



The Postcard

The leftovers of Thanksgiving feasting were still being stowed in the refrigerator when Aunt Martha Lou brought a file of family letters to the table. "I know your interest in family history and I thought you might enjoy seeing some of this" she informed us as we gathered around. Martha Lou is a stately cheerful picturesque girl inhabiting a 93-year-old frame. She has made Thanksgiving my favorite holiday. Since the loss of her beloved Hank, she and her family have graced our Thanksgiving table adding again and again to the thankful dimension of the day. A many years retired nurse, she continues to show the caring and uplifting and healing manner of the profession she so ably served.

The file contained many family treasures. The bulk were letters were sent over 100 years ago by relatives I had only heard about to those I knew. Martha Lou's mother, my grandmother had moved as a young girl with her family from Washington County Kentucky to Morgan county, Indiana. The Kentucky letters, as the family aptly refers to them , are a collection of family news in the days when phones calls either were nonexistent or costly and used only in the extreme situations such as the injury or death of a loved one. Generally, the letters were filled with sense of woefulness; maladies, dog bites, fevers including a smattering of advice they felt compelled to share. Parenting never ends-- especially from Kentucky. Occasionally they were tinged with loving "Forget Me Nots." One letter even had a lock of beautiful auburn hair that may have belonged to relative I never knew. There were also notes of pathos; a shopping list that was given to stronger legs to carry on from those who could not.

Included were several picture postcards, the prerequisite and precursor of Facebook when one traveled. Pictured of Niagara Falls or a scenic Rocky mountain valley. One such postcard was ignored at first glance. It was a family peering at a camera. Humph, odd I thought. Then on the back I surprisingly learned that the family I was viewing was my Great grandparents' family with two neighbor children. My Grandmother, Martha Lou's mother, was the 11-year-old girl standing beside her father, my great grandfather, L.W. Jenkins. I was unaware that one hundred years ago a picture post card could be so personalized. Laura, L. W.'s attractive wife and my great grandmother, had mailed the card to her father-in-law, William Jenkins, in Kirkland Kentucky on August 5, 1909.

The brief postcard message reported that the picture card was made at a family outing the 28th of July that year. Laura reported a “very hot” day at a resort, Bethany Park in Morgan County ten miles north of their home in Martinsville. Bethany Park still exists, but the large elegant hotel and 20-acre lake where one could rent rowboats is gone. Some cabins on the shore of the now none existent lake remain on Cabin Row... a touching tribute to the days that were. The wealthy from Indianapolis had acquired them for their summer homes to get away from the city heat. Later when the Great Depression played its financial havoc, these summer cabins were either sold or became permanent homes for the once wealthy families. Conveniently the cabin owners and resort visitors from surrounding areas including Martinsville, could travel to Bethany Park by way of the Interurban, part of an extensive public rail system of the early 20th century-- a convenience that would be so very welcome in the 21st century with truck crowded Interstates.

L.W. and Laura and the five children likely took that Interurban to Bethany Park on that Wednesday, July 28 outing. The reason for the outing is unknown. Perhaps it was just a summer outing, but it could have been a church picnic as well. Laura and L.W. were active members in the Martinsville First Christian Church. Laura was also a proud member of the WCTU (Women’s Christian Temperance Union). She reported they were there from 10:00 o’clock in the morning until 10 o’clock at night. That is convincing evidence that the Interurban was certainly their mode of travel. Taking five children by 1909 transportation would have been every challenging. Laura did not mention the ride to her father-in-law in Kirkland Kentucky which had no such convenience Writing that might be considered “uppity.”

The expressionless faces of the children’s faces also provide a hint of the day’s activities or weather or both, yet could there be more? Although photographs of that era are generally sans smiles, it is not difficult to wonder what if any emotional turmoil hides within. Was it environment or genetics that led two of the three children to be plagued with alcohol addiction issues as adults while the other one suffered with manic depression? I know nothing about the parenting of L.W. and Laura and very little about their character. My father dearly loved the kindnesses of his grandmother and spoke fondly of her each time her name came up. I only recall L.W. a few times He died when I was seven. To me he was the old man with the shaky knife opening Christmas presents or the old gentleman that stepped over a water snake in the shallow ditch we crossed to go fishing.

L.W. of the postcard was a 35-year-old owner of a men’s clothing store on the square in Martinsville which was successful enough for him to build a large two-story house on South main. Sadly, he went bankrupt in the Great Depression. The family “story” was that he was too generous with purchasers’ credit and was unable to collect debts owed him when the dark clouds of the Great Depression occurred. He was never to own anything again in his own name. They moved from that stately large house to a small farm near Paragon, Indiana, for a few years. Then when age compelled, they took occupancy with a daughter and her family—the daughter forlornly standing next to him in the postcard --- my grandmother. How that card sent to Kirkland Kentucky in 1909 ended up on our post-Thanksgiving kitchen table will ever be a mystery. Yet it is a gift outright--fitting for mind and memory to feast upon on that day of thankfulness.

Don Adams

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