

Reminiscing With Mom

My 82-year-old mother is but a shadow of the woman and mother I have known for so many years. For the past five years or so, her energy level has steadily declined, and she has suffered weight loss. Unfortunately, she also inherited her family's history of hearing loss. For several years, she absolutely refused to accept this reality and wouldn't even consider the possibility of wearing a hearing aid. It is only recently that family members were able to persuade her to wear a hearing aid. It has helped some, but only enough to keep her abreast of 50 percent of the conversation going on around her.

I can sympathize with her. Even I have trouble following the shorthand, paragraph-swallowing interchanges that take place when her granddaughters begin to hold forth. Everyone talking at once, laughing, gesturing, interrupting, squealing, and talking so fast that it makes your head swim. Mom does better in one-on-one conversations, but she gets lost much of the time. She smiles, nods her head in assent, looks intently at the speaker, but I'm sure most of what is said is beyond her hearing capability.

On Wednesday, I went to stay with her while her husband was undergoing his heart x-ray procedure. I tried to lead her into conversation about my childhood memories of dad, the different places we lived, and some of the places we visited. At first, it was tough going, but finally she kicked into gear and began chatting and remembering with ease. I wondered to myself about some of the topics about which she chose to reminisce.

She talked about going to Father McGarry, the pastor of the Catholic Church in Colusa, California, to explain to him why she had to take her children out of the convent school before the end of the school year and relocate to Parker, Arizona, to be with her husband. My dad had purchased a harvester and a truck to transport it and was under contract with the U.S. government to harvest grain at the Japanese-American concentration camp in the spring and early summer of 1945. She felt obligated to ask for the priest's permission to make this move because there was no Catholic church in Parker, which meant we would not be able to fulfill our obligation to attend Mass on Sundays. Failure to attend Sunday Mass in 1945 was thought to be a mortal sin and carried with it the possibility of being condemned to hell for all eternity. He forbade her to go. She told him that she had made up her mind,

she had to go. After the ceremony of Benediction, he took her aside and said that he had reconsidered; by all means, she should go. How relieved she felt!

She told me of the triumph she experienced in the first days after she arrived in Parker. With my father, she went to the town's only bar, the place where everyone hung out after the day's work, and when she walked through the door (now she sat more erect, straightened her shoulders as she puffed herself up remembering that day), all eyes turned to look at her. So this was Ray's wife! She looked back at them, confident as could be. She hesitated before continuing, wondering half-aloud if she was betraying the memory of my father, but she went on. As she sat down at a table, she noticed my father's initials carved in the table together with another woman's. But that didn't bother her one bit! She was here now! And, as if to ensure that I did not think any less of my father, she said, Well, you could hardly blame him, he was so far away from home, all by himself. But I could see that she was still pleased with herself, these many years later, about the fact that she had beaten off all female predators in Parker, Arizona.

During our haphazard course of remembering this and that, she talked about an incident that happened during the time we lived in the Log Cabin on the Corlett Ranch. The incubator under which all the newly born chicks were huddling was leaking hot oil, and it had burned their skins because their feathers had not yet developed. She felt so sorry for the chicks that she scooped them into a large container and brought them into the kitchen and began to wash each one off. One of the hired hands, who came into the house for a drink of water, saw her washing the chicks and asked what on earth she was doing. She laughed now, as she had more than 50 years ago. Why I'm washing the chicks! He just couldn't believe his eyes.

And the time when we lived in San Jose, California, my brother and I were still small, and she took us on a streetcar, stroller and all. As she prepared to take her seat, holding on to both of us, the train jerked forward and the stroller shot down the aisle and hit the driver in the back, scaring him half to death.

This started us on a round robin of all the places we had lived: San Jose, Colusa (2nd & Oak, 4th & Oak, and across from Zumwalt's on Market St.), Ross, the Log Cabin in the rice country between Maxwell and Williams, St.

Helena, Parker, Arizona, the old hotel in downtown Tehachapi, and even in Vallejo on VJ day. All this moving before I was age 14; is it any wonder that I remain so unsettled?

She brightened up more and more as we jumped from remembrance to remembrance, until we both became confused about where we were when. It was great fun while it lasted, and mom seemed more at ease and confident again.