

2-2-99

Mamie

One of my first words was "Mamie," my name for my maternal grandmother, the only grandmother I ever knew. She liked the name but would not let any of her other grandchildren call her that, that is, until I had siblings. It was the beginning of a very special relationship between the two of us. I never thought of her as anything but "Mamie," although I did learn to introduce her to my friends as my grandmother. She lived with us a large part of every year, and in my early years I was often her constant companion, undoubtedly a boon to Mother who had two more children in two-year gaps after my birth.

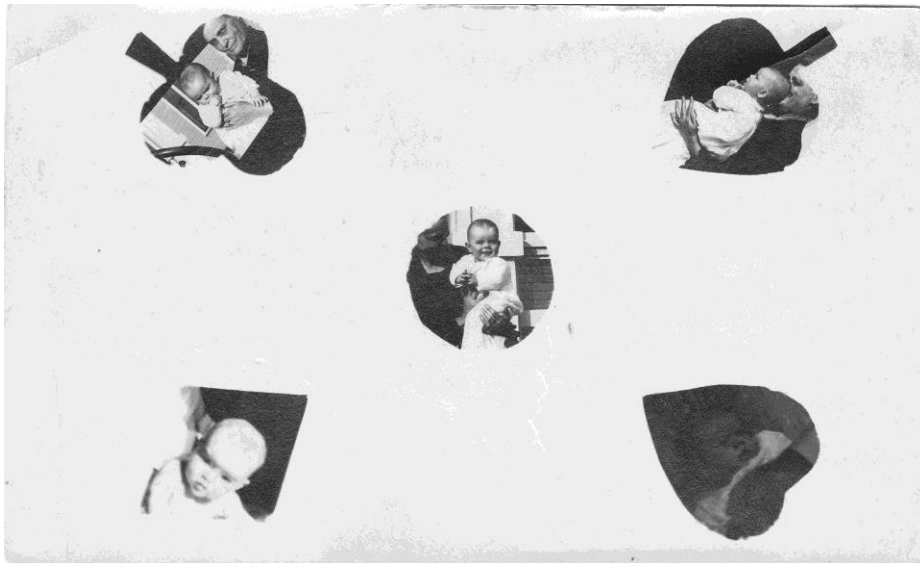


I remember Mamie's reading to me extensively from the Bible and talking about the meaning as she saw it. I recall being bewildered by the lengthy "begats" in the Old Testament, as well as by the archaic language of both the Old and New Testaments. Mostly I enjoyed hearing her read and talk, but the gist of what she read and said generally escaped me. For years I was puzzled by her frequent prayers with me which she always ended with commending me to "the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

I was early aware that life in our home took on a different tone when Mamie was with us. Daddy was out of town for weeks and months with his business, so perhaps that was the reason she spent so much time with us. He was impatient with many of her exacting, fundamentalist rules although I don't recall his ever confronting her with any of them. All playing cards disappeared while she was with us, and, without feeling too "put upon," we children entertained ourselves with quiet games of which she approved. We knew she disapproved fiercely of dancing and insisted on a fairly strict observance of Sunday. She would, however, contribute to the work of cooking and cleaning up after meals. We were not a drinking family, but neither were my parents entirely abstemious except in her presence. I learned early that any mention of alcohol was anathema to her. She also frequently quoted the Ten Commandments, sometimes in their entirety when she felt the occasion demanded it. When we visited her in Ardmore, Oklahoma, sometimes she and I were the only members of the family who went to church. When I was very small, she always took innocuous

little games for me to play and a cracker or crust of bread for me to eat during communion, a part of every worship service. Later she expected me to pay attention so that we could discuss the sermon as we walked home, whereas I would have loved to talk about the lovely fur collars that occasionally sat in front of me or about the velvets and silks many of the women wore.

But the importance of our relationship at the time seemed to be based in other areas. She was never idle. When she wasn't helping Mother with housework, cooking, and child care, she was always working on beautiful embroidery, hand knitting, crocheting, and tatting. Mother told me that when I was an infant, Mamie provided delicate tatted lace to trim the neck and sleeves of my clothes. Since she used the most fragile sewing thread for that decoration, she frequently had to replace the tattered lace after the garment had been laundered several times. Later she would tat or crochet medallions of a more durable yarn for my growing wardrobe, or she would embroider yellow, blue, and pink roses on my collars and cuffs. She also knitted, crocheted, and tatted endless lace for pillowcases and bed sheets. Some of my most prized possessions today are the delicate laces with which she trimmed pillowcases.



(Note: ironic? Given a ban on playing cards.)

By the time I was three or four, I delighted in standing by Mamie's knees and watching her fingers fly on whatever handwork she was doing. I was fascinated by the lovely knitted lace for Mother's linens that she produced by the yard, using bicycle spokes, the smallest knitting needles at her disposal. Her crocheting was fun to watch but not nearly so much as the mysterious flying of her almost invisible silver shuttle as she turned out yards of tatted lace. For herself she crocheted or tatted white mitts: fingerless covers for her hands for gardening as well as housework. She was modestly proud of her strong but soft hands. She used a hand lotion of her own devising of rose water and glycerin, which always smelled delicious.

She began early to teach me to read, using the children's books which were plentiful in our home. When my own children began to read, I recognized some of the phonics techniques she had used with me, but she had other teaching methods which I don't recall exactly enough to explain. By the time I was four, I was hungrily devouring most of the books in our library, especially the Elsie

Dinsmore series in its entirety (a series that Mother thought was a serious waste of time), as well as other children's series: Penrod and Sam, some of Mark Twain, such as *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. I enjoyed wading through an ancient set of encyclopedias we had in our library.

But I didn't read all the time when Mamie was with us. I was too interested in watching her fingers fly in her handwork. I wanted to learn how to manipulate the bicycle spokes, the crochet hooks, and embroidery needles, but especially that mysterious tatting shuttle.

I embroidered an incomplete baby bib, a fine voile with some flowers which I put on it, a couple of roses almost recognizable, some fairly presentable daisies, and a few green leaves and stems, all this on a fragile scrap of fabric. Most of the stitches were so tight that the bib is recognizable as a bib only because I know that that is what I set out to make. With knitting needles much larger than bicycle spokes, I was able to do some modestly decent knitting, but it was woefully slow. The crochet hook was an instrument of torture that I quickly learned to avoid. Worst of all, the tatting shuttle defied all of the efforts of my stubby, uncoordinated fingers. In later years I reconstructed what Mamie had taught me about knitting and did a great deal of knitting. In order to finish some of the knitted pieces, I worried out the mysteries of crocheting, did some embroidery - not my thing - and continued for years to try to conquer the tatting shuttle. Tatting is composed entirely of little knots fashioned into lace. I can make knots in abundance, but they never resemble true tatted knots. Nevertheless, I keep Mamie's silver shuttle and hope that some day I can actually tat a few inches of lace.



For many years, I supposed that Mamie's influence had been limited to teaching me practical things like reading and some handwork, and I disregarded her religious training as not for me. She and Daddy, whom I adored, were not especially mutual admirers, and his rejection of her faith was not lost on me. Nevertheless, now I realize that she gave me rudimentary bases for a faith of my own, not from her Bible reading but from her patient relationship and from the many stories she told me about her childhood and adult life and the way she lived her life. She might not appreciate that result of her spiritual influence, but it's one I live comfortably with. She died when I was twelve, soon after my twin brother and sister were born. I tried to foster a relationship with them that

mimicked Mamie's with me, but I had neither the patience, the time, nor the age and wisdom. I realize that Mamie's harsh God and Puritanical attitudes, which I so consciously rejected, gave me the foundation for the person I have become. I'm sure she would not have been pleased, but I hope she is at least a little bit proud of me for becoming my own person.