

Grandma and Spufendiker

If I had to sum up in one sentence who my grandmothers were, I would write that Grandma was a moral theologian, and Spufendiker was a card shark.

In the 1940's of my childhood years, Grandma was the name of my mother's mother, and Spufendiker was the name of my father's mother. Both were short of stature, but other than that, they were more like opposites. Grandma was a thin, cheerful, upbeat, and an active woman. Spufendiker was a heavysset, dour, passive, and sedentary woman. Both were in charge of their respective households, Grandma at the home ranch, west of Williams, and Spufendiker at her Colusa rental house at 2nd and Oak Streets.

During the long absences of my parents, I lived with Spufendiker and her husband, Art, known to me only as Pop. I was a frequent visitor to the ranch of Grandma and her husband, Joe, but he was known to me only as Grandpa. I liked both of my grandmothers, but I preferred the company of Grandma because she was pleasant, smiled a lot, and was quite talkative.

Grandma was a prodigious worker. From the predawn hours, after Grandpa lit the wood stove in the kitchen, Grandma worked until the late evening prayer of the Holy Rosary. She cooked three meals a day, which counted the noon meal for half a dozen, or more if it was harvest time, and she washed dishes, baked pies or cakes, cleaned house, washed the clothes and linens, ironed by hand, tended the yard and garden, canned fruit and vegetables, and mended; it seemed she was always busy. She did not drive, and she rarely left the home ranch unless she was going to Sunday Mass or was taken for a rare Sunday afternoon visit to one of her relatives.

In contrast, Spufendiker seemed to be semi-retired. Slow afoot, she moved about the house and kitchen doing her daily chores. Pop left early in the morning before she was up, took his lunch with him, and didn't return until late in the afternoon. Her house was empty, unless my brother and I were living there at the time, but of course, we would be off at school during the day. She cooked the evening meal, she ordered her groceries delivered from Chung Sung Market, she read and played cards, and if memory serves, she crocheted. She rarely left the house, she didn't drive, and to my knowledge, she never went to church.

Television, of course, was as yet unknown. I don't remember a radio, phonograph, or anything associated with music to be present. The print media consisted of the local newspaper, a weekly in Williams, a daily in Colusa. In Spufendiker's, home, there was the *Saturday Evening Post*, and at the ranch, a monthly farm publication of some kind. Neither home had a telephone. Liquor was forbidden at Grandma's, and no one smoked. Spufendiker smoked, Pop used a pipe, but there was no liquor in the house as I remember. I say Spufendiker smoked, although I am unable to conjure up an image of her doing so; I rely only on a memory that, because of war rationing, she sometimes bought cigarettes from Chung Sung's under the counter, as they said in those days. The only source of heat in either home was the wood-burning stove in Grandma's kitchen and the freestanding gas-burning stove in the corner of the dining room at Spufendiker's. Of course, neither home had air conditioning, although during the sweltering summers, Spufendiker and Pop slept in a sleeping porch, which had been built off the 2nd Street side of the house. Each house had one bathroom to accommodate family members, but at Grandma's there was an outhouse located next to the chicken yard that, as far as I could tell, was reserved for Grandpa's exclusive use.

I hesitate to characterize the daily lives of either Grandma or Spufendiker as innocent, but they were certainly simplified by the extent to which they were anchored to their homes and the never-ending daily work of providing sustenance and cleanliness for their families. (This might be the place to observe that during the lives of Grandma and Spufendiker, tomatoes tasted like tomatoes, peaches like peaches, and cantaloupes like cantaloupes, which is a pleasure that only a few readers of this essay have ever enjoyed.)

Grandma was the moral theologian for her husband and family – six boys, three girls – and for any grandchildren who might be staying at the ranch. For these farmers of French Canadian descent, Grandma served as moral arbiter and interpreter of the teachings of the Catholic Church – pray daily the Holy Rosary, attend Mass and receive Holy Communion on Sundays, go to confession once a week, don't eat meat on Fridays, marry in the Church, do not divorce, raise your children Catholic, and do not work on the Lord's Day. Keeping everyone observant of this religious regimen was a tall order, but she was up to the task. If 100 percent compliance was not always achievable, she was not harsh in her judgment, but neither did she yield any more moral

ground than was absolutely necessary in a particular case. If dispensations were required from time to time, she exercised her authority with understanding and good common sense.

I have no doubt Spufendiker was also the moral compass for her family and possessed a keen sense of right and wrong, but she was not a church-going person, nor, as far as I could tell, was she an overtly religious person. I can testify that she was a card shark. Cribbage was her game. I was old enough to learn to play, and she taught me. I enjoyed playing with her, and every night after supper she and I would play at least two rubbers of cribbage. Each of us would move our own pegs on the cribbage board, but with pencil and paper she also wrote down the score of each game when we finished, and she carried over those scores day after day, week after week. She was very meticulous about keeping the scores of her card games. The law of averages dictates that I must have won some games, but my own recollection is one of losing to her night after night, ad infinitum. She showed no mercy, and as each new cribbage intricacy manifested itself, she took time out to explain to me what I could have or should have done; but ignorance was no excuse, nor did it gain me any points. We were both card players, and there would be only one winner that night, and it certainly was not going to be her grandson.

Well, there you have it, the recollection of one grandson about his two grandmothers during World War II, written 61 years later. I don't believe that during this entire period of my childhood, my grandmothers ever met or talked with each other. They were worlds apart, living 16 miles from each other. I was their sole connection.

Curious.