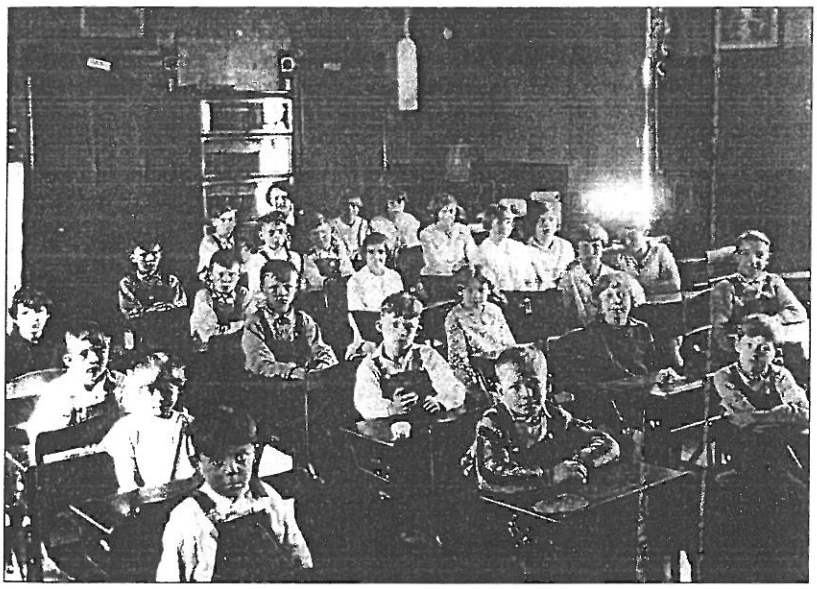
Real life stories from family history work

In the Blood

By Catherine Stover

When I needed to find courage — which was quite often during my first year as a seventh-grade English teacher — I would think of my Grandmother, Ella Lyster Lewke, who taught in a one-room schoolhouse. I have a picture of her in her classroom, taken in 1928, with her twenty-four students. She is smiling.

Think of it! A pot-bellied stove, an outhouse, a thick stick that hung on the wall, and a teaching certificate from a one-year training course at the County Normal. Two generations later, I have central heating, indoor plumbing, guidance counselors down the hall, and a teaching degree from the University of Wisconsin.



Ella Lyster Lewke, teacher in back, in a 1928 classroom.

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These are great differences, to be sure. However, the most important parts of the job have not changed: We both have stood in front of chalkboards, explaining why sentences need subjects and verbs, looking at our students, hoping to see that change in expression that kids get when they suddenly understand. We both have spent countless evenings reading assignments, some of which were written with skill, some with great reluctance. We both have woken up in the middle of the night with worry about a student, who seemed to be turning into the class bully right before our very eyes.

Two different points in time; two identical sets of challenges. I could look at the picture of her class for hours, guessing what it would have been like to face her students on the day the photo was taken in 1928.

This photograph is one of the three pictures that I have of my grandma. I like to line them up on my desk and think about her. Clearly, I bear a resemblance to her, which, in fact, is increasing as I enter middle age. If she were still alive to see me as I am now, I think she would be pleased to see the living proof of her theory that a person's most important traits are inherited. One of her favorite sayings was, "It's in the blood."

I heard her say this often when I was growing up. We all lived on the farm that my great-grandparents sold to my grandparents, who sold it to my parents, who now raise beef cattle with my brother. My grandparents' house stood about 50 yards from my parents' house. One of my earliest memories is walking from one home to another with a note pinned to my jacket as I carried an ingredient or one of my

drawings in my mittens. I felt important because both women watched me from their windows.

The second picture that I have of my grandma is a family portrait, taken in 1912, when she was a blond eight-year-old in a gingham dress with an elaborate collar, button-up shoes, and a bow in her ringlets. It is a picture of the American Dream. Her parents had immigrated from Norway as teenagers, penniless, but ambitious. Andrew, my great-grandfather, believed that someday he would own a farm with good land that was near a school. And he did. Look at how straight they sit and how strong their hands are. Can you tell by looking at this proud father that he believed the best thing he could give his children was a good education? All four of the daughters in this picture did well in school and, in fact, became teachers — a remarkable accomplishment, even by today's standards.

Family portrait.

When I look at this picture of the sweet little girl in ringlets, I can also see my grandma as I knew her 60 years later. I can see her tying my own wet, cold hair in long strips of rags on Christmas Eve morning, so that I could have ringlets, too.

I wish I had a picture of the day she taught me how to skip. I had come home from kindergarten crying, convinced my life was over, because I was the only one in the class who couldn't skip. She taught me in the kitchen. She held my hand, and we went around the table many times.

I wish I had a picture of her standing next to me while I sewed 4-H projects on her black Singer sewing machine. She always scolded me for going too fast. Whenever I use this machine now, I can almost hear her say, "Slow down, girl! Haste makes waste!"

And, I wish I had a picture of one of the many times a box from Grandma would come in the mail to me when I was in college. In that box would always be the world's best brown nut bread, baked in old soup cans, wrapped in tin foil, and devoured in my dorm room. My roommates and I didn't own plates or silverware, so we would break the loaves into big chunks, and eat them with our hands, quickly, before anyone else found out.

"It's in the blood." I remember my grandma, in her green apron, with a knife or a spoon or a rolling pin in her hand, standing by the kitchen table, ending many discussions with this statement. She had the advantage of knowing many generations of many families. When someone did something remarkable or horrible, she could trace family traits back to relatives who had done something similar. "We should have seen it coming," she'd say, "because it's in the blood."

As a child, this always scared me. It made me wonder if she knew what was in my blood, too. As an adolescent, I hated the idea that my blood could determine anything — I wanted some independence, a chance to do something on my own. As a college student, I felt an electric shock go through me when, for an assignment, I read the letters by the poet Rainer Maria

Grandma's wedding photo.

Rilke who wrote hauntingly about how one generation influences another. "And yet they, who passed away long ago, still exist in us, as predisposition, as burden upon our fate, as murmuring blood, and as gesture that rises up from the depths of time." I have thought about this for years: predisposition, burden, murmurs, gestures. Somehow, these ideas cut pretty close to the bone.

The third photograph that I have of my grandma is her wedding picture. I love this one the most because it is mysterious. While the other three people in the photo are looking straight into the camera, my grandma is looking off to one side, as if her mind is elsewhere. It almost looks as though she is having mixed feelings about the whole thing. Could she have been? When she was married in 1929, at age twenty-five, she wore a flapper dress, her hair was bobbed, and a veil was conspicuously absent. Confidence, I tell you. Deciding against wearing a wedding veil — then and now — requires confidence.

I inherited her wedding dress, and it took me about ten years to work up to trying it on. When I did, I was shocked at how sexy it was: the v-neck in back, with its elaborate plunging yoke . . . the sash that tied up on the hip . . . the double-layered skirt . . . the provocative feel of the peach silk material. You cannot tell from the black and white photo that her dress was — well — hot. It wasn't a dress one would choose because it would please the mother-in-law. Was she rebelling? Was she having second thoughts?

In those days, women were required to resign from their teaching jobs when they got married. And, it was very, very rare for a woman to reenter her profession later. So, it seems natural that she would wonder about the wisdom of trading one life for another. One life had independence, a career, and a salary that allowed her to spend $400 in 1926 on a racoon-fur coat. The other life had the promise of creating her own family, with its own future, which would, in time, create a new generation, with its own future, as well as its own history.

Knowing more about how her life ended than how it started puts me at an awkward vantage point: because I did not see the decisions as they were being made, I have no idea what she felt as she decided to sacrifice one option for another. I do not know how complicated the choice was, or how many facets there were to her feelings.

And, even after all these years, I am still wrestling with her idea that people do what they do because it's in their blood. How much of my work as a teacher is due to traits I inherited from her, and how much is due to my own choices? In a beautiful essay titled "Grandmothers," Pico Iyer says, "We can all save time by remembering the lessons of

those who've gone before us . . . a large part of who we are isn't very individual at all." If he is right, then it means that our predispositions, burdens, murmurs, gestures, *and* our looks, professions, and independence all tie us together with the past and the future generations. We, then, would be only as unique as our place on the time line is unique. We would all agree with Shakespeare that "What's past is prologue."

When I was a child, I assumed that her life was a straight line that lead from one point to another. Now I see that her life was more like a cloud: yes, it went from one point to another, but from where I stood, I could never see the top layers. How could I even guess the size or complexity?

It makes me wonder what my grandchildren will think of me. Will they reduce me to being a gray-haired lady who was born before computers were invented? Or, will it occur to them that there was once more, much more? How much influence will I have on them?

This is what I would ask my grandma now, if I could: What did you have mixed feelings about? What would you have done differently? What did you live for, mainly?

Perhaps she would ask me what I live for, mainly. I don't know. Right now, I am looking up at the blue sky that ends with infinity, and I'm wondering if she knows that I miss her.

Catherine Stover has published more than 200 articles in regional and national magazines and newspapers. She has received five awards for fiction, nonfiction, and poetry writing. "In the Blood" is a modified excerpt from her first novel, All Kinds of Truth. *She lives with her husband and two daughters in Columbus, Wisconsin.*

Adventures and Miracles

By Bridget Cook

Annette Czarniak Bailey, my grandmother, was an enigmatic woman of the 90s — the 1890s that is, or so we believe. The problem is that we don't know exactly when she was born, since the date she declared as her birthday and the date of birth listed on her baptismal certificate do not agree. Her older sister would bring her presents months from the time she celebrated her birthday. This may be explained by the fact that, during that era, the family did not keep accurate records. They were people of the land, and they remembered their children's births as seasons: harvest season or planting season, etc.

Annette Czarniack Bailey was born into the adventure called America sometime around the turn of the century. Her actual birth date remains a mystery, but her spirit of volunteerism and faith in God lives on in her children and grandchildren.