centerville and now Emporia. She is a very bright and intelligent woman with a wonderful history and many experiences to share. She has an Associate of Arts degree that she obtained in night school after having children.

My grandmother was born on December 5, 1925 in Buffalo, Kansas, one of five children in her family. Soon after she was born, her family moved to a farm near Humboldt, Kansas. In Humboldt she attended several schools that have since been remodeled or destroyed. In her country school she was the only first-grader. There was no transportation system to school so she and her siblings walked one to two miles to school each day. She remembers that they traveled through many fields to take short cuts when going to school and to her grandparent's home. She said, "When I was growing up it was nothing for me to walk on isolated roads to go to school or visit family. The land was very peaceful, there was not a threat of drive-by shootings or kidnappings. If people stopped, it was because they wanted to help you, not harm you!" When my grandmother said this, I began to realize how much has changed in just a short period of time.

When her family moved to Humboldt, she noticed racial segregation. She said the town was divided at Bridge Street. Black people lived south of Bridge Street and whites lived north of Bridge Street. There was no crossing over Bridge Street in her time growing up. Grandma said the first time she interacted with Blacks was when she went to town school in the 7th grade. She remembers Humboldt as a very segregated community.

Heather Bowman Wright is a 2002 graduate of Emporia State University. She lives in Osawatomie, Kansas and is employed at Meridian, a Louisburg accounting firm.

The major event she remembers is the Great Depression. Many people in the area were without work and struggling to make ends meet. She said that President Roosevelt established the Public Works Administration (PWA), which really helped the people. Her uncle was provided work by the PWA putting stones on the slopes near rivers so the soil would not collapse. In return he would get paid a small wage and would be given commodities. Grandma said the commodities were the best part of the deal, because they provided lots of good food, such as cheese and large containers of peanut butter. She said her dad was one of the few lucky ones who found a job during the Depression. He took a job with the Stanley Pipeline, which meant he traveled a lot and was not home much. I believe this is what led to the frequent moves the family made.

When Grandma was a sophomore in high school, the family moved to Centerville, Kansas. The main difference she noticed between Centerville and Humboldt was the terrain of the land. Centerville had a lot of big trees and more hills and creeks than she had seen in Humboldt.

Her first day of school at Centerville started as a disappointment for her because she loved athletics and her new school did not have any athletic programs for girls. At the end of the day the school principal asked her if she would be interested in teaching the girls' gym class. She gladly agreed to teach it and even started the first girls' basketball team. The girls challenged the boys to play basketball on one condition: that they played by the girls' rules. The boys accepted the offer. On the day of the big game they had to play wearing skirts and hats. If their hats fell off it was considered a foul. This was a big accomplishment for my grandmother.

Among the most memorable social events that took place in the small town were the pine box suppers. The girls would prepare a supper and decorate the box to carry it. The boys would bid on the boxes in order to eat dinner with the girl who prepared it. Grandma's father worked for the oil line and he and his friends thought they would bid on her box so the price would go really high. When her box came up, the price continued to climb. At the end of the bidding a boy

(who would become my grandfather) paid \$20 for the box, which back then was a huge amount of money!

No one had a lot of money when Grandma was growing up, so another form of entertainment was to have square dances. Most of the square dances happened when a farmer was not satisfied with the performance of his workers. The workers would have to leave in March, so when they moved everyone would gather and have a square dance party as a going away party. Grandma said she went to a lot of these.

My grandmother had always wanted to be a nurse. She was planning to go to college in Michigan after high school. Instead she fell in love with my grandpa and started a family. She had five children. My father, her first child, was born at Grandma's mother's home in Centerville in 1946. Grandma's mother helped with the birth of the baby. Grandma's second child was born at home on a very cold day. The doctor who delivered the baby said he would never forget that birth because it was the coldest day in February, and he could feel the wind whipping through the cracks in the house as Grandma gave birth. The other three children were born in hospitals. This experience illustrates the change in access to technology in the late 1940s and 50s.

After Grandma's last child was born, she started working at the Osawatomie State Hospital while attending college at night to earn her Associate of Arts degree. She worked at the State Hospital for 28 years. To give me an idea of the changing value of money during her lifetime, she said that when she started at the state hospital she was paid \$150 per month. When she retired 28 years later she made \$1500 to \$1700 per month. It was a very good job and helped to pay the bills and get the family out of debt.

When I asked Grandma what big issues people talked about when she was growing up, she said politics. In her family, she said, "My mother and her family were Republicans and my father and his family were Democrats. They were very diligent about voting. Needless to say, their votes would just cancel each others' out. I, on the other hand, didn't care much about politics. In fact I have only voted one time for the President. My vote was for John F. Kennedy and he was assassinated!"

One of the biggest world tragedies in her lifetime was the bombing of Pearl Harbor. She said she was just as devastated after Pearl Harbor as we were after the September 11, 2001 attacks. She felt the United States was a very safe place to live but had to admit she started to wonder after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. She said the attack and the war changed the lives of many people. Several people she knew got married before the men went off to war.

Her older brother Junior was in the National Guard. He was home visiting the family in Humboldt when the news was sent that Pearl Harbor had been bombed and Junior was to leave immediately. No one knew where he was except Grandma. She was out on a date in Chanute and had seen him in town; she didn't want to tell anyone because she was not supposed to be dating and she knew she would be in trouble. So she told her parents, "I think he may be in Chanute."

Grandma said the war changed the role of women. It used to be that the women did not work outside the home, but the war changed this. Women worked in bomber plants and had to pick up the chores that the men used to do at home. Even the schools were involved with the war. Grandma's typing class in school typed the war ration books.

When I asked what kind of natural disasters she remembers, she told me the story of the tornado that hit her home. The sky was yellow and a very strong musty smell lingered in the air. They ran to shelter in the cellar. The storm did not last long and as they walked out of the cellar she saw that "the house was still standing and was only slightly turned on the foundation. The gasoline bottles were off the porch and scattered in the yard, the hay barn was gone, and the tree in the yard was twisted like a cork screw."

Technology has really advanced during my grandmother's life. When she was growing up everyone had crank phones and party lines. You could tell if it was your phone by the pattern of rings. If the phone began to make short beeps then it indicated an emergency was happening. Everyone on the party line would pick up the phone to find out where to go to render help.

At the end of our interview, Grandma put in a cassette tape into the tape player and pushed play. To my surprise I heard my *great grandmother's* voice. My grandma had interviewed her mother just

before she passed away. The tape was fascinating and I thought I would share a few of her words with you.

My great-grandmother was born in 1904. Her great-granddad came from Ireland and married a Cherokee Indian woman from Illinois. Great-Grandma talked of how they traveled by horse and carriage. The first time she ever saw a motor-powered vehicle was when her date (my great-grandpa) came to pick her up in one. She was scared of the car and refused to get in it!

Great-grandma's parents lived on a farm near Coffeyville, Kansas. She told the story of her father meeting the Dalton Gang. She said the gang used the family's horse water trough to get their horses a drink before they headed along their way. I thought "WOW, my family actually saw the Dalton Brothers!"

These are just a few of many recollections my grandmother and great-grandmother had when interviewed. For me, these interviews bring history into new perspective. I have often read history books and heard about the trying times of the Great Depression and the many inventions that the technology of the 1900s brought, but I never thought about how history affected my family. This project has given me a greater understanding of how my family has been affected by the past 100 years of change.