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Growing Up a Farmer’s Daughter

I interviewed my nanny for the Intergenerational Life Review Interview. When looking and listening to her speak of her childhood experiences and memories, and reflecting upon my own, there were extraordinary differences. Her generation saw and experienced events that today’s generation never could have imagined. Her generation was far less concerned with safety and danger; parents would allow their kids to walk miles without supervision or assistance. Nanny was born May 2, 1936 in Almar County, Virginia. She was born to Henry and Florence Gibson and was named after her Aunt Victoria, or “Aunt Vic.” She had three sisters and four brothers: Opal, Helen “Marlene,” Thelma, Chesley, Junior, Merrill, and Jimmy. My nanny had one child, Randy, and three grandchildren, myself, Rebekah, and Sarah. She grew up in Boonesville, Virginia. When asked what memories came to mind when thinking back to this place, she said that they would always go sleigh riding when it snowed, and since it was in the mountains, it snowed a lot.

When asked to reflect on her parents, nanny reported that her mama was a very sweet woman, while her father was a very mean man; she says that he was not very lovable. Her parents had worked on the railroad in Maryland before settling in Boonesville, in what is now mostly considered Charlottesville. They then became farmers and farmed up until their death. While the children did not have official jobs growing up, they were expected to milk the cows, bring wood in for the house, and bring water up from the creek, as they did not have running water. Chores in today’s generation vary greatly from hers; while children may still be expected to help care for farm animals and bring wood in for a wood stove, nearly all houses have running water which eliminates the trips bringing water to the house. The children in her household, though, were expected to help extensively with the farming. In today’s world, machinery has replaced much manual labor for farmers and their families. However, in her day, she said that this eliminated much free time, and caused them to not have much time for fun; she answered that she did not really have any hobbies or interests that she could remember from her childhood. She did not have any funny family stories to share with me.

When she was not working on the farm, she went to a one-room schoolhouse. Her favorite teacher was Mrs. Lucy, but she cannot recall any specific memories about her. She named many friends that she had when growing up: Daisy, Shirley, Diaz, and Frances were among the many. She went to school with all of them and was the most close to Daisy. She shared a funny story with me about one time when she and Daisy were younger, but did wish for it to be included in the paper. She was very close with her sisters growing up and enjoyed traveling with them once they were old enough to drive. Nanny also enjoyed listening to bluegrass and country music growing up. She was not really made aware of too many historical events when she was a child because her family did not have a television; however, her brother was in World War II, so that impacted their family.

Growing up as a child in the 40s is much different than growing up in recent generations. When comparing her schooling to todays, there are many differences. She went to a one-room schoolhouse, whereas today’s generation has multiple different classes per grade level, and they are all in different rooms. Today, schools are also separated in general by Elementary, Middle, and High School. We also live in a time where news is received very differently and nearly everyone is kept up to date with major events; aside from receiving news from news broadcasts on TV, people can get updates on their phones, radios, computers, and tablets.

Nanny married once in her life; she married a man named Royce. They were ten years apart, she older than he. They met when they were both working in a shirt factory. Their marriage was good at the beginning, but their satisfaction with one another dwindled, and they got divorced. While married, she had one boy, as aforementioned. She said, “he’s very smart and is good with cars. He likes riding horses. He was a very sweet little boy” who would always sit in her lap when they were going on trips or just riding around in the cars. I could tell when interviewing her that he was her pride and joy, and I can still see that evident today when the two are together. As an adult, she is a very close friend with Royce’s sister, Vermalane, and sister-in-law, JoAnn. She also remained very close with all of her sisters. She enjoyed shopping with her friends and her sisters and still does today. Nanny has three grandchildren. When asked if she had any special memories about them, she remarked, “they are lovable kids.” She also said that she has enjoyed watching us grow up and watching the oldest, myself, graduate high school.

In today’s world, it would be unheard of for a child to ride in his mother’s lap in the front seat of a car. It would also be uncommon to meet your spouse in a shirt factory because I am not aware of any still in existence anywhere in the United States. She worked in one in North Carolina and Virginia. She also worked in an eyeglass factory where she assembled eyeglasses and a shoe factory in Tennessee. Her most recent job was at Phillip Morris. She says that this was her favorite job because she made the most money. She had no memories to recall about any of her other jobs. These jobs are very different than jobs today, though, with the exception of her job at Phillip Morris. So many jobs and products are shipped overseas now, such as making eyeglasses and shoes, that none of these factories are even on American soil.

Church was a very important part of my interviewee’s life. She was raised in a Baptist church and still attends one to this day. She commented that the people at her church are very nice people. She was baptized in Alabama when she was forty-something—she was not quite sure of exactly what age she was. Presently, she enjoys working puzzles, and I could see several framed on her walls. She also enjoys shopping and has more shoes than I have ever seen before. She notes that she hates cooking and prefers fast foods such as Chic-fil-A and Subway. Her favorite TV shows include Dancing with the Stars, Family Feud, Fox News, the Voice, and Jimmy Fallon. Her favorite movies include The Notebook, Message in a Bottle, and Gone with the Wind. She continues to listen to country music and bluegrass as she did in her childhood. She has traveled across the country, and some of her favorite places include the Grand Canyon, Gatlinburg, Hawaii, and Las Vegas.

When comparing my nanny’s generation’s activities, even in adulthood, to more recent generations, I see a smaller gap, but a gap nonetheless. I think that her generation may be a little more religious than this generation, in the fact that she goes to church every single Sunday. I also do not think as many people from this generation and previous ones will be working physical puzzles, rather they will be working puzzles on their tablets or iPhones when they reach her age. There are similarities though, such as favorite movies, shows and food. I happen to love The Notebook and Message in a Bottle, as well as the foods that she enjoys. I also love shopping and shoes, and I think I may have figured out where I got that gene. I cannot imagine what it must have been like for her generation to witness the evolution of technology—to go from no TV to having a TV in every room, and no phone to having a handheld cell phone.

My nanny reported that seeing the 9/11 attacks of the Twin Towers on TV made her think about how those people just came over here and tried to take over like that. 9/11 was the only event she listed as leaving an impression on her as an adult. When asked to reflect on her favorite memories during her lifetime, she claimed that she thoroughly enjoyed visiting with her friend Vermalane every Thanksgiving and having Thanksgiving dinner. Some of the proudest moments of her life include the day that her son was born and the days that her grandchildren were born. The greatest challenge that she faced was when she battled Hodgkin’s Lymphoma in 1998. She lost all of her hair and was very lucky that the doctor caught it at the stage he did. When asked what she looked forward to the most about the future she was quiet at first. She then answered, “being rich,” but laughed and said she was just kidding right after. She said that she was looking forward to maybe being a great-grandmother. Her advice to younger generations is to be careful when you go out in the world today; it’s a much different time and people are mean. She said that she had no real wisdom to offer other that to enjoy life, and do what makes you happy, which is something she has told me countless times, even before this interview.

It was a different time when she was growing up, for numerous reasons. One of the biggest differences I found was the level or worriedness parents had for their children being out without them. When my nanny was only ten or twelve, they would walk miles with friends their age and parents would not worry. This was way before cell phones, so the parents had no real way of even contacting them unless they went out looking for them. In today’s world, though, no parent in their right mind would let their twelve-year-old walk miles with her friends without a cell phone. This is because we live in a time where crime rates are high and murder and kidnapping is far more common than we would like. I definitely see that older generations have a more positive outlook on life. If you asked someone from my parent’s generation for wisdom, you would probably get something like get a college education because that’s the only way you will get a job, or something to that effect. My nanny, however, said to do what makes you happy, which, to me, is some of the best advice you will hear.