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GIRL, ALONE

by

Claire Meikle

of

Willimantic, Connecticut



"A Solitary bird flies the highest"

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Claire Genevieve Meikle has lived in Willimantic, Connecticut most of her life except for two years in Fishers Island, N.Y, during her childhood and some summers at Watch Hill, R.I. and Rockland Lake, N.Y.

She is a lifetime scholar and an avid reader. She has a particular interest in all religions, and has made pilgrimages to many churches. Even though she is a Roman Catholic, she had permission by a priest to go to other churches as long as she does her duty to her own church.

She is a student of life, and one reason she still goes to "college." Claire is a role model for senior citizens who wanted to go back to school but didn't dare, and now they dare and are happy to tell her that they are taking classes.

This is her first attempt at writing her memoirs. The name of the novel is, "Girl, Alone," a novel about growing up in Willimantic, Connecticut, in the spring of life with family; in the summer of life out in the world working, and in the autumn of life on a retreat. The novel teaches in the winter of life to love thy neighbor as thy self, and in the second spring, teach the young.

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DEDICATION (FOREWORD)

I dedicate this novel to my mother, Martha Antoinette Brown Meikle and to my grandmother, Martha Esther Knapp Brown.

The only thing I have left of my grandmother's is a memorial.

In Cherished Remembrance of

Martha E. Brown

Passed To Eternal Rest on February 16th, 1932

"May Her Soul Rest In Peace"

I cannot say, and I will not say

That she is dead, she is just away!

With a cheery smile and a wave of the hand

She has wandered into an unknown land.

And left us dreaming how very fair

It needs must be because she lingers there.

And you, oh you, who the wildest yearn

For the old-time step and the glad return.

Think of her faring on, as dear

In the love of there and the love of here.

Think of her still as the same, I say

She is not dead, she is just away.

by James Whitcomb Riley

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I wish to thank Shirley A. Shirelle, RoseAnne Carlo, Marguerite Eliason, Martha Grylls, Steven Grylls, Clinton Grylls, Jr. Scott Beatie, Adam Phelps, John Monaghan, Eli and Phyllis, Andrew and John, and Michael for the help they gave me in writing this novel.

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FOREWORD BY ADAM PHELPS:

My name is Adam Phelps and I am writing this on Claire's behalf. Included in this large set of documents is Claire Meikle's life story. Claire has written all of the pieces following this foreword that I have written. I am simply writing this to not only congratulate Claire on such a wonderful story and life, but to clarify what she has written.

I first met Claire upon working at the Soup Kitchen in Willimantic. She came upon me and told me about her life story. She told me how it was a dream to get her story published and how she's been looking for someone to edit her story and finally get it published. I told Claire that I was a writing tutor at Eastern Connecticut State University, and that I would help her get her story published.

What you are about to read is the language of Claire Meikle. She is an incredible and original writer. She has a life story worth retelling, and while it may not be written chronologically, it is written in the way Claire wants us to read it. Her writing is truly an art and Willimantic should be proud for what she has accomplished while living here much of her life.

Parts of Claire's story may be hard to understand. I tried my best to clarify parts of her story through my editing, and what hasn't been edited is open to interpretation. I have also added some of Claire's personal photographs that recount her life here in Willimantic and give proof to the very words she's written.

Claire has not only written a life story to fulfill her dream, she has written a culmination of historical Willimantic stories for year and years to come. People will read her stories and remember Claire Meikle as "Ms. Willimantic."

Without further ado, I present to you Claire Meikle's life story, "Girl Alone." I have moved some parts and edited parts of her story for clarification, but I tried my best to preserve

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Claire's original voice and writing. All of what you will read in the next two hundred or so pages are a recounting of Claire's life, as well as a rich history of Willimantic. Much of Claire's story was written as a single story with many parts, although there were several individual stories that I integrated into her larger story. I tried my best to place these stories in a logical manner, though some may feel out of place. Overall Claire's life is portrayed and organized rather uniquely, as you may soon discover.

I thank you all for taking the time to read about Claire's life. Please feel free to contact the museum or myself if you have more info or would like more info regarding Claire's life story. Thank you,

Adam Phelps

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GIRL, ALONE

of

Willimantic, Connecticut

By Claire Meikle

PROLOUGE

In my literary travels, I have learned that for everything, there is a season: a flower, a tree, a world, a country, a town, a family, or an individual person.

It is in the springtime of our lives that we sow the seeds of our character. It is our minds, our thoughts, and our faith. The spring is the foundation on which we build our lives. Our education, as well as the books we read, are very important.

Then comes the plant with its many leaves in the summertime of our lives. It is our spirit and our hope for a good life. It is the words that we speak that show our personality, and the person that we would like to become. The summertime of our lives is our hopes, our dreams, and our goals for the future. It is our building that protects us from life's storms as we work out in the world.

Our heart is the flower. It is our flowering in the autumn of our lives from ages thirty-six to fifty-four. Our deeds show to the world how we treat other people. This is our reputation, and how we furnish the home; our hearts in which we live in. Be careful what you think because emotions shut your mind off. This is our Renaissance, our renewal, the time to leave off the bad and remember the good.

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In the wintertime of our lives, it is from this flower of life that the fruit of the spirit is produced and used. In the world, if the flower does not have a name, it will pass by and never be noticed. If the fruit isn't good, it won't be able to produce seeds for future flowers, the children of our world. The fruit of the spirit is peace, love, and joy.

If a person is fortunate to have a second spring in the later years of their lives, and has good seeds to grow in the minds of the young, this is like building a bridge so that the young man can cross the river safely.

I always like to "show and tell." I figure what is the sense of knowing something if you can't share it. I wanted to be a teacher, but that is out. They cancelled the teacher program I was in after 1 year and 1/2 because the federal government cancelled the funds for the program. Then when I was in AmeriCorp, I had only a couple of classes to do and make a booklet to earn my teacher's certificate, and they took it away from me to give to a younger person. Americorp said I didn't need it because of my age and if I remember correctly, that poor girl died a year or two after.

I always wanted to write this story, so this is my chance. I have studied, and still study philosophy of all nations - East and West. I, myself, try to live by the rules I learned, and I am sharing my knowledge with people I know who need a friend.

The Buddha wanted to share his insights with others, and I would expect he would like the others to share it also. In Buddha's 4 Noble Truths, he states: (1) Existence is unhappiness, (2) Unhappiness is caused by selfish cravings, (3) Selfish craving can be destroyed, and (4) It can be destroyed by following the eightfold path, whose steps are:

1. Right Understanding
2. Right purpose (aspiration)

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3. Right speech
4. Right conduct
5. Right vocation
6. Right effort
7. Right alertness
8. Right concentration

Actually, I think I did it for myself so I will not have to look anything up in books because it will be in one place.

I am a writer. Not of published stories, but of everything I want to remember. I have hundreds of notebooks, large and small, of every subject under the sun. When I am reading a storybook, there is usually a sentence or thought that is the most important; something that I want to remember, so I jot it down and mention where I got it from. There was a time when I wrote down every book that I read, but I didn't keep this up. I know some people who do write down every book they read for future reference. That is a good idea.

I have written down the ages of all my two sisters' children for every year, and what my age is at the time. This is one of my ways of keeping track of my whereabouts - my memory helper. There are seven of my sister's children in one family and three in my other sister's family. I also have a record of my uncles and aunts ages in accordance to my age when I was growing up.

I can't think of a better way of spending some of my time than in writing - it doesn't matter exactly what I write, but maybe someday I will write something important. I hope my story "Girl, Alone of Willimantic, Connecticut" will be that day.

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I never wrote in a diary. That is not my thing. The things I write are impersonal. They are learning things. There is so much to learn in this world, and I do not trust my memory to be able to hold everything. I like to take a certain subject, expand on it, and get as much out of it as possible. It is like a game to see how far I can go in unraveling someone else's thoughts.

Years ago, I discovered the value of the I Ching, an ancient Chinese mind game. I only use the game for an answer to a profound question I might have. I had a class in Eastern Philosophy, and at the end of the semester, which was in December, I found a Christmas present on my desk, addressed to me from a fellow student, who had already left. I never saw him again, but I shall always remember him because his gift to me was a beautiful book of the I Ching and some lucky pennies to go with it. That was so nice of him. He and I sat in the back of the room and were quiet, because the teacher said he was going to call anyone who talked too much "George," and we both agreed we did not want to be called "George".

In my novel, *Girl, Alone*, I write about my life. I did not have enough in my life to write about, so I also included some history of my town, Willimantic, Connecticut. Included in my life is my own Renaissance. I reached my "Renaissance" when I was thirty-five years old, and I believe this is the age where people decide to follow the ways of the world, or the ways of God. I chose the ways of God.

I believe, like a guided missile, when a person has goals set in their mind, they go to the target, no matter how many detours it takes to reach the goals. My personal goals were to go to college, be a teacher, and become a writer. So far, I've done well. I have been going to Eastern Connecticut State University for twenty years and have earned a BA in History, a BA in English, and a minor in Philosophy. I still continue going to Eastern because there is so much to learn in the world, and tuition is free for me and anyone else over sixty two years of age.

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I have been a reader for two years with Americorps Reads in a daycare, and I worked many times as a teacher-sub in daycares and grammar schools. I am in the midst of writing a novel about me growing up in Willimantic, including the history of Willimantic from its beginnings. Who says that prayers aren't answered?

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PART ONE The Springtime of My Life



Claire as a baby



Claire as an adult

Chapter 1: Grandma's Girl

I stood there watching. Two men carried a stretcher out the door, into the back hallway, and out another door and into a waiting ambulance. The figure on the stretcher was covered up, but I did not have to be told who was under the covers. I knew. It was my grandmother. I had just turned six years old but was old enough to think, "Now I will be alone." All the years when I was growing up, whenever my grandmother was mentioned, I thought of the words "girl alone." For years, I thought it was the name of a book. So, I looked for a book named "Girl Alone" whenever I had the chance, but never found one with that name.

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This story would not have been written if I had not been a crybaby. For years I cried over a lost photograph, a copy of a painting, a lost grave, a death certificate with father's name, my lost grandmother's grave, and whenever someone mentioned the town my grandmother came from. As I said, I am a crybaby, and I cannot go to wakes and funerals. When people lose a loved one, I cannot tell them "I am sorry." I cry, and they end up consoling me. Therefore, I only go to the church service.

Although I was often alone, I wasn't an only child. I had a sister, Martha Elizabeth, who was four years older than I. When I was born, Martha Elizabeth said, "I don't want the little brat." There had been another baby girl, Grace Arlene, who was born in between us two. She died shortly after she was baptized. If her death had not happened, things might have been different for me. There was one last baby girl, Marjorie Alice. She was born two years after me, putting me right smack in the middle of my two sisters.



Claire (middle) with her older sister (left) and younger sister (right)

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My older sister had grandparents, many aunts, uncles, and cousins to spoil her by the time I came along. Then when the new baby was born, there I was, caught in the middle between a very spoiled child and a new baby.

One of the stories my mother told me was that my aunt, Helen, who was nine years old when I was two, was supposed to be playing with me in the apartment over my grandfather's restaurant where we lived. She was mischievous enough to put a big winter hat on me, in the summertime, and great big shoes with turned up toes. Then, she sent me down into the restaurant where my mother and father both worked. This made people laugh and made me become shy. Even when I got the customary bumps and bruises that kids get, my mother never knew it until she bathed me. Like a little puppy dog, I went off in a corner and licked my own wounds. I am still like that.

I have a very good memory from when I was two and a half years old, and I remember when my father's mother, Katherine Griffin Meikle, died. I was sitting in the window seat in the hall looking at a book when the doctor came and I went into the room where my grandmother was in bed. I remember exactly the room and every other room in the house, even though it burned down from a faulty fireplace when I was young.

My father had no sense of responsibility. We moved just about every year from Turner Street to Main Street and over to my grandfather's restaurant. At the restaurant, a picture of my Grandmother Brown was taken in the backyard when I was a baby in the carriage. After, we then moved to Hope Street and to Johnston Avenue, where my mother used to play ball with us out in the yard and push us on a swing. One day when she was pushing me, I jumped off up in the air, like I saw the bigger kids do, and fell on a rock and split my forehead. My mother was

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beside herself because, like she always said, "If I hadn't done this or done that, nothing bad would have happened."

Around this same time, we were in Colchester visiting my uncle, and my mother and aunt were hanging clothes in the yard. I put one of my dresses through the washing machine wringer and tried to get it back. Instead of the dress, my hand went into the wringer and up to my wrist before my little cousin shut the machine off. We never had a washing machine, so I didn't know anything about how it worked. My mother was frantic and probably blamed herself. Luckily, my hand wasn't hurt.

After Johnston Avenue, we moved to Ivanhill Street near my aunt's house. She was my mother's sister, Anne Lucey. This house was in the woods at the west end of Willimantic. We used to see skunks once in a while, and when we did, we ran in the house. A lot of Italian families lived at this end of town, so we got to be friendly with the Italian children too.

My older sister and I went to St. Joseph's School and St. Joseph's Church, so we had quite a walk to get there. We had to pass by a small stream as we walked on the road because there wasn't a sidewalk, and we would stop to look at the Johnny-jump-ups, skunk cabbage, and jack-in-the pulpits growing by the stream. It always fascinates me about streams. The stream went under the road and came up again in the yard of the house across the street. Then the stream went down behind the houses to Valley Street, under the road, and I assumed it progressed underground to the Willimantic River. Some of the people living on Prospect Street had a grape arbor, and many of the families there were Italians. They also had vegetable gardens and statues of Our Lady Mary.

One morning, when my mother was sick, and it was cold, my father took turns bringing in each of us, put us behind the cold stove, and dressed us. I seem to remember when he told us

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that Santa Claus was sick and couldn't come to our house this Christmas. It was in April of that year when my grandmother died and I had just turned six years old.

It is in the spring of our lifetime where we sow the seeds in our minds, make up our character, and grow into the plant of our personality. In the spring of my life, I was very fortunate that my mother's mother took care of me. My grandmother, Martha Esther Knapp Brown, was a special person, and I am glad she was my grandmother. I was the lucky child, as my grandma took me everywhere with her. Whenever she went to visit her son or other daughter, I went too. When we went to my Uncle Francis' house in Colchester, Connecticut. He used to call me his "star boarder, Zazu Pitts," after a funny movie star, and "Kaya," his pet name for me. He had a barrel of russet apples on his porch, and I ate many of them.

My grandmother had a special large picture of "The Boy With A Rabbit," and she must have had a special affection for it, because she took it wherever she went to stay. Years later, I saw it hanging on the wall in my cousin's house and asked if I could have it someday. She said "OK," but the next time I went there, the picture was gone. When I asked about it, she said she threw it in the dump. So much for loving her grandmother.

My mother had the two other girls to look after so I was my grandmother's girl. Then came that fateful day and I was left alone. Shortly after, we moved to the other side of town, which was called Down Sodom. I was lucky, otherwise I would have grieved even more. If I don't mention my father much, it is because we seldom saw him. He had been working as a Supernumerary (extra help) on the Willimantic Police Force (from the late 1920's until the early 1930's) and also as a chef in a restaurant. I remember my father was sick and my mother had to take care of him. We lived on the left side of the first floor in a very large six family building. I remember we were there for May 1st because we picked

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wild flowers in a field where we played, and put them in a basket outside our door for my mother for May Day. We knocked on the door, ran, and hid. My mother had a nice surprise.

One of my most favorite poems, next to "If" by Rudyard Kiplan, is "My Kate" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. "found them and did them all good." One of the best attributes a person can have, in my opinion, is to be able to feel sorry for other people. All people are not as fortunate as others.

I can remember back in St. Joseph's School, when I left there in the middle of third grade, at six years old, what it was like to feel sorry for someone else. During that spring, when the circus came to town, all the children in my classroom went to the circus except for one boy, Chester. They said Chester was a bad boy. I felt very bad for him.

It didn't seem fair and for many years I remembered his name. I didn't know it at the time but other children in our class also felt sorry for the boy. When this boy was fourteen years old, he died. I don't remember how he died, or why, but it left an undeniable mark on my brain. Perhaps the circus matter could have been the turning point in the boy's life, and it turned him in the wrong direction.

One day, a few years ago, I was in a restaurant and I saw one of my old friends from St. Joseph's School. We got to talking about old times, and the first thing the both of us said was, "Remember poor Chester." So I know that I wasn't the only one who felt sorry for that little boy.

There have many times I have heard someone say, "It serves them right," when someone has something bad happen to them, but I believe that it does not do the person any good to have that kind of an attitude. It is better to have a sweet taste in your mouth rather than a sour taste, because a sour taste shows on your face exactly what you are thinking. That is what little

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children are taught by pictures of a sour face with the corners of the mouth turned down, and a happy face with the corners of a face turned up in a smile.

Chapter: The Giver

We had Christmas in our apartment in Down Sodom, and we shared it with some Jewish children, Natalie, Marvin and Albert, who lived upstairs over us. I am a giver and find it hard to take anything from anyone. One day at school, before Christmas, we each picked a name to bring a present to school. I picked a girl's name, and my mother bought a nice little girl's necklace and bracelet. I brought it to school and gave it to the girl. When it was my turn, the girl who had picked my name handed me a small amount of the very smallest lollipops for my present. I must have been devastated, but I can't remember how I acted. I was usually always bashful.

I do not know what my mother did about it. Probably nothing. She was not the kind of person who would go to the school and make a fuss. But it must have made an indelible message in my brain because to this day, I find it hard to accept anything.

Many, many years later, when I was working at the Italian Garden Restaurant, a lady customer said to me that it was my fault that she got a hard spanking one year when she was in grammar school with me. So evidently, the event never left her brain either, but she was the culprit, not me.

The school teacher, a nun, must have told her parents about the lollipops. The story is: the little girl's mother had given her money to buy me a present at the corner store near her house. It was Osso's Candy store, where all the kids went to buy candy, though they had little toys and other things also. Evidently, the little girl couldn't resist the candy. She spent all the

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money on candy and ate everything before school and the only thing left was that tiny bunch of lollipops, not the big round lollipops, but the little flat ones.

So I guess we both learned a lesson that day. It is better to give than to receive. We left after that for Fishers Island so I did not dwell on it.

I can't resist telling something that happened to me not too many years ago. Even though I am a Roman Catholic, I like to go to other churches but before I did, I asked a priest and he said: "As long as I do my duty to my own church, it was okay to go to other churches". So, I was a so called member of the families of the Salvation Army for many years through three of the families (in charge) and went with them to many places during the holidays bringing gifts to shut-ins, to the events at the Camp Ground, and to their lake resort.

On Sunday nights, they made a good meal for the homeless, or for whoever wanted to come to eat. I think there was a little prayer before the meal, and a little get together after the meal for whoever wanted to stay. I always stayed. One Sunday night, the Captain's wife read a story, "The Giving Tree." I was sitting way up in front and I was glad, because no one saw me crying. I was so taken by the story that I cried through most of it. But I didn't get away with it, because at the end, the lady reading the story, the only one who could see me, told on me. She had said, "You should have seen Claire, she cried through the whole story." I forgave her because she was such a nice person, as was her husband and two little girls.

We weren't in that house at 52 Ash Street very long before my father got an offer to manage a restaurant in Fishers Island, New York, while the owners went to Florida for the winter.

We had lived in this house such a short time, but there were lots of neighborhood

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children to play with. I remember asking, “Do we have to move AGAIN?” My father went there ahead of us because we were in school. Later, he came back for us. We all packed up and went to New London, Connecticut to board the boat to the Island. Both my sisters got seasick, but I didn’t. It was wintertime, right after Christmas. The water was choppy, and because there were only islanders going back and forth, and not many travelers going back and forth from New London, we were in a small boat they used for the winter.

I sat in the cabin, thinking, *Where was this island we were going to? Are we going to like it there? Are there any kids to play with? Are we going to school? Am I going to have books to read?* Because I was an early reader of storybooks, I had an imagination. My mother and grandmother both read and told my siblings and I many stories, and together we sang songs. I like to thank my grandmother and my mother for who I am. Besides everyday activities, I liked to think and daydream.

The Fishers Island boat finally stopped after eight miles from New London to the island. We picked up our suitcases and walked off the boat. Dad had a station wagon on the place where the boat stopped, so we got into the car – father, mother, and three little daughters all together again.

The first thing I saw was a large house with a swing in the yard. Kids?

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Chapter 2: Fishers Island, N.Y.

There would be times when I would be out somewhere with people I didn't know, and usually I was very quiet. However, when Fishers Island was mentioned, it got me talking. I have had people say, "Well, you really can talk, I didn't think you could." I always say I have a "rainbow bridge" from the island to my memories, and they are beautiful memories.

Living on the island was a wonderful adventure. Although the island was only 8 miles from New London, Connecticut, the island was part of New York because it was owned by Mr. Ferguson, a New York resident. Mr. Ferguson lived in a small house next to the schoolhouse, and only came to the island occasionally in the summer. One day, he gave us each a nice book.

The rich chronology of the island was inbred in us right from the start. Indians had been there. From the clay pits, pieces of pottery were found. There were shipwrecks, and English "pirates" looting the island. John Winthrop, Jr. acquired the island in 1640-41, and then began settling there. From time to time, the island was sold and belonged to different individuals. It was Mr. Ferguson who owned the island when we lived there.

In 1898 (the year my mother was born), the United States Government built Fort H. G. Wright at one end of the island. In 1900, a permanent Life Saving Station was built and manned by the U.S. Coast Guard. At one part of the island, there was a fishing village, and the few families who lived there, lived by modest means. The fathers fished for a living, going out in their boats, and keeping lobster pots. At times, there have been "wars" between New York fishermen and the Connecticut fishermen. Even though Fishers Island belongs to New York, the

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Connecticut fishermen thought they had the right to fish in those waters because the water was right off the Connecticut shores.

Fishers Island is about eight and a half miles long and the beaches on all four sides are different. The south side is facing the open ocean, and the beach there is named Isabella. It always had huge waves. We seldom went there, as it was dangerous for little children. We swam mostly in the bay and could see the boats bobbing in the gentle surf.

Another part of the island houses the rich in huge mansions. There was no reason to be envious of them, because they lived in a lonely area. However, where we lived, we had many friends to play with. My friends John, Alicia, Gloria, Francis, Marie and Richard are as real to me today as they were then. I still have a letter John wrote to me mentioning that he was going to send me a Buck Rogers' pin. He also asked me to write to him in milk in order to keep the message a secret. I can see myself riding Gloria's tricycle in her cellar, playing paper dolls with Alicia on her porch, and playing dolls in Marie's attic.

The first thing my mother did when we got to the island was to enroll us in the Fishers Island grammar school. I was seven years old and in the third grade.

The first house we lived in was over Renard's Restaurant, where my father was a chef and my mother was the waitress. The first thing we three kids did in the morning was run downstairs and have ice cream for breakfast. The restaurant held dances on a dance floor over the restaurant. Our apartment was in back of that, and the owners' apartment was on the third floor. There were houses up in back of the restaurant, and there were kids living there. There was a little girl my age living across the street.

The little center of the island had a post office, a grocery store and another little store. There was not much else. Lily Pons, a famous opera singer, had a small house in the center. Her

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son, Efraim Zimmerlist, was a movie star. Years later, Robin Williams made a movie in one of the island's big houses that we used to pass by while swimming.

The library was a little ways from the center. There was a Catholic Church, and the Lady of Grace near the library. There was a life size statue of the Pieta, and a beautiful marble statue of our Lady holding Jesus. Near the schoolhouse was a Union Church. We used to go to a tag sale in the basement of the Union Church, and I remember buying a clown suit for twenty-five cents. It was green on one leg, and yellow on the other leg, and the top was the opposite. I loved the suit and would not take it off. I even wore it to bed.

Another day at the schoolhouse, near the church, they gave vaccinations and my mother sent me there with a neighborhood kid. The doctor painted a pink bunny on the spot where the needle went because he was so impressed that I was not afraid, and without my parents. I guess I was a little "Fearless Fobsdick" from the Dick Tracey cartoon.

Because there weren't any clothing stores on the island, people had to take the boat to New London in order to shop for clothes. When it was wintertime, my father took the boat to New London to buy us some snowsuits. He bought each of my sisters a beautiful suit, pants, and a jacket with pretty colors. And guess what he bought me: a one piece brown jumper suit with a zipper front like a little boy's suit.

It was the winter season when we got to the island, so we stayed in the house most of the time. After school, we played games and colored in coloring books. As soon as we each finished our book, we would run down to the store in the village to buy more coloring books. I also read a lot of books from the library.

When summer finally came, we went to the beach, which was only a short distance from our house. We were given our lunch bags and would spend all day at the beach. When the fire

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horn went off at noon, we knew it was time to come out of the water and eat. We did not go back in the water until the Fishers Island passenger boat went by at one o'clock. We picked up shells, smooth colored stones, and starfish to take home.

When we were not at the beach, we roamed the island. Near where we lived, there was a tree-shaded dirt road we used to walk up just to peek through the bushes to see a rich person's house. They had a pond with a canopied roof over a bridge, which went from one end of the pond to the other. All around the pond were beautiful flowers. I think it was a Japanese garden. It was like looking into another world.

We did a lot of tree climbing and had one very large tree near our house. At this tree, we played house or whatever else we were supposed to play that day. Amazingly, there were lots of other children around to play with. In one little girl's cellar, we used to take turns riding her tricycle around. This girl moved to a bigger and fancier house around the corner, and when I went for the first time, she showed me her room. I was dumbfounded when she showed me her clothes closet—hanging all in a row were a lot of pretty dresses. We had never had anything like that.

I was a tomboy, climbing trees and all. In those days, little girls wore cotton dresses, even when playing outdoors. Every day I would go walking home with a torn hem dragging on the ground. My little sister could not wear the clothes after I got through with them so she got new clothes. My older sister got new clothes and I got the hand-me-downs from my bigger sister and my cousin. Those clothes were always too big for me, the girl in the middle. I can smile about it now, but I don't think *I was smiling then. I should have been grateful though, because I got two very pretty Shirley Temple dresses from my cousin – one light blue with dark blue watery waves*

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on the bottom and sail boats on the water, and the other one was a nice yellow and brown, with laces tying the shoulders on.

My sister, older by 4 years, went off with her friends. We never saw much of her, so it was my responsibility to care for my younger sister. She was a daredevil at age five. She would get in a big black inner tube and row out to the raft where I and the bigger eight-year old kids were (I had turned eight years old in March). I was obligated to swim alongside her so I could protect her. All through the years, if my mother said it once, she said it hundreds of times: "Don't get hurt, and take care of your sister," so I had to be the responsible one.

My sister turned six years old in July, and we had a birthday party for her in the dance floor room. I knew we were still living over the restaurant, but I never found out when the owners (the Renards, Arthur, and Madeline), came back from Florida.

We used to go to the Fort. The Fort was where the movie house, the community center, and a bowling alley were for the soldiers. Most of the soldiers' families lived at the end, so there was a lot to do. We went to school with the army kids along with the island kids. We had come from a Catholic school and were a little more advanced than the island school. At the end of my third grade, I was awarded five dollars for the best marks, but it was taken away. Some parents said it was not fair because I had only been there for half of the year. We made friends with a lot of kids. When we returned home, one of the boys whose father was a soldier, wrote to me and sent me a valentine. I still have it.

There was a country club on the island for the rich people who lived there. In the winter, we used to go to the country club which had a very, very high hill. We used to slide down this hill on either cardboard or a toboggan. So winter and summer, we had wonderful times on the island. Why would anyone want to live anywhere else?

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Two of the hotels on the island were named after Native Americans who were on the island before anyone else. They were the Mononoto Inn, and the Pequot House. We lived at the Pequot House when the Renards took over running their restaurant. My father was chef there and my mother was a waitress. We had Native American trails to follow and we used to look for arrows. This is when I first learned to love Native Americans.

After my father worked at the Pequot House, he worked for the Army as a Civilian Chef. He was an excellent chef, as his father ran restaurants and taught all his sons to be very good cooks. So we were connected not only with Island people but the Fort H. G. Wright people also. I still have a menu napkin from Thanksgiving, 1935. All the names of the soldiers are listed on it, naming their rank and everything they ate.

When my father worked at the fort, we moved to a little house on the hill near the library. This house was very small, and looked more like a summer home than a year round home. We never walked on the sidewalks, as the hills running alongside of the sidewalks had Native American paths on them. We had more fun running along the paths and through the woods from one place after another. In the yard, was a tree house that some kids must have made before we came. In the woods, there was a sandbox, and we used to bury things like pirate's treasure, and gold candy wrappers, which we pretended was buried money. Whenever there was a thunderstorm at that house, I would be out in the rain in my bathing suit, while my mother and sisters huddled in a closet.

When I was eight years old, I recited the poem, "The Children's Hour" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, on stage at school. My mother always had read or recited poems to us, and she always read books to us. I can remember especially hearing her read: "The Little Red Hen" and "The Little Train Who Could." These were wonderful books

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for kids to learn how important it is to work, and also how important it is to never give up no matter if you have a high hill to climb over. The island had a wonderful library and I was in there reading every chance I got.

The last house we lived in on the island was an eight-room house. All the houses were furnished, of course, because we didn't have anything. We could go in any room except the front room because it was full of antiques. This house had a porch on three sides where we played. When it rained, we slid down a coal-chute on the window to get into the cellar, where we would often play.

The house next door had a gym, although it used to be a dance floor. I used to swing across the floor, from one jungle gym to another. There was a dirt road leading up to our house, and one day, my father came riding up in a large basket type vehicle, pulled by a pony, and gave us a ride. That was fun. My father was a big man, weighing two hundred pounds, so it must have looked funny to see him sitting in the small basket seats being pulled by a donkey.

Our house was on the side of the island facing New London, and the water was very calm. The way we got to the beach was unique. Somebody had put the gate leaning on one side of the fence and the other gate leaning on the other side of the fence and we climbed up one gate and down the other and ran through a field to get to the beach. We could walk out quite a distance but couldn't swim, because it was too shallow. At that time, it was a perfect beach for little kids like us. It was a cove where the Fishers Island boats came in. Lots of boats, belonging to people who came in the summer, were moored within this cove.

We were free spirits to roam the island at will. It was safe in those days to give children free reins. There was always a grownup around and about in case we needed help. We also had a

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lot of family company that came over to the island to visit. It was my father's family that came, not my mother's family. My Uncle Ed and his wife Cal and her niece, Patty Worden came over.

Patty and I grew up together and used to tell people we were cousins, even though we weren't. My uncle married her aunt. My Aunt Alice came with her sister Helen, and her cousin Helen, and they all had fun.

But the time came when we had to leave our beautiful island. We had to leave all our baby dolls, a typewriter, a dollhouse and other toys and other things with the lady next door. We told her we would be back, but we couldn't possibly carry any of those things on the boat, so we had to give them up.

My grandfather on my father's side had remarried and had three children: Marilyn, Irvin and Joseph. Together, they had moved to Down Sodom while we were living on the island. All of our worldly belongings were stored at my grandfather's house near the junction of the three rivers. During a flood, all of our belongings were lost. All of my mothers' certificates, papers and pictures were lost, along with furniture and everything. We had one photo album left belonging to my mother, but I always thought it was mine, because it had one picture of my grandmother in it. Years later, when this picture disappeared from my house, I had my one and only tantrum. No one has ever owned up to have taken that picture. There was also one picture of my father holding me as a baby that was missing. I would have liked to have those pictures.

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Chapter 3: Sadd Block and My Father

After we left the island, we returned home to our old town, to live in a small-furnished apartment in the Sadd Block, on Main Street in Willimantic. We had nothing but the clothes on our backs. My father, conveniently for him, disappeared, leaving my mother with three small children to care for herself. My father was never to be seen nor heard of again. I think, perhaps, we were the lucky ones. I used to think that maybe he hopped a freight train out of town, as we lived near the railroad. There was a joke about somebody going out West to have their shoes tapped, and we used to say that about our dad, so I guess we didn't care that much about somebody we hardly ever saw. Anyway, this is my opinion about what happened.

My father had no sense of responsibility, but maybe it wasn't his fault. His father spoiled him. He was the oldest son of nine children: Mary Jane (Jennie) was the first daughter, then my father, Alfred called "Nick", next John, called Jack, then Edward, Charles, Robert, Alice and Helen. His oldest sister, Jennie, also spoiled my father. It was from her that I got many of the family stories.

My aunt laughed when I asked her "How come my father didn't graduate from grammar school?" She asked me how I knew he didn't graduate. I told her I found out when I was researching Willimantic history and the book said: Mary Jane Meikle graduated from St. Joseph's School in 1912. So, I looked for my father's graduation in 1914 and his name wasn't there. She told me that when my father was thirteen years old, he left school and went to work at the Vanderman Foundry, and his mother and father thought he was in school. He never graduated from grammar school.

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When he was young, he used to do chores for his aunt Minnie, his mother's sister who lived across the street. At least he received credit for this. Then, when my father was seventeen years old, he joined the United States Navy. He didn't like it much, so his mother bought him out. The services made you not like it in those days. My father's mother was a little Irish lady, who held the purse strings and had money in her name from my grandfather's restaurant where she worked as pastry cook. When she died, she willed the money to her two youngest daughters to further their education for their careers. She knew by then that my father, her oldest son, was irresponsible and would have squandered the money.

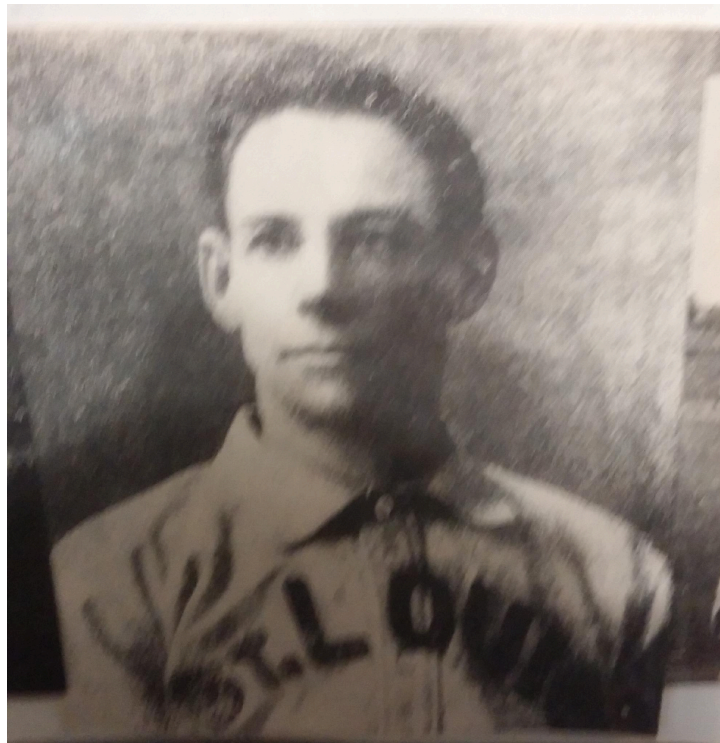
When my father was about twenty years old, he fathered a son who he really never got to know, nor would the boy ever know him. The boy was brought up by a very nice foster mother. This was before my father knew my mother, but we always knew the story. When I mentioned it to my aunt Jennie, she was surprised that we knew about the boy. She used to see him at St. Joseph's Church on Sundays, and could see what a nice boy he was.

We never knew the boy. His name was Reginald Cahoon. When he was, I think, twenty years old, he joined the United States Marine Corp. and learned how to fly helicopters, where he flew them in Michigan during World War Two. He was sent to the South Pacific, and was killed right after he got there on Roi Island. His first duty there was to guard a munitions dump, and it was bombed. He was twenty-two years old. A little while ago, I got in touch with a man who was his foster brother, and he took me to Baltic, Connecticut, where Reggie is buried in St. Mary's Cemetery. He told me it took a long time before the United States government had his body sent home. Before he went overseas, he married and his wife, practically a stranger, and she told the government to bury him with his comrades. Now Reggie is buried with his foster

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mother in Baltic, so we can visit his grave. I am glad about this because I always wanted a brother, and because I care.

Growing up, my father didn't know if his name was Meikle or Nichols, as his birth certificate said: "Arthur Nichols" and no one did anything to change the name to "Alfred Joseph Meikle". The doctor, at that time, had a fixation about the name Arthur Nichols and wrote it on at least two birth certificates of baby boys born to my grandfather and his brother Alfred. Alfred's son kept the name, but my father didn't. My grandfather, Arthur Meikle, called Art Nichols, played baseball for the Chicago Cubs, the St. Louis Cardinals, and International Baseball.



Art Nichols, the "Grand Old Man of Baseball in Willimantic"

People called him the Grand Old Man of Baseball in Willimantic, so I guess the doctor expected that the first baby boys born to his brothers should be named after Uncle Art.

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There is a story written up in Willimantic history books about my grandfather and his four brothers who all played baseball for the same teams.



They played for the American Thread Company teams, among other teams, when baseball was the biggest thing in Willimantic. It cost twenty-five cents for admission. At one game, the man collecting the money pushed the quarter back to my great grandfather, and said: "You already have five nickels in there." The name caught on, and whenever my grandfather or one of his brothers came walking up, someone would say: "Here comes one of the nickels." That's how the name Nichols came to be. My grandfather, his brother Art, and brother Jimmy went by the Nichols name, but his brothers, Joe and Alfred went by Meikle. Alfred's son Roderick did not like going by two names, so he had his name changed legally to Nichols. My father, on the other hand, sometimes signed his name Meikle and sometimes signed Nichols. Everyone called him "Nick," short for Nichols. Rick Nichols, the key man at ECSU is Roderick's son.

Bob Steele was fascinated about the story of the five nickels and talked about it on the radio many times. He talked about my grandfather, Jackie Nichols, when he died, and then mentioned the five nickels again.

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My mother had a hard time with both names as both names were on their marriage license. When my older sister was born, the birth certificate said "Nichols," so my mother went to the town hall and changed it to Meikle. Many people in town took it for granted that our name was Nichols. Even my godfather, Jack Costello, called me the Nichols' girl.

When I was doing research in the town hall about the name, the man checking it for me said: "You think that is funny. I have at least five different spellings of the name." Whenever my great grandfather or anyone else signed the name, they signed it exactly like the person writing it did, so there are five different spellings of the name at the Willimantic Town Hall. However, because my great grandfather spoke with a Scottish brogue, his real last name, which is Michael (John Thomas Michael), sounded like Mikel, so our name turned out to be Meikle. I have his papers when he became a United States citizen and could vote. I also have his name from his previous home in Manchester, New Hampshire, which read "Michael." These papers are authentic because they came from my father's cousin Ruth Nolan Dobush.

When we came back to Willimantic from the Island, I was nine years old. We lived over the old Woolworth Five, and Ten Cent store, both of which were in a building called the Sadd Block on Main Street, as I mentioned before. The only place we had to play on was a tar roof. Our feet used to stick in the tar, since it was the summer. This was dangerous. It was also dangerous to play in the very small backyard, which had a wall a few feet up from the train tracks, and it was dangerous to play near the train station. We chose the train station, as it was more fun waving to the trains, buying candy, or using the bathroom, because we lived three stories up. The train station has been long gone, except in our imaginations.

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Chapter 4: Fishers Island, the Second Time

My sisters and I were very, very lucky that we had a good mother who was very, very smart. It was the beginning of summer and my mother took us back to the island, and got a job in a very nice hotel, the Mansiom House. She could only have one child in the room with her, so it was always the youngest child that she took with her. My older sister went to my uncle's farm in Colchester, Connecticut, because he had a daughter the same age. Now for me, I was placed with friends, near my mother's work, and I had to earn my keep by babysitting three children, aged eight months, two years, and four years. This began my working days at nine years old. I seldom saw the parents, only the kids, and my little sister. It was the beginning of my babysitting career, but I had time for fun, too. The family was army people living off the base, and their last name was Bacon. So people called the father Bacon, called his wife Ham, and the three children were the three little eggs. Their house was near the restaurant where we had lived, so we knew all the families around there.

The kids that lived near us were year-round Island kids. One family had a garage we used for a clubhouse. In order to join, a kid had to bring in five certain kinds of flowers and these were put into a book. We also had an attic to play in for rainy days. We played with dolls and paper dolls. Years later, I was to read a book "The Blue Bottle," and this book put me right back in that attic. Memory is a wonderful tool.

In back of the family's garage, there was a junk pile, and I found pieces of a bike. With the help of a gas station guy, we put the bike together. Every morning, I went to the station for air in the tires, because they were flat. Then one fateful morning, I found both wheels smashed by a large rock nearby. One of my friend's brothers dropped the rock on the wheels. He was nine years old, the same as me, and had been in my room at school. I don't know why he destroyed

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my bike. We left soon after that, and he could have had the bike to ride because I would have left it.

I think it was really smart for my mother to take us back to the island for the summer. We had nothing, and yet she managed to give us a wonderful summer. We had wonderful friends there. However, we were ready to go back home to a new life when the summer was over. When my father never came back, friends and relatives used to say to her: "You are young and should go out and have some fun. Why not put the kids in an orphanage and take care of yourself." My mother would not do that. She would rather work two jobs or go without a job than to give up her kids. Although our father was gone, our mother didn't want to desert us either. My grandmother (mother's mother) had given up her husband to follow her two daughters to Willimantic, even though that estranged my grandfather forever. He never spoke to any of us for the rest of his life.

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Chapter 5: 51 Ash Street, Willimantic, CT.

I was nine years old when we moved back to the six-family house. This time we rented the apartment on the right of the third floor. Luckily, for us, my mother had good friends, and my father's family was very good to us. They all pitched in and gave us furniture, and whatever else we needed to make a home. There was just a toilet in this house and no bathtub.

We used kerosene lamps (and had to clean the soot when the glass shades got black) because my father left bills all over, and we couldn't have the electricity turned on. We also had flat irons that we heated on the stove. One stove had a wooden handle that could be fastened to the iron, and another stove had an iron handle we had to put a potholder on. We sometimes got burned while ironing clothes.

My father had worked for the Willimantic Police Force for years. However, when my mother reported her husband missing, they didn't do anything about it.

My mother was lucky to get a job in a laundry ironing shirts because now she was a professional at it. This was another blessing from Fishers Island. The job was two miles away, in the same direction we had to go to Noble School, only she had to go early. Later she was able to get a job around the corner from our house.

Before we went to Fishers Island, we lived on the left of the first floor at 52 Ash Street, and I was used to climbing trees. When we moved back to Willimantic, we lived in the same six-family house at number 51, but on the right side of the third floor. The way I went in and out of my home was shimmying down the posts of the porch to get out, and shimmying up the posts to get in the house. The only time I took the inside stairs was when my older sister tried to get me to do some housework. I would run down the two flights of stairs and jump off the side of the outside stone steps. Almost every time, I would sprain my ankle and would say, "Don't tell

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Mama I sprained my ankle again,” as though she couldn’t see me hopping on my toes. I also have a scar under my chin, and I don’t know when I got that. While my mother worked, my older sister was in charge of us, but I took care of my little sister. We went everywhere together.

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Chapter 6: Noble School

Whenever we walked to my aunt's house, which was at least two miles away, my sisters were both walking with my mother and I was trailing behind. In my house, it was the same thing. Both my sisters were sitting in the chair with my mother, listening to the radio, and then there was me, girl alone, sitting in a chair in the corner, reading. Luckily, I was a dreamer, dreaming my own dreams, otherwise I would have been upset. I remember dreaming, because when I walked to school in the morning with my little sister, I was too busy dreaming that I would not let her talk to me. The walk was two miles to Noble School from Ash Street where we lived. Poor little kid, no wonder she didn't like school.

Some days in the winter, the tears would freeze on our faces, and some days, we would stop at my Aunt Alice's house, which was a few blocks away. At night, my mother would say: "I hope you kids didn't go to school today." She had worried all day.

In Noble School, when I was in the fifth grade, the teacher liked that I was a reader. I can remember looking at books when I was two and a half years old and I was always reading ever since I first learned how. I like to say that I grew up like Topsy, from "Uncle Tom's Cabin" because my mother worked two jobs, ironing shirts in a laundry day, and nights in my grandfather's restaurant as a waitress. A lot of my bringing up came from books: "The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew," "Little Women," (I wanted to be Jo because she was a writer), "Little Men," and "Eight Cousins." I believe that Louisa Mae Alcott contributed a great deal in my growing up.

In our school, there was a room for artwork in between both fifth grades. In this room, the teacher let me read all day long for the whole year. Some people do not believe me, but it is

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true. I never had to sit in the circle or do math or anything else, all I did was just read my books all day long. To this day, I can't do math.



Claire Meikle in the sixth grade class at Windham Street School,
1938

As long as I can remember, my two most prized possessions were my mind and my eyes. I needed my eyes for reading books. When I mentioned the seeds of our spring, I should mention the fact that it is our mind that develops our character in the spring, our summer plant is our spirit, our autumn flower is our heart that brings our fruit for the winter, and the fruit of the spirit is peace, love and joy. Some of my sayings are from the Holy Bible, but some come from all the studying I did. They come from the inner most recesses of my mind from all the reading I did. My professor, Dr. James Lacey, said I shouldn't be humble. He taught me Bible class studies at Eastern Connecticut State University.

Meikle 40

Directly across the street from our house at 51 Ash Street was a fence with a flat top big enough for a foot, so I always got on the fence and walked it to the end at the next street, one foot after another. It was more fun than walking on the dirt path. I don't think they have a sidewalk there yet. At the end of the fence, there was a small grocery store in the basement of a house there. The owner, a very nice man, told me he had a job of cheese tester. I said that is what I wanted to be when I grew up because I loved all kinds of cheese. I didn't know he was only teasing me.

There were three sons in the family, and the youngest son had a bike selling for ten dollars. I saved up my nickels and dimes from working, and kept checking with his mother about the bike. Finally, when I had saved up five dollars, his mother made him sell me the bike.

I guess he wasn't mad at me though because Ernie Champagne made me a beautiful box kite. I loved that kite. We had a whole field on Ash Street to play in, and it was on a hill so I could run down that hill flying my kite.

That was a good place for kids to play in the winter and summer. In the winter, we used to ski down the hill in the field on barrel staves, or we slid on sleds or cardboard. We could slide down Ash Street hill because there weren't many cars in those days. Once when I slid down Ash Street on my sled, I tried to stop myself at Chapman Street and ran over my hand. It was lucky my mother worked, and didn't see some of the things we did where we might have gotten hurt.

Meikle 41

Chapter Dr. Siracusa

When I was in grammar school, my mother would take us to visit a nice lady, who lived around the corner from us. Her son was in my grade at school. One day this nice lady went to the hospital for a small operation and died.

From that day on, I do not care to go to doctors or to the hospital. Whenever some little thing happened to me, I would say, "I'm not staying at the hospital." I do not expect anyone to copy me because we all have our own inner-measuring stick. I also do not take medicines unless it is important (like when I was anemic or had double pneumonia for six weeks (at home, not in the hospital).

When I had a broken elbow, I went to the hospital for the operation at 8:00 a.m. and went home at 8:00 p.m. When I got stung by a lot of bees, my friend Doris Dziek gave me a ride to the hospital. I said, "I'm not staying" so I went home and then had to go back at 4:00 a.m. (I called Doris again for a ride) because the pills they gave me covered me with rash. Then, I left again at 8:00 a.m. and walked home.

When I fell on ice and had a broken wrist, I still went to work the next day and was sent to the hospital. The first thing I said was, "I'm not staying" so I went back to work as soon as Dr. Collins put half a cast on my wrist.

One Sunday morning at church, I felt faint and went to Bud's Restaurant and asked for a coffee and a glass of orange juice. I never ate oranges because they burnt my mouth and so I never drank orange juice. A lady I worked with had said, "if you ever feel faint, drink orange juice" (she failed to tell me that she had sugar.) So I drank a glass of orange juice and doubled up with terrific pains in my stomach. I had to walk home bent over, holding my stomach.

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My pharmacist, Frank, was on a two-week vacation, so I saw a different guy. The man I saw told me to take mallox or something like that, but that didn't work. I couldn't eat for weeks, I worked two jobs, and was attending Eastern Connecticut State University full-time, almost ready to graduate. I wouldn't give up. I carried on as best as I could without eating.

When Frank came back, he said right away that I had an imbalance of my juices (I had eaten a whole can of stewed tomatoes for supper, and this mixed with the orange juice the next morning was not good.) Frank suggested that I eat five or six yogurts a day, for a week or two, in order to straighten out my juices. So I did.

In the meantime I was very very skinny. At night, when I laid on my back, all my insides sank, and I felt something there. I told Frank and he said I should have it looked at, so I went to see Dr. MacLaughlin at Eastern Clinic, and he sent me to the hospital for five x-rays, but they could not find anything. Dr. Siracusa called me Friday at work and said that he wanted me at the hospital, Monday morning at 8 o'clock. I said if it's something I can live with, I will live with it. He said, "No, I want you up here Monday morning. So I asked my nephew, Steve, to stay at my house to take care of my dog. My nephew Steve and his daughter Amanda did, and I took the bus up to the hospital in the morning.

Then I ran into Dr. Siracusa. I told Dr. Siracusa that nobody touches me without God being there. I gave him a letter with quotes from the Holy Bible, Ecclesiastics Chapter 38:1 to 38:14, as well as typed some other stuff there too.

Well, there was a little thing attached by a string on my small intestine, and Dr. Siracusa just snipped it and said it was something that doesn't usually happen to people, so I guess I was lucky that I got my juices unbalanced, lost a lot of weight, and got to meet Dr. Siracusa.

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I was in the hospital for four days, and it was the first vacation I had in years. I had three meals served to me. I read and watched television and listened to Jesus tapes. After I went home, I had to take iron pills because I was anemic for the second time.

Never in my life had I needed any insurance that I had to pay for, unless it was something taken out of my pay. I was a student at Eastern Connecticut University, so I had student insurance. However, the university wouldn't pay for my operation, so they left me stuck with bills over \$4000.00. I heard that the State of Connecticut might pay it for me, so I went to the Norwich office in October. I was told if I had gone there in September, they would have paid for it, but I was too late. The reason I mention this is because after I had paid off a fair portion of my bill with Dr. Siracusa, he and the office secretary, Diana, had a talk, and Dr. Siracusa decided to cancel the rest of my bill. He is one of my heroes and Diana is my very good friend.

When I saw Dr. Siracusa awhile after I left the hospital, he said, "Are you still hopping around, like a bunny?" When I saw him a little while ago, I said, "Dr. Siracusa, Dr. Siracusa, thanks to you, I made it to age eighty-one. He said, "No, thank you," but I don't know what he meant.

Meikle 44

Chapter 7: Down Sodom

I have always loved Willimantic, especially my old neighborhood called Down Sodom. It was a melting pot, and it really was true that "it takes a village (neighborhood) to raise a child." We were in every house in the neighborhood: French, Canadian, Irish, English, Polish, Jewish, Russian and Portuguese. In these houses, we ate ethnic foods and learned different languages and religions. Most of all, we were safe. In our French neighbors' house, the LeClaire family, we kids used to kneel down around the round table, and Meme would recite the Rosary in French. Then sometimes we would sit at the round table, eat homemade donuts, and dip them in homemade syrup. Another lady in the neighborhood would make nut buns, and call us to eat when they were ready.

In our neighborhood, we had three Jewish grocery stores and a bakery, a Polish grocery store and bakery, and a French grocer and bakery. The Polish bakery was next door to our house. What was better: walking in the bakery, smelling the delicious breads cooking, and getting a fresh bun or donut, hot from the oven? Most of the families in Willimantic worked at American Thread. Parents and their children were able to save and finally buy their own homes in another part of town.

We had a recreation park to play in the summer and an ice skating rink in the winter. The town sent people down to teach arts and crafts and play games, like checkers tournaments. Ray Gamache won a plaque for winning the checker tournament when he was fourteen years old. The town had a shack put up so kids could be inside to put their skates on, or get warmed after skating. There was playground equipment, swings, a seesaw and even a maypole to play on. There was also a tennis court and a place for baseball.

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We had open fields to play in. We could ride our bikes on the roads, and slide down the hill in winter. Best of all, we had a clean river to swim in all summer. Even today, people from the neighborhood are happy to say they are from Down Sodom. Because we were sort of "out of the mainstream," we had lots of open fields, and the Polish people had gardens for vegetables. It was also the perfect place for carnivals and the circus. So year after year, we had wonderful places to go for entertainment, just around the corner from our house. I always believed that this was the most perfect place in the world to be brought up in. The land later known as Down Sodom was in the area of Recreation Park. Recreation Park is where the beginnings of Willimantic took place.

Water is the most important commodity, along with rich soil and rocks. Willimantic had them all. Today, we have three rivers in Willimantic. The Natchaug River comes from Mansfield, and meets the Willimantic River, which comes all the way from Stafford Springs. The Middle River and the Furnace Brook come together to make the Willimantic River. The Hop River in Columbia joined the Willimantic River. The Natchaug River runs south, and when it meets the Willimantic River at the east end of the land, they form the Shetucket River. Because of the rivers conjoining, those who live here are called part of the Shetucket Valley in the northeast corner of Connecticut.

When the waters were low, a big pile of rocks grouped together in the middle of the rivers. This was called Rock Island. People sunbathed on this island (This information from Al Wojick).

The Shetucket River flows south and joins with the Quinebaug River at Norwichtown. The Shetucket River then becomes the Thames River, which goes through Norwich to the open

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ocean. Because of all the rivers, Willimantic has dozens of seagulls flying around in the winter, looking for food.

Meikle 47

Chapter 8: Hurricane of '38

We lived at 51 Ash Street from the time I was nine years old until I was twelve years old. Our house was a large six family house with a flat roof. We were on the third floor on the right side of the house, the Greenwoods were on the second floor, and the Duchesneaus were on the bottom floor. On the left side of the house, one apartment was empty on the third floor where the Vertefeuelles, Robert, Norman, Germaine, and Babe lived. Brettschneiders were on the second floor, and the Dazy's were on the first floor (three generations of Dazy family, Jimmy and Michael Dazy are the fifth generation, and Brittany Dazy is the sixth generation (Shirley Shirelle's children).

When living at our house on 51 Ash Street, a hurricane came, and we became homeless again. In 1938, there were no government weather ships, hurricane tracking aircraft, or satellites. Previously, airlines had been grounded because of bad weather. Ships at sea were moved out of the storm area. The last tropical hurricane on the northeast coast was on September 23, 1815. It took one hundred twenty-three years, almost to the day, for a hurricane to hit us again. The hurricane of September 21, 1938 was really a bad one.

It was a tropical hurricane, called the New England Express that slammed into New England on Wednesday, September 21, 1938. Our town of Willimantic was directly in its path. The hurricane was first noticed at Bilma Oasis in the Sahara Desert in Northwest Africa on September 4, 1938, and it passed into the Atlantic Ocean near Cape Verde Islands on September 7, 1938. Then, the hurricane passed by Puerto Rico at 20 miles per hour, and ended up taking the roof off of our house in New England at 51 Ash Street, Willimantic, Connecticut.

Our hurricane was very dangerous because it came for several thousand miles over the Atlantic Ocean. The name hurricane comes from the Caribbean Indian storm god Huracan. A

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hurricane forms around a low pressure which draws a warm, moist air from the ocean. As the process builds up, cooler air flowing in from all sides spirals in a counter-clockwise direction. So, the storm takes the shape of a doughnut with a calm hole in the center - the eye of the storm. It becomes a hurricane when the winds are 75 miles per hour. Some of our winds reached 120 miles per hour.

We were in our home when the roof blew off our, but thankfully no one was hurt. It was just my two sisters and I, because my mother went to work as usual, and my father was no longer with us. We had been home from School since the Wednesday before, September 14, because of all the flooding. Luckily, there was no school at the time of the hurricane, because the storm struck Wednesday, September 21st, just after 3:00 P.M. when school was getting out. If the storm did strike at school, children might have gotten hurt.

The Coast Guard rescued entire families in boats just six hours before the storm struck, because of all the flooding. Willimantic people were not ready for a hurricane, because they were battling a flood. The rains started with showers on September 14th, off and on, until September 17th, and then the rains came in torrents for four days. Dams were in big trouble, and the first dam to let go was the Stafford Dam. This sent a great force of water into the Willimantic River, and overflowed the city of Willimantic.

When the Natchaug River, coming from Mansfield, and the Willimantic River, joined with the Shetucket River at the far end of Recreation Park, they overflowed their banks carrying away roads and bridges. Horseshoe Bridge in Down Sodom was one bridge carried away. Over this bridge was the way from Windham Center. This bridge plus the Jillson Bridge, and Bridge Street Bridge, isolated Willimantic from the rest of the world for forty-eight hours. Willimantic

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was the only train route between Hartford, New Haven, Providence, and Boston and there no passenger service for three weeks. There was also no mail service.

All of lower Main Street, Route 14, Willowbrook Street, Cardinal's Square, Mayo Street, LaFayette Street, Adelbert Street and Lower Ash Street were flooded. A gas station on Willowbrook Street was damaged. Mayo Street and LaFayette Street were in a gully, and right next to the river, so these people (at least sixteen families) had to be rescued by boat. We, on the other hand, were still at home in our third floor apartment when the storm hit and our roof blew off. We were told to evacuate and walk up Chapman Street to the Elms Hotel on Main Street. The flood had stopped at Brook Street, so from there on, Main Street wasn't flooded and our house on Ash Street was one block away from Brook Street, so we walked up Chapman Street, crossed over Ives Street, and walked up to the Elms on Main Street. Fortunately, we were in the eye, the calm part of the storm, so we weren't afraid. I do not know why we were still in our home when the roof blew off, or why we were not evacuated earlier. We didn't have a telephone, and my mother was worried sick before she was told that we were safe at the Elms Hotel where she later found us. She was working at the Maverick Laundry at 1150 Main Street, which was a long way from our house, and she had to hurry home in order to find out that we were okay.

After we had arrived at the hotel and were in the kitchen eating, we could hear all the noises outdoors. We heard the cracking of trees, the winds, and the rain, but we could not see anything because the windows were high up. We were fortunate that we got to the hotel unharmed. My family was still in the hotel on September 29th for my older sister's sixteenth birthday. For her birthday present, I bought her a small pad of multicolored pages, and put a cardboard cover on it that said "Autograph Book." She had all the people at the hotel sign it.

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Outside, the Natchaug Bridge was still passable and cars and people were scurrying over it. The Natchaug Bridge was on Route 6, and was a solid concrete bridge which had replaced the iron bridge within the past three years. We used to cross over the iron bridge to go swimming when we lived in that apartment for three years. Our neighborhood river was the Natchaug River, which was a lovely slow moving river, not very wide, and not very deep in places. We had several other swimming places: Gil Flynn's, the Island, the Baby Hole, the Trussel and Rabitaille's. We were very fortunate at our end of town to have such a sturdy bridge that wasn't destroyed by the storm.

At the other end of town, the water level was five feet deep at Bridge Street Crossing, and the people living on Pleasant Street and thereabouts were cut off from the rest of the city. The two bridges, Jillson and Bridge Street, which separated rivers, were out of commission.

The storm lasted two hours and the winds blew the roofs off many homes and businesses. Many windows were broken, and trees were knocked down. These fallen trees did damage to wires, buildings, and cars. Many trees at Park Springs and the Elks Fair Ground were downed. Area farms were hit badly and many animals were killed.

The roof blew off the New England Pants Factory on Ash Street hill, just up the street from our house. One man who went outside to go home was killed. The Roselyn Mfg. Company on Milk Street lost its roof, and the owners were lucky because they had hurricane insurance. Part of the Willimantic Town Hall roof fell off and damaged a car, and two of our churches, St. Joseph's Church on Jackson Street, and the Congregational Church on Valley Street, lost their steeples. These are only a fraction of the damages done to the people and buildings of Willimantic.

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It was estimated that Willimantic damages were nearly a million dollars. The American Thread Company was the biggest loser. Besides the mills being shut down and losing revenue, they had a lot of damage because they were right on the Willimantic river. They were so upset by the damage done to Recreation Park, which had turned into a lake, that they deeded the park to the town. The park was then called the Old Fair Grounds, where the American Thread Company had many festivities including sulky races, where the famous horse Donny Brook won three races in a row. The American Thread company, who shut down for nearly a week, the Red Cross, and the Public Works Administration supplied cots, blankets, clothing, and food for the one hundred and thirty people who were homeless and staying at the Elms Hotel, a hotel which the American Thread had built years ago for their workers.

When the dam at the Mansfield Pumping Station let go, it left Willimantic with a limited supply of water, and practically crippled the town for fire protection. The fire engine pumper then gave water to the people for seventy-six hours. There was no electricity or gas for three days. The Connecticut Light and Power Company had a field kitchen where one hundred seventy-five of their workers were fed for three days by company women, cooking with fuel supplied by an improvised gas line. Many Willimantic people helped the CL & P by chopping down trees. More than one thousand trees were down, and most of them across roads. Getting from one place to another was almost impossible.

There was so much destruction in Willimantic that the State of Connecticut sent five hundred WPA (President Roosevelt workers program) workers to help clean up, and five hundred railroad workers were sent to repair the roadways. We also had CCC (Civilian Conservation Corp) workers who came to help clean up the damages. We knew some of the

Meikle 52

CCC boys by name because they brought their laundry for years to the Willimantic Wet Wash, where my mother worked after she left the Maverick Laundry.

The hurricane should have gone out over the ocean from Cape Hatteras (as some people predicted), but the eye of the hurricane fell into a low pressure channel at the Cape and went up the ocean, off the coasts of Delaware and New Jersey, then up to Long Island and over to New England.

Even though many people in Willimantic were hurt and had to go to the hospital, we were lucky there was only one death (and this man had only been in our town for a week working at the factory). Our destruction, mostly from the winds, was not as bad as some other towns, especially at the coast of Connecticut. Those on the coast also suffered many deaths from tidal waves at the shoreline. In Connecticut, eighty-five people died due to the storm.

The total deaths in all the New England states was six hundred and eighty-two people in all. Seven hundred people were injured. Even if people were warned about the storm ahead of time, I do not see what anyone could have done about it. In a way, we were lucky that we were battling the flood, because people, including children, were already not going about their usual day-to-day activities. If the flood didn't happen and people went about their everyday activities, they might have been caught unaware by the heavy winds.

When we checked our apartment after the hurricane, we found that someone went in our house and stole my father's picture of when he was in the Navy. He was seventeen years old and handsome. They took the picture and left the frame. I would have liked to have that picture. Incidentally, my mother never tried to turn us against my father. Even though after seven years, a person is presumed dead when missing, my mother never took up with another man and always

Meikle 53

wore her wedding ring. That shows what a valiant lady she was. She kept her vows even if he didn't.

My father disappeared in 1935, before Social Security. When I checked with Social Security, he was still alive at age eighty five. Later, I checked with them when he would have been one hundred years old (people in his family lived to be old), and I wasn't given a straight answer.

Meikle 54

Chapter 9: Chapman Street

After the hurricane, our next apartment was on Chapman Street, where all the Polish people lived. My family and I made lots of new lifelong friends there. This apartment did not even have a bathroom, so we had to go across the street to an “outhouse.” My poor mother, she could survive anything, even a hurricane.

We were welcomed in the homes of the Polish people who lived in the five family house. There were the Paciks and the Wrzesiens (cousins) in the house, and we even got to call their father ‘tata. Polish people in America have their Christmas dinner on Christmas Eve (called Wigilia which means ‘vigil’). Their Christmas carols are called Kolendy, and Christmas Day is Boze Narodzenie. The Polish people have a prayer corner in their kitchen, and at Easter time the Polish Priest comes to the house and blesses the food, including babka bread.

I have a prayer corner in my house with a very large picture of the “Lady of Guadalupe” from Mexico, who I have always known. In my prayer corner, I have snapshots of people I pray for stuck all around the frame and on the wall.

At the carnival one year, I won a nice gold (not real) bracelet of ‘Our Lady of Guadalupe’ and I gave it to my step-daughter, Terry, because she was such a nice Christian girl who read the Bible and joined the Catholic Religion all by herself.

The Polish kids from Chapman Street used to walk the tracks, cross over the tussle, and go down the steps on the other side of the river to go swimming. It seemed like each group had their own swimming place. Ours was at Rabitailles, near the Willimantic Wet Wash where my mother worked. The Polish kids had the Baby Hole, the Rock, and the Island. Some others had Gil Flynn’s.

Meikle 55

One day, I went swimming at Gil Flynn's and got hurt. There was a high mound for a diving place and instead of me diving straight out in the front, I dove in off the side and scrapped the whole bottom of the river. I scraped my nose, my elbows, my hip bones and anything else that was sticking out, and I nearly lost my bathing suit. For days, I wore a band aid on my nose, and with the way my bangs looked, it must have been funny. I started to cut my bangs, then decided not to cut them, so I had a few strains of hair hanging down in the middle of my forehead. I was lucky, though, because a boy named Claude dove off the same place and broke his neck and died.

Well, after we were friends with the Polish kids, we walked the tracks with them. The Polish kids brazenly walked upright across the tussle; and me, twelve years old, and my little sister, ten years old, crawled across the tussle on our hands and knees. Imagine looking down through the openings into the river below. We were petrified. If my mother had gone out into the yard from her work and looked up, we would never be able to go swimming again. After that, we went by way of the bridge. The tracks are for trains, not for kids.

I first went to St. Joseph's Church and School, and was brought up Catholic. When I was with my French friends, I went to St. Mary's Catholic Church. The mass was in French. When it was time for me to make my Confirmation, I was too late to make it in St. Joseph's Church (because we were in Fishers Island at the time), so I made it instead at St. Mary's Church (in French), and did not know the importance of being confirmed until years later when I read it in my Sunday Missile. My Missile read: "In Confirmation, the person receives the Holy Spirit which is Divine Love, Divine Wisdom, Divine Knowledge and Divine Fear." This is a good thing to know, especially knowing that if a person is afraid of getting in trouble, they will think twice before doing wrong.

Meikle 56

On some Sundays, we went to St. Joseph's Church with our Polish friends, and the Mass was in Polish, so we didn't understand any of it. After Mass, all of the families went to the Polish Club for eating and dancing. We used to go with them too. When we grew up, we all went to the Polish Club for dancing to the really good Polish bands. The band gave out records, and one night I won "A String of Pearls," but I was too bashful to go to the stage to get it. All the young people in town went to the Polish Club, and many young men from Norwich came to the dances, met the girl of their dreams, married, and stayed in Willimantic. It seemed like the older children in the families married someone of the same nationality, whereas the younger ones, who seemed to be more Americanized, married someone of a different nationality. Examples are the Polish marrying French, or English or Italian etc. Finally, the day came when the Polish Club was no more, and the French Club was a mixture of many nationalities, as each generation chose their mates from outside of their family roots. Willimantic people "really became a League of Nations," as one teacher in St. Mary's school said.

Meikle 57

Chapter 10: 18 Ash Street

We lived on Chapman Street for about a year, and then a lady who knew my mother had an apartment for rent, so she let us have it. The lady also put the lights in her name, so at least we had electricity. But again, a toilet and no bathtub, sink, or shower. Imagine having to take a bath in a basin in the kitchen sink. When you get down to your feet, you sit down in a chair and wash your feet in a basin. I am sure we are not the only ones who lived like that.

Around this time, I wanted to have beautiful feet, and I read in a magazine that if I put cold cream on my feet, I would have “beautiful feet.” So I put cold cream on my feet and wore socks to bed at night. Then, one day when I was visiting my friends, the Gaudettes in Scotland, we went swimming down to the river, and walked barefoot along the road. I didn’t know there were tiny sharp stones in the blacktop. When we got back, my feet were all cut and bloody. So much for beautiful feet.

I never liked to wear “hard shoes,” so I used to wear moccasins or penny-loafers. Then one day, I discovered how comfortable white tennis shoes were, so I wore them. When I went anywhere out of town “dressed up,” I wore high heeled shoes. It wasn’t long before I went into a store and bought low shoes. I would rather chose comfort over style.

In our house at 18 Ash Street, we had six rooms, three bedrooms, a kitchen, dining room, a front room, and a small bath room. Our furniture and other things came from friends and relatives. We liked living in this house. We had a shed and a very large backyard. We even planted a garden. There was a large tree in the yard, leaning on the roof of a shed, and someone cut out places for feet to climb up the tree. There was a comfortable place to sit on the crotch of the tree, and that is where I usually was. Reading.

Meikle 58

I would bring my book, an apple, and some saltines and stay there as long as I could. I had to finish a story. When my friends came by for me to go somewhere, I said, "Not until I finish this story." At night, my mother would follow me around, putting out the lights and I would go to bed with a flashlight under the covers until I finished the story. She used to say that when I got old, I was going to have to wear thick glasses and not be able to see.

When I was really deep into a story, probably in a far away land, my Mother would call me. When I didn't answer, she would have to shake my shoulder to bring me back to the present.

My best place to read in the winter time was sitting in front of our big black stove with my feet at the oven. I was always cold, with poor circulation, low blood pressure, and below normal temperature.

We had ice skating at the park and we all used to go. They had a shed and also a bon fire for warming. I would sit, put on my skates, skate once around the ice, then take off my skates and go back to my warm oven. I always had a warm drink and a snack ready when the others came back, often with friends.

My family and I used to have to chop wood for our stove, and we burned coal for cooking and warmth, but the kitchen was always the only warm room in the house. Many times, we would take a bucket and go up Ash Street hill and pick coal up from the side of the tracks, where it fell off from the coal car as it went rushing by. Later, our big black stove was converted to oil, so then we had to go across the street to the gas station for a jug of oil.

We also had an ice box instead of a refrigerator, and had to be sure to empty the pan underneath before it overran. When we needed ice, we put a card "ICE" in the window for the iceman to bring another block of ice.

Meikle 59

Chapter 11: Live and Learn

There are many people we meet along life's path that influence us even though we don't know it at the time. In the sixth grade at Noble, one of the girls wore a lot of make-up. The teacher used to say, "When a person uses so much make-up on her face, they are going to have holes in their face when they get older." That scared me because I knew a lady who had holes in her face. So to this day, I do not wear make-up.

In Noble School, grading was on a scale of one (F) to five (A). I got fives in all of my subjects, except for a two in math. I could never do math on paper, or think it in my head. When I got to the eighth grade, all the kids in my classroom went across the hall to the other eighth grade to learn algebra before going to high school. All except me—they put me on my desk, and out in the hall for the three weeks while the others learned algebra. Luckily, I know how to read and dream up my own stories or I would have been upset. When I got to high school and I was in the algebra class, the teacher said, after three weeks, "Bring me a paper from home and I will let you out of here." So I did.

All the time I was going to school, I worked too. I worked in the neighborhood, helping the old people. I had a red wagon and went to the store for them, cleaned out their sheds, got rid of their papers and bottles, and made a little spending money for the movies.

We had a trolley that we rode uptown on, and we had three movie houses. One of them was the Strand Theater. On Saturdays, they ran mostly a country western serial, and we hated to miss even one chapter. If we wanted to go to the movies and did not have any money, my two sisters would beg my mother for a half hour or so before she gave in. All this time I was sitting there reading, but was ready to go when she finally gave in.

Meikle 60

I was always the different one—while they bought candy when they had money, I bought a big fat dill pickle from a barrel with my money. When we sat at the table to eat, I ate the dinner (meat, potatoes, vegetables and bread & butter) and didn't want dessert. The others ate dessert. In the afternoon, when I got hungry, I would go to the icebox (we did not have a refrigerator) to get some dessert, and it would be all gone, so I would make a fuss because they didn't leave me any. My mother would say, "You do it every time. You wait until the dessert is all gone then you want some."

"What is wrong with you?" My mother asked. If she said it once, she said it a hundred times. Another joke around the house was, "If you want to get rid of Claire, just start talking about someone," because I hated gossip and would get up and leave the room as soon I as my family started talking about someone. I wanted to treat people the way I wanted to and not let any idle gossip get in the way. Years later, when I worked for a bondsman, I stopped reading the newspaper because I wanted to treat all people good and not for what they did. I did not want my face to show any adverse feelings. I was the outsider. The family joke was that my older sister looked like my mother and my younger sister looked like my father and I looked like the mailman or the iceman or the milkman. I used to say, "I don't want to be a 'Meikle', I want to be a 'Brown'." My mother and sisters liked to joke and kid around, and I did not want to be bothered when I was reading. My mother would always say, "You never want to have any fun."

I was to care for more children than I can count. I babysat just about every child in our neighborhood. My sister often came with me, though I took care of her as well. I remember one house. We were babysitting two young children who were asleep, and we both sat together in one chair because we were scared to death. Not too long before that, we had seen a man, who had died young, and he was in the coffin right there in the same room. In those days, the wake

Meikle 61

was in homes, and not in a funeral parlor. It seemed like we went to lots of funerals back in those days, and my little sister and I used to get nervous laughs and have to leave the room. We used to get like that in the hospital as well. We'd have to leave the floor where we were visiting, and go to another floor until we stopped laughing.

The day I graduated from grammar school, my friends and I went to the carnival. I had a beautiful white accordion pleated dress on, that Mrs. Jack Lutton went all the way to Norwich to buy for me. My friends were from a different school, and wore slacks. We went into a fun house. When I was sliding down the last slide, I held my skirt close and my feet were straight out and my shoes stuck on the down side of the slide. I fell on my face and started to cry, but laughed instead because they had a fat lady statue standing at the door, laughing. I said I hope my mother doesn't see me; but of course, she was just walking by the entrance at that moment, saw my bloody face, and got upset.

Meikle 62

Chapter 12: A Smart Lady

My mother was very smart. She had gone to Bacon Academy in Colchester and could speak German. She taught us German songs and poems, she spoke Yiddish because a lot of Jewish people came from New York to farm there, and she had many Jewish friends. She knew a lot of sayings, especially Yankee sayings. She could sing "Yankee Doodle" in Yiddish. Years later when I was at ECSU, I was writing a paper on Yankees, and asked a professor how to spell some of the Yiddish words I remembered from the song. The professor roared with laughter then said: "A Jewish person from New York doesn't know 'Yankee Doodle.'"

One of the poems she used to say to us was:

Little Johnny would say: "I love you mother" and would run out to play,

Little Mary would say: "I love you mother" and would go with friends,

Little Nell would say: "I love you mother" and she would sweep the floor, mind the baby, and go to the store.

Now which one do you think loved mother best?

My mother had many fun sayings. When we were teenagers and thought we knew more than she did, she used to say, "Who is milking this cow?" She came from a farm. Another saying she said was, "What do you know about the war? You never shot a gun." That was to let us know we were not so smart after all. But if we insisted we were right, she would say, "pick up the marbles, you won."

She had a fun way of spelling towns or states. For instance, Willimantic— "will a boy tick, will a girl tick, will a woman tick, Will a man tic," or New York-- "a knife and a fork, a bottle and a cork, that is how you spell New York." And another one was: "If Missi ssippi, lent Miss ouri her New Jersey what would Dela ware? I da ho, Al aska?" I put this story

Meikle 63

in for fun because my mother used to talk to us a lot, with poems and songs and other languages and I wonder what other mothers talk to their children about.

My mother's sister, Annie Lucey, was often sick with bad headaches. So, my mother would go there to help her, but I never knew how she found the time to do so. It was a two-mile walk from our house to Annie's. We would go with our mother there. At Annie's house, my mother did her housework and took care of her. And me, being like my mother, took my two weeks vacation from work to care for my aunt when she was dying years later. Some relatives sitting in the kitchen were just talking about death and dying. I put them all out, except for my mother, because she did not talk about death or dying. After my two weeks were up, there wasn't anyone to care for my aunt, so she went to a convalescent home and then they had to put me out of the room because I was the only one crying.

One time when I was the babysitter, and waiting for the two little girls to come home from school in the afternoon, I fell asleep on the couch and dreamed. I dreamed that I was paralyzed and could not see, but could only hear people talking. Instead, I knew who was there by their voice. Since then, I feel sorry for people who are so ill that they can hear what is being said around them, but cannot talk. Only their eyes say something. I saw my aunt like that and a dear friend, Violet like that too. I was glad that I was able to help my aunt, because that is when I found out that my grandmother had a pauper's grave and did not have a stone, so I bought her a stone.

Meikle 64

Chapter 13: Windham High School

When I was a freshman in high school and had a class in cooking, the teacher kept saying how much better I would look if I wore makeup. My friends were sick of hearing it, so they brought lots of make-up to school and fixed my face real good. The teacher did not have much to say, and I had a terrible time getting all the make-up off my face. Never again would I let them do that. Just a few days later, I was told to turn the oven on for baking, so I turned on the oven but did not know I had to light it. We already had a coal and wood stove. They told me to light the oven with a match. When I did, the match exploded in my face. It burned my hair in front, burned my eyebrows and eyelashes, and left red spots on my face and neck. So much for looking better.

According to a philosopher, there are three roads to take in life. The bottom road is: uncouth, partying, out in the world doing whatever the world does. I did my partying, time and time again, but always knew when to put a stop to it because there are more important things in the world than going out and having fun. Mediocre is in the middle: A person is born, goes to school, gets a job, gets married, has children, then grandchildren, and maybe great grandchildren, and then dies. The top road is the scholarly road: reading, studying, and trying to make a better world for people. I chose this road a very long time ago.

In my class yearbook, someone wrote: "Life is what you make it" next to my picture and I asked everyone: "who wrote it" but no one seemed to know. I can't imagine who wrote it, but to me it was like a challenge in life, and I hope I have met the challenge.

Meikle 65

Chapter 14: Work

I babysat many of my relatives' little children. I babysat for my aunt's kids. She had only two kids, but my great aunt who lived about five blocks away would send her three grandchildren for me to babysit. I didn't want to refuse her because she was old. My aunt also worked in a beauty parlor, and whenever customers needed a babysitter, she sent me. Some days when I only had two kids to watch, I would take them to my house and clean the whole house. When my mother came home from work she would say, "I see Claire was here today, the house is clean."

I got my first "working papers" at age sixteen and went to work at the Braid Shop making braids. I had to turn a handle at the top to start the machine, and then I made sure the machine didn't stop. One day, from turning the handle so much, my whole right side got paralyzed and I couldn't sit or lay down for awhile. I had ten machines running all the time and I wasn't very strong. I worked 1 week days and 1 week nights during the summer. Being young, I didn't let the paralysis bother me. I went swimming at Columbia Lake with my friends and dove off the raft, sideways, and after awhile the paralysis went away. When I got my first big pay, I went to the record store and bought an album of Strauss Waltz. I don't know when I started liking them, but these waltzes are still my favorite music.

When I was a teenager, I did a lot of work in the neighborhood. I did housework for the lady across the street from my house. I used to wash and wax Mrs. Rabinowitz's floors, polish silverware, as well as complete other chores. Mrs. Rabinowitz lived upstairs over her son's grocery store. Her son, Louie, the grocer, got me a job one time working as a waitress at the Country Club for parties (American Thread Co. had their parties there). Louis said he got me the

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job because I was a plain person and not all dressed up with make-up and jewelry. I took that as a nice compliment. I also worked in several mills at one time or another after school: the Braid Shop and the Electro Motive Mfg, both South Park Street and Bridge Street plants and got an 'E' during the war.

When I was 17 years old, my younger sister, Margie, and I went to Colchester to stay with a Cousin Frances and her little boy Johnny during the summer. There, I went to work at *S and S Leather Company*. The first job they gave me was putting creases in wallets on a hot plate. I was always getting burned from this job. Then they had me placing I.D. cards in wallets. When I sat on a high stool in the hot summer, I used to fall asleep because it was monotonous. The boss used to holler at me all the time.

One day, an elderly lady, who I had never seen before, put her finger in my face and said, "You are a Brown." I was really happy to know who I looked like beside the milkman or the iceman or the mailman. It turned out the lady was my mother's cousin, Sylvia Brown, and I got to be good friends with her and her children, Johnny, Moe and Mary. They took me horseback riding one day – bareback – and the horse went directly to some water, and bent down to drink. I was horrified. They had to help me off that horse – never again.

When I was 18 years old, I went to work with my mother at the Cheney Mills in Manchester, Connecticut. We worked for Pioneer Parachutes during the Second World War. Because I was 18 years old, I could work 10 hours a day, so that was generally my hours each day. My mother sewed parachutes, and I put the grommets in them for the laces. I sat on a high stool (again) and had a foot press, and every once in awhile my foot would go down by reflex, and I would cut a finger. My poor mother would get worried every time she saw me coming by her, holding my hand, with blood dripping. I was glad when the summer was over and I was

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back to school.

After the summer, we returned home, and I went job hunting for after school. I started on the right side of Main Street and went in every office or store, all the way up to High Street. Then, I crossed over and went down the left side of Main Street in every store or office. No one needed any help until I came almost to the end and Hallock's Restaurant needed a waitress. Working at Hallock's started my work in food places which was to last about 50 years.

When I worked as a waitress, I used to have a big meal and go home with a lot of tip money. I worked with Alice Fowler, who was fourteen years older than me, and she was such a wonderful person. We used to call Mr. & Mrs. Clark "Blondy" and "Dagwood" because they had funny little spats. Many years later, I worked with Alice again in the Clark House, and I was able to tell her that she was my role model before she passed away in her nineties.

One day I ran across the street to Mrs. Rabinowitz, and fell up the couple stone steps leading to the stairs. Being embarrassed, I ran up the stairs fast. When I got up there, I was dizzy and had to lay down on her couch, unable to work. I had scrapes and cuts from the cement, and my poor circulation was what made me sick. I did not go to school the next day, and when I went to the office with my paper, the lady said, "Everybody else in the world falls down the stairs but you have to fall up them." I was a trial to her. Every day in homeroom, I got excused to go to the typing room. However, every day the teacher forgot, and every first period I was called to the office.

I also used to have toothache, when all my teeth ached at once, I would stay home and have to see the nurse at school the next day. I'm sure they didn't believe me, but I found out what the problem was years later.

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My freshman year was not the best. I had first period English, with a brand new teacher, and I also had her for second period Math. I never talk back to anyone, especially a teacher, but I had a bad habit of shrugging my shoulder when she said anything to me. She called me "Lady Jane." I did not know who Lady Jane was for years. The Textile Museum had a paper doll book for sale that had a beautiful paper doll with lots of fancy clothes to put on the doll, so evidently the teacher thought that I thought that I was a fancy lady. O contraire. Mrs. Jack Lutton, a friend of my mom and I, who was in my school to get her high school diploma, and was in my class, became very upset because she didn't like the teacher picking on me every day.

Well, this teacher, when it came to the end of the year, said my grade was an A but she was giving me a C because she did not like my attitude. I had all B's and should have been on the B Honor Roll, but after that I said "why should I bother?" My mother was not the type of person to go to the school to protest. Besides, she was always working. What saved me that year was because my old friend since childhood, Johnny Costello, sat with me every lunch period in the cafeteria. He was a wonderful, wonderful person.

In my last year (and sixth) in an English class, the teacher said the record showed that I did the best work of anyone in English every year. This class was during the second World War time, and one day a returning soldier looked across the room and said, "Claire. what are you still doing here?"

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Chapter 15: Elks Fair

We had many wonderful times in Willimantic, especially the Elks Fair. The Elks Fair was held every year since 1913, in the backyard of the Elk's Home, on Pleasant Street across from the footbridge. Everyone, both young and old, couldn't wait until it was time for the Elk's Fair, even though it meant that summer was over and time to go back to school. The Fair was always held at the end of August.

Entering the grounds, over on the left side was the flower show. Behind the flower show were the swings for kids to ride on. There were many events to see and do. It was like a regular carnival with all kinds of booths and food. There was a stage for contests. One year, my little sister won first prize. She was dressed as a little old lady. There was dancing on the platform later in the evening. It was a wonderful fair we had, year after year for all the years we were growing up. Then, in 1952, they said, "No more Elk's Fair." I believe this decision was made because every year they raffled off a brand new car and the politicians said, "That was gambling and Connecticut does not allow gambling," so they took away the most important event Willimantic had every year. Of course, somewhere along the way, the politicians changed their minds about gambling.

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Chapter 16: Watch Hill, Rhode Island

The first year, I went to the beach to work at the Narragansett Inn (now called the Watch Hill Inn). My friend and I saw an ad in the newspaper that said they needed waitresses, so we went just for a lark. We had to take the train from Willimantic to New London and from there, another train to Westerly, Rhode Island. Then we took a bus to Watch Hill. This was at the time during the war years, and when there was a blackout.

The lady who owned the Inn said, "You girls must be hungry." She gave us a pan of chicken bones that had been picked clean, so we ran down to a restaurant and ate grilled ham and cheese sandwiches and chocolate milkshakes. I can still remember how good it tasted. The next day, the lady gave us uniforms. Mine was about five sizes too big. I weighed only one hundred pounds all of my life. We had to put a giant pleat down the whole back of the dress before I could wear it.

The young people who worked there for the summer, in different jobs, were mostly college kids. There was Doug who was going to Tufts Dental College (I went out with him once), George Tedford, and Howard Barr (called Candy bar). Howard Barr's mother was the pastry chef at the hotel and she lived in Westerly. Mrs. Barr let us stay there for the weekends when we were no longer working there. Another guy there was Ed Beattie. Years later, I got to be friends with his sons, Ed, Mike and Scottie. There was a guy named Eddie DeFannie, who kissed me on the forehead because of my bashfulness and because the guys named me "Miss Unsociable of 1948." My boyfriend, JB, from Willimantic came to Watch Hill once and liked it there. He also came after me when the summer was over and I went home.

At Watch Hill, there was a beautiful merry-go-round for the children, a wonderful beach, and a special store that had many, many different kinds of ice cream. There were wonderful

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restaurants, *The Greeks* and *Sissons*, and many more places to eat on the beach. There were clothing stores, gift shops, a drug store, a guy who painted portraits and said I had a face like a pixie, a Linen store, a newspaper store, a book store, and a fish market (where Candy Bar worked).

In those days we did not have drugs, and I do not remember anyone getting drunk. However, we often went to the Misquamicut partying, and to Westerly. We had fun, singing songs such as "From the Tables Down at Moreys" and "Them Bones, Them Bones," as well as many others. We had many beach parties, and some nights we danced. Watch Hill had strict rules. Guys weren't even allowed to go walking on the street without a shirt on. Some of the kids we hung around with were from Watch Hill, and they knew the rules. There were strict rules on the beaches and on the docks as well.

During one early evening, a young boy took us for a boat ride on a row boat. By the time we got back, it was getting dark. I was the last one getting out of the boat, and I lost my grip and fell back into the water. I was so scared of jellyfish stings that I practically flew back into the boat. They helped lift me back up to the dock. I was wearing new clothes, slacks, a shirt, and loafers. However, I didn't lose my shoes in the water. I was very wet, and then this kid, Jimmy, said, "Try not to look like you are wet, as we are not supposed to be out in a boat at this time." Then I went slosh slosh up the dock, across the road, along the side of the Inn, and down to the cottage where we lived with other workers, trying not to look like I was wet.

We met some wonderful people at the hotel. One family was the Heinz family; the father and his little three year old son, John, along with a nursemaid. The little boy grew up to be John Heinz running for a political office. I have his political button for old times' sake.

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There was one lady who wanted breakfast in bed every morning, so I brought it up to her. There were some people who were known as 'nuevo riche.' They spoke French at the table, and this gave them away. Old rich never talked like that, and old rich would put the tip money in an envelope and hand the envelope to the waitress at the end of the week.

There was one nice lady there who was the 'grand dame' of the family and when she came into the dining room, the men and boys would stand up, someone would seat her, and then they sat. She had her eightieth birthday there, and was given an orchid to wear. She was so healthy that she would go for a brisk walk in the morning, and a swim in the afternoon. I put her face in my mind and said I want to be like her when I get to be eighty. She was my first role model.

One of the families at the hotel had a little three-year-old girl. I often babysat her. When summer was over, they asked me to go with them, up north in the spring, autumn, and to Florida in the winter, but I said no. I never wanted to be too far away from my family.

One night we had dates and went to the Norwich Inn to a party. My date was a Chinese young man named George Lee. He was the handy man at the Inn, and he carried the luggage for the guests. He and I were good friends. He was going to college, and I can't remember if it was Harvard or Yale, but he was going to be in a show in the next semester so I was his coach. I helped him study for his part.

On Watch Hill, there was a nice Catholic Church around the corner from our cottage. We went to Confession on Saturday night, so we weren't allowed to eat or drink after midnight, because we were going to Communion on Sunday morning. It is too bad that the Church changed the rules, because it kept a lot of us out of trouble. At the end of summer one year, I was waiting for my ride back home. I was the only one left and it was lonesome, so I helped the lady

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clean up and put things away. In exchange, she gave me all the little prayer books she had when she was little. That was nice of her. She went to church every morning, but didn't always practice being nice. One day, the cook, standing at the stove, looked like she was having a heart attack and my friend and I both went to help her. We had her sit down, but the owner wanted her to keep on cooking. My friend was so angry over her disregard of the cook, that my friend stopped going to church. As far as I know, she never went to church again. I, on the other hand, would not let anyone sway my faith. This is what I mean about planting good seeds in the spring of life.

My favorite parable is about the sower who went out to sow his seeds. After sowing the seeds, only the seeds that fell on good ground grew and flourished. Some seeds never flourish, and some seeds grow, then die at the first adverse circumstance. So, I have used this parable for many questions I might have.

I had three wonderful summers when I worked at Watch Hill, and many years afterward, when we continued to go there. My family, mother, Martha, Clint Grylls, and Clint, Jr (when he was a baby), had come down to Watch Hill to check the place over. They said they all loved it there.

Many times, my friends and I went for day trips to the beach. I took my family there quite often, as I had a car. I used to give each of my nieces and nephews turns to go. One summer, I took my mother, my nephew Randy, and my niece Robin to Watch Hill for a week. In those days, it was cheap, and the rooms over at *Sissons Restaurant* were ten dollars a night or fifty dollars a week. So they gave us a very large room and put four beds in it, and the cost was fifty dollars for the week. It seems unbelievable.

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I had just so much money to spend, and I gave each person a certain amount of money every morning, and said, "This is what you each have for food for the day, and if you want ice cream at night, you have to figure it out for yourselves." They had to check the menu's amount for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, as well as save some for ice cream.

Well, we did fairly well with the money, but by Friday we were broke. I had to call my brother-in-law, Clint, to come and get us. We did have a very good week, but couldn't stay for Saturday and Sunday. The lady in charge, Ann Sisson, said, "Because you didn't stay for a week I want to give you back twenty dollars." But I said "no." The kids begged me to take the money but I said, "no." We stayed for five days and it was ten dollars a day, so that was fifty dollars. If I took the money we could eat, but we wouldn't have a place to stay, so it was only fair not to take the money.

Many years later when I was doing my family tree, I found that the Sissons from Westerly and Watch Hill were my grandmother's relatives, and I was really happy to know that Ann Sisson was not just a relative, but a wonderful person.

My grandmother, Martha Esther Knapp, was the daughter of Lorenzo Dow Knapp and Julia Ann Gould. Julia was the daughter of Jonathan Gould and Elvira Sisson. My great grandmother, Julia, is buried in Westerly. I think Lorenzo is as well, because they couldn't find his burial where he is listed.

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Chapter 17: Oneida Park

The last summer I was working at the Narragansett Inn, one of the families asked me to work at their home in Oneida Park. It was a very wealthy section of Greenwich, Connecticut. Greenwich is a lovely town with a beautiful Main Street with lawns and trees. I lived there on the third floor and had one day a week off. I had to take a taxi to go to church on Sundays or to go shopping downtown in Greenwich.

I was alone most of the time with only the dog and the bird to talk to and a taxi driver who asked for a date, but I said no because I would never date a stranger. I was the only maid for the people, the mother, the young son, and the daughter. I worked for them. After the father died, the family had to live on a monthly allowance and couldn't afford any other help besides me. They spent their summers in Watch Hill and their winters in Greenwich, so they did not need year round help. I lived there on the third floor and had one day a week off. I was alone most of the time.

I cleaned all the house, three floors, cooked the meals, and did the shopping. I also took care of a long, tan dachshund named Taffy, and a bird named Peter who could say, "Kiss, kiss, Peter." Peter would sometimes mess up the mirrors and windows for me to clean when the young people let him loose. It wasn't very often, however, because they were usually away at school. The girl was at a school for young ladies, and the boy was attending Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.

I used to wear my own ordinary clothes for cleaning. Then, when I finished cooking, I would put on my maid's outfit, a black dress with a white apron and a white maid's hat. The family would be sitting in the front room, and I would go into the front room through one way

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and say: "Dinner is served," and then I would go through another door into the dining room and serve the meal. I learned how to serve correctly at the inn in Watch Hill.

I made a beautiful Thanksgiving dinner (my mother taught me how to cook), and at the last minute, they were invited out so I sat and ate, and ate, and ate. I didn't want to waste my whole Thanksgiving dinner. When I told the lady I wanted to go home for Christmas, she said "no." The same day, like Thanksgiving day, would come again and I would be alone. So, I quit the job. I never missed a Christmas at home.

I only did this for a lark anyway, because I wanted to be a writer, and I needed experience. One day, I had to put on my maid's outfit and deliver a message to a neighbor. However, I brought the message to a smaller house at the gate (the caretaker's house), not the bigger house. That is how things were done.

So, in the end, I took another train ride and went home. I never went back to Oneida Park, but I often went back to Watch Hill.

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Chapter 18: America's Spring

It was in the Spring of life in America that people tilled the land in order to grow farms with crops to live on. Farms sprang up all over the New England states. The Natives, who were here for many, many years before, helped the people who came from England to survive the first winter, which was very cold. My mother's family was among the first settlers in Massachusetts (John Howland and Elizabeth Tilley of the Mayflower), and our ancestors later moved to Connecticut and Rhode Island. My Grandmother's family came from North Kingston, Rhode Island. The Goulds, Knapps, Sissons and the Browns were from Lynn, Massachusetts.

My mother's family was called "Swamp Yankees." My mother said that the first people to be born in the new world were "Yankees." The Dutch who came over settled in New York, and I believe that they were the first to call English people "yanker," and that sounded like "yankee," so the name stuck. England, on the other hand, had a nickname of John Bull, and in the Dutch language, Jan or Yan means John. People born in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut are Yankees. So I imagine my mother was right. There is a story that the name "Swamp Yankee" came about because in North Kingston, Rhode Island. In North Kingston, there was a town called Swamp Town. People couldn't use seawater for growing their crops, so they lived near a swamp for the water. My grandmother's family, the Gould's and Sisson's came from this area, as well as the Anthony family. Because they came from Swamp Town, one of the Anthonys told me they were "Swamp Yankees." Other people say the name came from Mystic at the time of the Pequot War, when people were afraid and hid in the swamps. However, I would rather believe my mother's reasoning, as it sounds right to me.

The English people, especially the soldiers, had a great time with the name "Yankee," and they made up a song: "Yankee Doodle" to make fun of the new Americans. This song caught on.

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From this simple little song, people refer to Americans as "Yankees." The son's name and words changed many times, but the tune remained. Today, it is the state song of Connecticut. Even the people at the Capitol, who had many songs to choose from, remained faithful to Yankee Doodle Dandy. We people from Connecticut take pride in our state, and the tradition is the adoption of emblems and symbols, including our state song. Here are some the words to Yankee Doodle Dandy (today's song is slightly different from the past):

Yankee Doodle went to town

Riding on a pony.

Stuck a feather in his hat

And called it macaroni

In England, during the days of Cromwell, a plume set in a hat was called "macaroni." The lyrics of Yankee Doodle refer to this English "plume set." The song's chorus is as follows:

Yankee Doodle keep it up,

Yankee Doodle Dandy

Mind the music and the step,

And with the folks be handy.

These are the old lyrics to the chorus:

Yankee Doodle keep it up,

Yankee Doodle Dandy,

Mind the music and the step,

And with the girls be handy.

Evidently, the ballad of Yankee Doodle (the tune) came to us by way of France, Holland, and England. The English called the tune "Lucky Lucy lost her locket". In Holland, it was called

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"The Buttermilk Song." From Holland, perhaps it came to America with the Pilgrims, who spent twelve years in Holland before sailing out to the New World.

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Chapter 19: North Stonington, Connecticut

My grandmother was born in North Stonington and married in Colchester, Connecticut, where my mother was born. An amazing fact I found when I was doing our family history was the fact that way back in the 1600's, my grandmother and grandfather had a common ancestor: Isaac Wheeler, who started the Town of North Stonington, Connecticut. That was quite a surprise to me knowing many years later that my grandmother had a pauper's grave in a strange town with no stone to show her passing.

My mother grew up on a farm in Colchester, Connecticut. It was her grandfather's farm. My grandfather was known as "Farmer Brown." My mother's grandfather also owned a grain store, and my mother had to drive the horse and wagon to the store for grain and bring it back to the farm. She had other farm chores too, so I am not surprised that when she was 18 years old, she came to Willimantic to work at the American Thread Company. Her mother, in her mid-60's at the time, came with my mother and worked in the mill as well. Later, I worked in the same mill, just as my family had. My mother's father had been an attendant, or some kind of a worker at the Norwich State Hospital, and possibly this had a bearing on how he thought and behaved.

My grandfather, George Franklin Brown, who was called Tocky, was so furious that his wife and my mother left, that he never spoke to my mother again as long as he lived. He never spoke to any of us either. "Swamp Yankees" are known for their habit to never, never speak to anyone once they got mad at them. My grandmother was not like that, and neither am I. Instead, it is my habit to buy a present for someone I might have offended by way of appeasement.

My grandmother did go back to Colchester after a year, because her son was going off to war. It was 1917 and the First World War was going on. Her son joined the Famous Connecticut

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Yankee Division. Later, my grandmother came back to Willimantic to be near my mother, and her other daughter, Annie, who had moved here.

Of course, I did not know it until I researched my grandmother's family history that my grandmother's first five babies died at birth, and then she had a son and two daughters. My mother was her youngest, so of course she would not let her youngest daughter go to a strange town and do a strange job alone.

My mother was brought up in the Congregational Church and when she later married my father, who was a Catholic at St. Joseph's, she had to take a vow to bring her children up as Catholics. I was born in St. Joseph's Hospital, and later went to St. Joseph's School and St. Joseph's Church.

We had a single parent home long before it was a common occurrence, and we were latch-key kids. We had spent our early school years at a Catholic school and went to a Catholic Church. When anything would go wrong with me, it was my habit to go into the church and sit there and cry. There was no one at home to cry to so I cried to God. It was the beginning of my dependence on God for everything. When a person says the "Our Father" often enough, they know that God is there for them to replace an earthly father that isn't there for them. One day I sat there and cried all day and when my family couldn't find me, they knew where to go – to St. Joseph's Church.

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Chapter 20: My Irish Grandmother

My father's mother came to the United States at age sixteen, through Ellis Island in the late 1880's. My grandmother was born to John Griffin and Mary Sullivan in Glamorganshire, Wales. Although they lived in Wales, my family was Irish.

My grandmother's family worked in the mills. Fortunately for them, they lived in a house on the corner of High Street and Prospect Street, on the same corner as the high school. Some of her relatives lived on Card Street, at the bottom of Hosmer Mountain. One of these relatives living here was her uncle. Her uncle, a farmer, always wore his boots, because he was a farmer, and everyone called him Paddy Boots Sullivan. I understand that today, the Lamberts live in this same house on Card Street.

Other Irish families who lived on Kerry (Carey) Hill were not so lucky, because the time came when the Irish workers went on strike, and the mill owners had their shanties burned down to the ground. Because their houses were burned down, the Irish families had to live in tents at Horseshoe Bridge, on the other side of the river. This was called Tent City. The people living here, I believe, were Willimantic's first homeless people.

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Chapter 21: St. Joseph's Church

English people had a problem with the Irish and Scots, because they were Catholics. The English mill owners were Protestants. These English mill owners made a room over the store, what is now the Windham Textile Museum, and had masses for the workers. However, the problem was that these English mill owners preached the Protestant Bible, while the workers were Catholics. So, there was a disagreement between the two. The Protestants had churches, but the Catholics had to meet in homes in the beginning, then later on the top floor of a building on Main Street, over which was later John's Framing Shop. Then, the Catholics were fortunate enough to buy land on Jackson Street for a church and a rectory. The church was named St. Joseph's, and today it is still a wonderful Church that looks like a Cathedral. They have a rose window and other beautiful windows. The parishioners were the Irish, Scots, Italian, Polish and French, until the French Canadians built their own Cathedral-like church in early 1900's.

My father's family was devout Catholics, and sent their children to St. Joseph's School and Church. Their children carried on the tradition, except my father, of course, who quit school. My mother, a Congregationalist, went to church with us, but my father never did.

St. Joseph's meant a lot to our family and to the town of Willimantic. My whole family attended St. Joseph's church and school, we were all baptized there, we all made our First Communion at St. Joseph's. Also, some of my family is buried at St. Joseph's cemetery. St. Joseph's Rectory is next door to the church. Standing in front of the rectory, there is a life-sized white-colored statue of St. Joseph, with his right hand over his heart, and a flower lily on his left arm. St. Joseph is a worker.

Across the street from the church is a red brick, long, double building that used to

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be the first hospital in Willimantic. It was built in 1907. The right side of this building was the home of the sisters who taught at St. Joseph's school. In front of the building where the sisters lived are statues of Our Lady and St. Joseph.

In 1909, St. Joseph's Training School for Nurses started at St. Joseph's. The school trained hundreds of young women, certifying them as nurses. For over twenty-five years, St. Joseph's Hospital served not only Windham-Willimantic, but Andover, Ashford, Canterbury, Colchester, Columbia, Eastford, Franklin, Hampton, Hebron, Lebanon, Mansfield, Scotland, Sprague and Willington. St. Joseph's has done its share to bring good health and blessings to these areas, and the church remains to help the community. When I was a girl scout, my troop had our meetings at St. Joseph's, on the side where the sisters had an extra room for visitors. There is a unique spiral staircase in that side of the building.

At one time, the left side of the building was a Home for the Aged. Then, when St. Joseph's Living Center was established, the left side of the building was turned into a shelter for the homeless families. Today, the name of the living center is "Holy Family Home and Shelter." The shelter is run by Sisters of Charity. Sister Peter is currently in charge, and Diane Lambert is currently in charge of Catholic Charities.

In front of the building is a white life-sized statue of Jesus with his arms spread out as though to say: "Come to me you who are weary and I will give you rest." Just like the Statute of Liberty says.

Although the later immigrants saw the Statue of Liberty when they arrived in America, Plymouth Rock was where the first immigrants saw America, and where the pilgrims knelt down on their knees and thanked God. Plymouth in Massachusetts grew, and people multiplied and ventured out to other areas within America. Some people went north to Maine,

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New Hampshire, and Vermont, and some went south to Rhode Island and Connecticut. The arrival of immigrants is where our story starts.

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Chapter 22: Pearl Street

When we decided to move to Pearl Street, we had four rooms of furniture and they wanted fifty dollars a room to move us. We did not have the money. I was walking down Main Street near Star Furniture store when it came to me that Jesus said, "Sell all that you have and follow me."

So I went in the store, and Sam Moskowitz, the owner, took our furniture, gave us credit for it, and brought it to his store. He sold us new furniture, which he sent to our new apartment. I was able to pay him little by little. He said he usually put a number on secondhand furniture, so he put "Claire" under all of my furniture.

I went for a job at Pratt & Whitney in East Hartford, and took a test for typist in an office. Even though I typed eighty words a minute, I was so interested in reading the script that that I typed badly and didn't get the office job. Instead they put me out in the building that had shipping and receiving.

I had to get a physical, so when the doctor saw me, he said, "How did you get in here?" I still weighed seventy-five pounds. I do not like needles, and after having three needles, the doctor told the nurse to give me another because he wanted to know why I was so thin. It turned out that I was anemic and that is why I always felt like fainting. So, my mother had to walk me to work. My mother took me to her doctor, and in three weeks time, my blood was normal.

It happened that my neighbor, Isabel Curol, was a nurse at Pratt and Whitney. When I asked her why my back sometimes got all "pins and needles" in it, and she said that when I picked up something heavy, my bones squeezed my nerves and that made the "pins and needles." So, I am very careful about lifting heavy things.

Meikle 87

One trouble with the job at Pratt was the hours I worked there. I got picked up in a limo that went to the job. Then, I was the first one picked up at twelve noon, before the driver drove around picking up other passengers. Next, I worked from three o'clock to ten or eleven o'clock. I usually got home at either one o'clock or two o'clock the next morning. The first week, I ended up working nine days in a row. All this time, my mother was alone in our upstairs apartment and she was scared to death.

I lived in such a weird apartment. I called it a haunted house. For one thing, an old couple owned the house and lived downstairs. The wife was deaf, and because of that the front door (the only way we had out), the apartment was always locked. My mother was scared all the time. If something happened, could she get out? I happened to be gone most of the time working. I had to get her out of there.

Going upstairs in our apartment, there was a long hall. On the right side was a front room connected to a bedroom. The bedroom had a door into the hall. At the end of the hall was the bathroom, and stairs leading to the attic. On the left side of the hall was a door into a small dining room, and then into a small kitchen. The stove was ancient and something always smelled of iodine. A dentist had had his office up there years before.

One night, my mother heard footsteps going up the stairs to the empty attic. She called out, "Is that you, Mr. So & So?" No answer. One day after she went downtown, she saw tiny white footprints in the hall, and followed them into the kitchen. Evidently, the people let their two-year-old granddaughter in our kitchen, and she spilled a box of flour all over and walked it in. My mother found some pieces of wood in her clothes closet that weren't there before. In the apartment, we had to lock all of our doors, including the bathroom, and had to unlock the door whenever we wanted to go.

Meikle 88

I quit Pratt & Whitney after three months because it made me sick to work there. I was in what they called the "bull pen," an enclosure with rails around it instead of walls. It was a small place with four working spaces, and people were supposed to change places every week, because making labels was bad. They stuck me with making labels for all the time I was there. The ladies who worked there spoke "dirty" to every man that came to the railing for shipping and receiving. They told me I either join or else, so I, being the person I was, took the "or else."

The boss took me to work with him, and the ladies wouldn't even let me go to supper with them. I told the boss I was sorry that I had to quit but he said it was okay because I was a good worker. He said he would rather work with a truck load of men than those four ladies. All the time I was there I had a headache and even caught a cold. I had to get out of there and out of that house too.

I let it be known to people that I wanted to live closer to Main Street. The Ricards who owned two houses on Valley Street let my mother and I move into their apartment, and they moved into the house in the backyard. They are nice people who are in my family circle.

Now, I have the town hall, post office, library, stores, restaurants, and St. Paul's Soup Kitchen. I also found work around my block, the Main Street office of Heller's, where I worked three times because they always wanted me back. On Main Street, I don't ever need a car again. I have the bus and a nice bus driver named Mark.

Meikle 89

Chapter 23: Willimantic Area

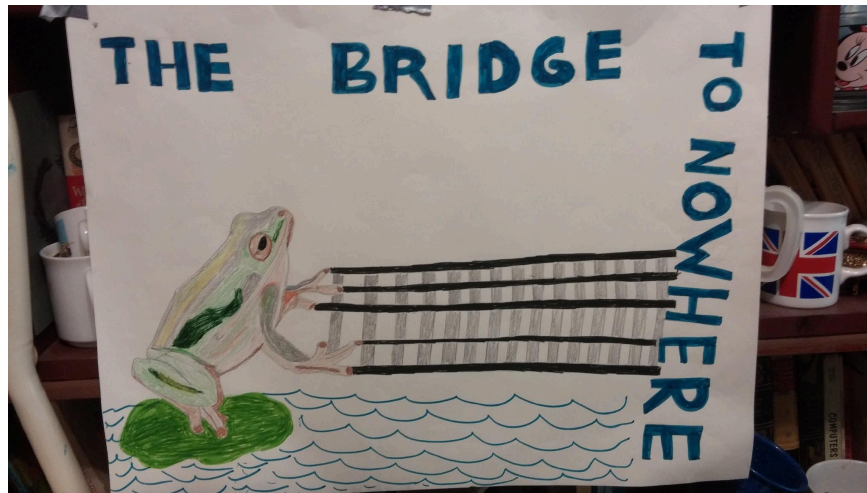
I love Willimantic. It is one of most unique places that I've ever known. Willimantic, Connecticut is in a basin (noted by Dr. Pocock, ECSU), and that is why we do not have much damage from storms as other towns do. Many times, the bad weather stops in Bolton, Connecticut.

It would not be a Willimantic story without the Frogs of Windham. I took the information from the book "The Tale of the Windham Frog" that Annie Wandell gave me.

In 1756, people in Connecticut were afraid that the Native Americans might come in the night to fight with them. One night, the people heard strange noises and got out of bed and were ready to fight their foes. Nothing happened. Then in the morning, people cautiously came out of their houses and were very surprised to see hundreds and hundreds of frogs. On Route 14, which was near the pond, something happened to the water and that is why the frogs littered the road and yards near the pond.

The symbol for Willimantic is a spool of thread with a frog sitting on it. This is for the American Thread Company, nationally known, and for the Frogs of Windham. This symbol is everywhere. It is on the class rings for Windham High School and in many other places. And, of course, we have a bridge of frogs called The Frog Bridge. I can't forget the Frog Bridge.

Meikle 90



Claire's very own picture of the "Bridge to Nowhere" featuring the frog bridge in Willimantic. Claire told me she made this in her art class at ECSU.

It was my habit to go to every first meeting that came up in Willimantic. It might be for the homeless, or the poor, or the handicapped, the Hotel Hooker, Third Thursday, or schools. So when it was announced that there would a meeting for the Frog Bridge, of course, I went. As a matter of fact, I have a copy of the original drawing of bridge on the wall in my house.

When it came for a writing of the minutes, they didn't know what to put down for me, because I have no title. So, they put down "citizen," and that is exactly what I am: a good patriotic citizen of Willimantic, Connecticut, and the United States of America.

I have a paper that shows what the duties of a citizen are, which I mention here:

1. The duty to obey the laws (if a person obeys God's laws, they will not come under man's laws)
2. The duty to respect the rights of others (do unto others as you would want to be done to)
3. The duty to inform yourself on issues of government and community welfare
4. The duty to vote in elections

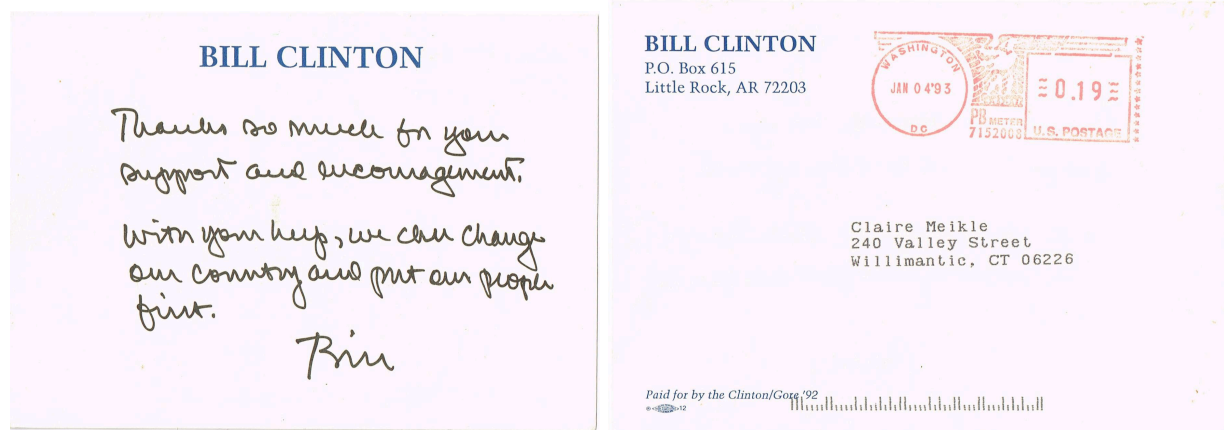
Meikle 91

5. The duty to serve on juries if called
6. The duty to serve and defend your country
7. The duty to assist agencies of law enforcement and
8. The duty to practice and teach the principles of good citizenship in your home.

Did I forget to mention that I love the City of Willimantic, Connecticut, New England, and the United States of America, and I like to believe that I am very patriotic and do my duty as a citizen of this great country of ours. I feel bad because we (The United States of America) were supposed to have May 1st as our Patriotic Day, but ours was cancelled because Russia has May 1st as their day. Our Fire Departments and Police Departments are the only people who celebrate the day. It was supposed to be in the schools and in the churches, but now it is the little children who lose out.

I helped in the rebuilding of the Statue of Liberty and the Second World War Monument. I also sent family photos to Ellis Island for their special program, and wrote to my Congressmen when I have something to say. I wrote to the then President, Bill Clinton, and received eight letters in return, including one from one of his lawyers when I wrote to free Leonard Peltier (the Native American) who was wrongly accused.

Meikle 92



I also have written to our Connecticut Senators when the subject is important. It was supposed to go into the schools and churches to teach children. It wouldn't be fair if I didn't put in Your Rights as a Citizen.

1. The right to equal protection of laws and equal justice in the courts
2. The right to be free from arbitrary search or arrest
3. The right to equal educational and economic opportunity
4. The right to choose public offices in free elections
5. The right to own property
6. The right of free speech, press and assembly
7. The right to attend the church of your choice and
10. The right to have legal counsel of your choice and a prompt trial is accused of crime.

The motif for May 1, Law Day USA is "No man is above the law and no man is below the LAW" (Theodore Roosevelt).

Willimantic is unique because it is the only city in our area surrounded by countryside living. There is North Windham, Mansfield, Chaplin, Hampton, Willington and Coventry to the

Meikle 93

north. To the west is Columbia and to the south is Lebanon and South Windham. To the east is Windham Center and Scotland. Surrounding Willimantic are many hills – to the south there is Bush Hill, Chestnut Hill, Cook's Hill, Liberty Hill, Gates Hill, Owunegunset Hill, Commons Hill, Sweet Hill, Kick Hill, and Babcock Hill. To the north is Beaver Hill, Monument Hill, Ripley Hill, Spring Hill, Hanks Hill, Tower Hill, Wormwood Hill, Bear Hill, Shaw Hill, Puddin Hill, and a mountain called Wiley Mountain. To the west of Willimantic is Clark's Hill, Cooper Hill, and to the east is Murphy Hill, Beaver Hill, Miller Hill, Chestnut Hill, and Mullen Hill. Ashford and Willington also have hills, which are included in the Eastern Hills. Willimantic is in the Green Corner, which is the northeast corner of Connecticut.

Our highest point north, near the Mansfield line is about 350 to 400 feet. Hosmer Mountain to the south is 500 feet and Miller Hill to the east is 358 feet. The hill in Columbia in the west is 250 feet, and Ash Street hill going towards Mansfield is also 250 feet high. Obwebetuck, which means a view of the river, is the highest point in Windham, and is 637 feet in the South Windham-Lebanon area.

Willimantic is also unique because it has a "dome" (Jim Ely helped me describe this). The city contains a "dome," because it is surrounded by hills and mountains. Our dome is at Main Street. If you look towards the south of Main Street, you will see that the land slopes towards the Willimantic River, especially at Railroad Street and Bridge Street. Also, Union Street from Main Street (near Dunham Street) goes sharply uphill, and from Dunham Street to Milk Street, the land is a mound which includes Carey Hill, Chapman Street and Ash Street hill. The land levels off at Valley Street and Jackson Street and Spring Street and Maple Avenue before it starts to climb again to the north hillside (Mansfield). Across Main Street, the hills

Meikle 94

going south are Jillson Hill, Mountain Street, Bridge Street and Hosmer Mountain. In the west, the road to Columbia goes up, and in the east, Brick Top Hill goes up.

Our Main Street also has a slight rise at Church Street, and the ground then starts to level off at High Street (this information from Jim Elie). I found this to be true when I rode my bike in the parade. So, being in a basin surrounded by hills and mountains, and having a dome in the middle might answer the question as to why Willimantic is protected from bad storms. I like to think that this dome is a blessing.

In Willimantic, we have Arts at the Capitol Theater, Windham Textile Museum and their many events, Connecticut Eastern Railroad Museum and their many events, the Jillson House Museum and their events, the Veteran's Memorial Greenway and the Bike Path. Willimantic also has the Bridge of Flowers, and the Thread City Frog Bridge, the Windham Area Arts Collaboration, and many, many talented artists who have their artwork shown on Main Street, including students who have decorated the Main Street poles with their art.

Among the artists is Ann Wandell, whose work shows how much she loves Willimantic because it is of Willimantic and its beautiful buildings. Bobby Brown, one of my cousins, is also an excellent artist in Willimantic, as well as many others that I do not know.

We have Arnold Prince artwork on the Walnut Street Wall of the Lumber Company building and his wife, and Claudia's work at Eastern. There is the Swift Waters Artisan's Coop, the Art's in Motion, and Jonathan Leonard's Swift Waters karate and the River Gym.

The Akus Gallery at Eastern Connecticut State University is open to the public, as are the many Musicals at Schaffer Auditorium and Theater. Eastern also has many fine people who give talks at the ECSU library, Johnson Room.

Meikle 95

For Walking Tours, we have the Victorian Homes, the Railroad Museum, the Old Willimantic Cemetery with its many beautiful monuments, and the Windham Mills.

Willimantic Whitewater Partnership, Inc. is going to have a beautiful site on Bridge Street which is to be a landscaped park overlooking the Willimantic River near the falls. The Willimantic River has much to share and enjoy - parks, trails, fishing, canoes, kayaks and historical sites to see along the river front. The Willimantic River Alliance promoted the Willimantic River Greenway, which is twenty-five miles from Stafford Springs to Willimantic, to have recreational, historical, and natural resources along the river.

Willimantic is also famous for our July 4th Boom Box Parade where everyone can show off their artistic endeavors, and Romantic Willimantic crowning of a Cupid on Valentine's Day. We have Third Thursdays with many musical bands and people showing their artwork, foods and wares from many nationalities. There is the Three Kings Day Festival, annual Latin Fest, the Spanish get-together in the parcel during the summer, and the Latinos parade. There is the Julia de Burgos Poetry in the Park, the Windham Area Poetry, the Antique Show, the Train Show, Sidewalk Chalk Festival, and the Chocolate Fest. We have Founder's Day, Frog Fest, the Christmas Tree lighting and the huge Halloween Night on Main Street. Last, but not least, Willimantic has the beautiful flowers that the Garden Club decorates our town with, and the delightful large painted frogs that dot Main Street here and there in various areas.

Meikle 96

WILLIMANTIC GENERAL

The early African Americans in Willimantic were Mr. Jackson on Jackson Street, the Watlsons, Harrises, Ernie Moores, the Johnsons, the Laceys, and the Hatchers. [you wrote down here: "Look up early books."] The later African Americans in Willimantic, at around 1958 to 1960, and arriving from Mississippi were the Mackeys, the Mitchells, the Yales, the Oates, and the Wilsons.

On retiring, Murdoch was given a luncheon and a plaque of twenty years of service to the community. His children were Vernon, Carl, Bailor, and Roderiel. He was a lab assistant in Paleontology for 6 years at WC Cult, and then he became a photographer.

When you see death, you value life. After thirty six years of working in forensic sciences, Carl Murdoch is ready to retire, go fishing, and spend time with his family, including his grandchildren who he'd like to spend time with. Murdoch spent seventeen years as laboratory assistant at WC Mtt and nineteen with the Alabama Department of Forensic Sciences in Montgomery. Even though he forgot the thousands of inantfigl, he participates. He couldn't forget the one he didn't participant in it, because it was in Connecticut. He and his wife saw a "hit and run" Vietnam- a young find unidentified.

WILLIMANTIC TAVERNS

From the very earliest times, people who lived in Willimantic loved their beer. I read somewhere that when the first ships came to America from England, that they had barrels of beer aboard instead of water. The English can't blame the Irish for drinking beer because the English loved their pubs.

Meikle 97

Down Sodom had two taverns, Busters and Leonards. Union Street had the Brass Rail, Lindy's, Horseshoe Tavern, and the Checker Grill. Main Street had Ben's Place, Driscoll's, Italian Garden, Cozy Corner, Iron Horse, and the Shell Chateau. Frontanac's (Whistles) was on Railroad Street. The Park Central Hotel was on Valley Street, and the Hotel Hooker and Nathan Hale Hotel on Main Street had their barrooms. Frenchy's and Duke's and Wonder Bar barrooms were on Jackson Street, as well as the American Legion.

There were clubs in town with their barrooms: The Moose, Elks, the Polish Club, the French Club, the Italian Club, and of course the Country Club with their barroom. The American Legion Club on Jackson Street was a place for families to go after mass because it was near both churches, was a family affair, and many of the children's birthday parties were held there, as well as weddings and other occasions. People also went to Lindy's after church where they had a Green Room for parties, weddings etc.

The VFW has been on their spot for many, many years and has hosted many parties, weddings, dances, and many political gatherings with the previous Governor showing up. The motorcycle riders who ride for aiding sick children gather at the VFW.

The Moose Club on Brook Street was also there for weddings, birthday parties and for a special Thanksgiving dinner one year. Now, in their new location, they host special events for Special Class Citizens.

I can't leave out the Ukie Club. We had many wedding parties there, and gatherings for after funerals. One year, I was asked to work there as a waitress for a frat party from Uconn, and believe me, I had to stay in the kitchen all night because these young men were wild. I was the same age as the young men were because one of them went to grammar school with me. The older lady had to serve them, and even she had a problem. By now, UConn has its own place.

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Without some of these places, Willimantic people would not have a place for parties, weddings, dances, and holidays feasts. We went to many weddings at the Shell Chateau. One year, Ben Blue's Orchestra played at the Shell Chateau. One year we had our Windham High School dance at the Shell Chateau. We had weddings at the French Club on Temple Street. One was for my cousin Helen McSheas, and we had my mother's seventy-fifth birthday party there also. I remember going to a baby shower at the French Club when it was on Church Street. Every week, we had dances at the Polish Club for everyone, and we had some wonderful Polish bands that played there. Also, the Windham Theater Guild had plays in which Willimantic people were the actors and they had dinner and a show many, many times at the Polish Club. Families had parties there for their children. One year my little nephew Timmy's birthday party was there.

Some of the Windham High School Reunions were held at the Elks Club and some were at the Country Club. The American Thread Company always had their parties at the Country Club. Political parties had their dinners at the Country Club also.

Without these places, there would not be any large gathering places for people to meet and enjoy each other's company.

Meikle 99

Chapter 24: "Wilimentuck" Land of the Swift Running Waters

In the year 1677 or thereabouts, the Mohegan Chief Sachem, Uncas Attawanhood (who we believed was first to inhabit some of the land of Connecticut) gave or sold some of the land to the English.

One of the first Englishmen to make friends with the Mohegans was a Mr. Leffingwell. Mr. Leffingwell helped the Mohegans in their war with the Narragansetts from Rhode Island by putting a piece of meat on a tall pole which meant that they had food so the Narragansetts could not starve them out. For this, Uncas gave Mr. Leffingwell land and when he settled on it. The land might have been the beginning of Norwich. The Leffingwells were very rich, and when my uncle Francis Brown worked for a Mr. Leslie Leffingwell, many years later, he was one of the first to drive an automobile, as Mr. Leffington was one of the first people to buy an automobile.

The Narragansett Sachem, Mianamus, wanted to kill Uncas and take the land away but the English came to the rescue of Uncas and the Mohegans. They killed Miananamus, and the Narragansetts ran back to Rhode Island. At least we know of land from Uncas to us here in the Windhams as he awarded land east of the Willimantic River to sixteen men from Norwich: Joshua Ripley, Jonathan Hough, Jonathan Crane, Jonathan Jennings, Joseph Huntington, Samuel Hyde, Thomas Huntingon, Will Backus, John Learrabe, Thomas Bingham, John Reed, John Rogers, John Backus, Jeremiah Ripley, and John Cars. This land was to be given to them only after the death of his son, Joshua. Some of these men from Norwich did not want to live on the land, so they sold it to others. Some of this land today is known as Joshua's Trust and it is to conserve the forest as it was in the beginning.

Meikle 100

Uncas wanted his son, Joshua and his people to be able to hunt and fish for food as they did before the Englishmen came to America. The Nipmunk natives were on the land, too, and we still have the Nipmunk Trail. The first paths we had were Indian trails, (trode down paths), bridal paths (from horses), horse-back riders (mail carriers), foot travelers and cart road paths from stage coaches, and there was even a cart called the butter-cart, which carried goods. It wasn't just the wild, wild west that had these things, but Willimantic did, as well, in its by-gone-days.

From Norwich there was the "old Greenwich Path" that was a native trail for Windham, Plainfield, and Canterbury, and a path from Boston, Massachusetts, Providence, Warwick, and West Greenwich, Rhode Island. The path also went to Plainfield and New York.

Just because Willimantic was a wilderness did not mean that the whole country was. The Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts, in 1620, to work (for seven years) for the Virginia Company. The Dutch of the West India Company (a Massachusetts Bay Company) came in 1623; The Puritans established Salem, Mass, in 1628. Providence, Rhode Island was established in 1636. The first stagecoach was in 1768 from Providence to Norwich.

In 1639, Thomas Hooker founded Connecticut and also in 1639, Connecticut adopted the first formal constitution (a republic of fundamental orders) with delegates from Hartford, Wethersfield and Windsor. So even though Willimantic was still a wilderness, the newcomers had to follow the rules. They had to get permission before building etc.

In 1733, there was only Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire in New England. There was no Vermont or Maine as these territories were listed with the Massachusetts Bay Colonies. These four states were part of the thirteen original colonies and the other states were New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, South

Meikle 101

Carolina and Georgia. Parts of West Virginia were really a part of Maryland and only some parts were from Virginia.

As the other towns in America started slowly, family by family, and house by house, Willimantic started slowly also. There were two houses on the main path to begin with, and as more houses were added, in 1692 it became a village (a collection of houses in a country setting). Because it was on the main path, the travelers had to have a place to rest and to eat and drink. So just about every house in Willimantic was a way station with a tavern. In 1760, the people who had tavern licenses in the area were many: James Lassell, Paul Hebard (Hebard's Tavern), Ann Warner, Elias Frink, Ebenezer Bingham, David Ripley, Jacob Simmons, Ebenezer Griffin, Stephen Fitch (one of the oldest houses), Jabez Kingsley, John Parrish, Samuel Silsby, and Mercy Fitch of Windham Green. In 1761, taverns were licensed to Abner Flint, Eleazer Cay, John Howard, Nehemiah Tinker, Ed Badger, and Nat Lincoln.

In Windham in 1760, other commodities besides alcoholic drinks were produced, including wool, hemp, flax, tobacco, butter and cheese, wheat, and cereals. In 1761 more taverns were licensed to newcomers: Abner Flint, Eleazer Cay, John Howard, Nehemiah Tinker, Ed Badger and Nat Lincoln. The people here during the early years were all Englishmen. In 1763, the end of the French Indian War came, and in 1776, the Revolutionary War ended. giving the American people plenty to celebrate. The results of these wars gave plenty of reasons for people to celebrate. America was free from British control and all the states were united into the United States of America – free and independent. We have our Declaration of Independence to prove it.

So the people of the City of Willimantic, in the Town of Windham, in the State of Connecticut had plenty of reason to celebrate. According to Larned (1880-1899), social life in Windham was hilarity, feasting and merry making with a free and generous style of living by the

Meikle 102

upper Circle, which were English. After the Revolutionary War, there was much looseness of morals and manners, upheaval and commotion. That is how the east end of Willimantic got the name of Sodom, and from the other end of the town, it was always referred to as “Down Sodom.”

Later in 1833, when Willimantic was a Borough (a town incorporated for purposes of self-governing), the land that the Mohegan Sachem gave to several men which became Willimantic was written up as follows: “beginning at the west end of Horse-Shoe Bridge (so called because the Natchaug River takes a turn around like a horseshoe right there) thence running north-easterly to the brook where it crosses the road by a white oak tree on the edge of the hill north of the house now occupied by Salem Rider, thence westerly to the northwest corner of the burying ground, thence southeasterly South 51 ½ degrees west to Lebanon line, thence to the point where the Lebanon line intersects the Card road (so called) thence to a white oak tree on the east side of lands of Messrs. A.W. and S. Jillson, thence by said Jillson’s lands northerly forty-five rods to the Windham and Coventry turnpike road and thence northwesterly to the west end of said Horse-Shoe bridge, the place of the beginning” constitutes the boundaries.

Willimantic is approximately 27.9 square miles of land. Windham Center was the beginning of the springtime of the awakening of our area in Connecticut. We know John Cates was here first because there is a gravestone left in his memory. He came here with his negro servant, Joe Ginne in perhaps 1689.

It is believed that a man named Thomas Hartshorn (a millwright from Massachusetts) was the first settler on the Natchaug River, just about where the Natchaug River joins the Willimantic River. Some say the first building was a sawmill and some say a grist mill was build in 1706 and the first house built was in 1710, so it sounds right. We have wonderful trees: oak,

Meikle 103

birch, white pine, maple, elm (according to Tony Clark, only the original elm trees were killed by a blight, but the elm trees we have are Japanese elm), nut trees, weeping willows and many more beautiful trees. Some of our trees are very very tall.

Our city of Willimantic was first called a 'village' (a place where a few houses are grouped together), and was called Willimantic Falls because the Willimantic River falls ninety-one feet in less than a mile. Wilimentuck is a Mohegan name for "fast running waters" or "land of swift running water." In order to make clothes, people first had to spin (twist) the wool, cotton or flax into thread, then have a loom on which thread can be woven into a fabric. This work was all done by hand. Thousands of years ago, the simple way was the use of a distaff and spindle, which made a single thread at a time. Then came the spinning jenny (in 1767) that spun out 8-10 threads at once by a single workman. Imagine that perhaps the early settlers in our area made their clothing by this method.

The Natchaug River comes from up north and the land of Mansfield and is the boundary between Willimantic and Windham. The Willimantic River comes all the way from Stafford Springs. The Middle River and the Furnace River come together to make the Willimantic River. The Hop River in Columbia joined the Willimantic River. (info from Scott Beattie). When the Natchaug River which runs south meets the Willimantic River at the east end of the land (we now call Rec Park) they form the Shetucket River. When the Shetucket River was very, very low, a big pile of rocks, which were grouped together in the middle of the rivers, were called "rock island." People used the rocks to sunbathe (this info from Al Wojick).

The Shetucket River flows south and joins the Quinebaug River at Norwichtown. Then it becomes the Thames River which goes through Norwich to the open ocean, and that is why

Meikle 104

Willimantic has hundreds of seagulls in the winter looking for food. The rivers are another reason why Willimantic is so closely connected with Norwich.

Certain water privileges were given to some people for a saw mill, (for homes, I presume, although a lot of buildings, homes, stores, mills etc were made out of the gray stones from the river.) The gneiss stone was primarily in land near the ocean in the east, Norwich, New London, and Rhode Island and Willimantic. These places were the only inlands that got gneiss rock, except for an area south/east of Willimantic in Colchester.

Willimantic bedrock is gneiss (including granitic gneiss), schist and quartzite, Hope Valley belt, proterozoic Z age) according to the Connecticut Geological & Natural History Survey in 1989. Dr. Clebnik, ECSU, in Joshua's Track Walk Book, says schist and gneiss are particular verities common in the area. They used a water wheel like people in England did, a carding machine (for clothing) and a paper mill because paper is very important for many things such as writing documents, news and mail.

The first company houses were on lower Main Street and one of the houses (in which Barry Trainor's grandparents lived later on) was used as an office for a mill, which I believe was owned by the Smith Family. There was a road called Factory Road across the main street from Elm Street, and this went to the factory. Both the mill and road were washed out by a flood, I believe.

On the corner of Elm and Main, there was one of the earliest houses called Mrs. Smith's house. Many years later the house was moved to Chapman Street, and then to, I believe, Sturbridge for preservation by Mrs. Smith's daughter, Lucy, and her husband. The Smith family lived across the street from us on Ash Street and the Smith's owned a lot of land on both sides of

Meikle 105

Ash Street. Lucy was my older sister's age and her father was very old and wore a black cutaway suit and black hat all the time. Mrs. Smith was much younger.

The first cotton mills I can find records on in Willimantic are the Jillson Brother's mills in 1824. Then in 1854, I found that the Willimantic Linen Company was bought by three men: Dunham, Capen, and Ives.

We have three streets named in their honor across from the mills on Main Street. Chapman Street was a hill and called "side hill." When the owners of the mills wanted to put in a street, the one called Ives Street, they had some men, including Sammy Bonafine's family, dig out the hill with a pick, shovel, and pails to carry the dirt away. That is how one side of Ives Street came about. The truth of it is the fact that many houses on Chapman Street do not have a back yard.

The mill owners converted the linen factory to machinery for spinning cotton which they got from down south in the United States which came to them by railroad. In 1860, they built tenements on Carey Hill for their Irish workers, and they built the Elms Boarding House for single women workers who they had gone to other states north of Connecticut to hire. They sent a black vehicle called the Black Maria to bring the girls down to work (or so I was told).

The company built a dye house and bleachery in 1870, a boiler house, and a store house. They did very well for their workers. Several years after that, they built a company store for meats and groceries, a hat shop, offices (where my Aunt Cal worked) and a library called the Dunham Library, located on the second floor, and which was opened from 1880 to 1936 (my little sister and I used to go there when they were giving the books away). They had 9000 volumes given to other libraries, schools, employees and children.

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So in 1898, the English Sewing Company purchased the Willimantic Linen Company (called the Windham Mills), as well as other mills, and combined them to form the American Thread Company, which was British owned. In 1985, the American Thread Company went south, to North Carolina, for the cotton and longer daylight hours. This move kept many Willimantic people out of work. The Spanish people from Puerto Rico, about eight hundred and fifty workers, were the last to work there, as compared to the two thousand and fifty people who used to work there.

The Jillson and Linen Company were not the only mills in Willimantic. On the corner of North and Valley Streets, we had the Windham Silk Company (made from silk worms). Between North and Temple Streets, we had the Holland Silk Mill and the Windham Manufacturing Co. two buildings on both sides of Bridge Street. There was a foundry on Mansfield Avenue (where my father worked when he was thirteen years old and my brother-in-law Norbie Ives worked later on). Many, many children, some as young as eight or nine years worked at the Willimantic Linen Company, and the vice-president William Barrows, started the idea of the "coffee break" for children workers. The Smithville Company was on the West end and I don't know where the Clark and Gay Mills were or the W.G. & A.R. Morrisson Silk Company was.

After the cotton and silk mills left town, the buildings were used by others. Brand-Rex was in the building in the North and Valley building until they moved. The factory building at the corner of Valley and Bank Streets housed the Trade School for older students and a Kindergarten for young children in the 1950's. This was the A.G.Turner Silk Mfg Co. in 1886.

Of course, some of the buildings were torn down, and in the 1970's, many homes and buildings. Whole blocks were torn down for Revitalization, which did not come to pass. We lost

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Center Street, Temple Street, Broad Street, Part of Union Street, Jackson Street, and Valley Street from near Church Street to Jackson Street, which is now a parcel of land.

Chapter 35: Ackley Express

I don't recall how I got the job, but I got the job as secretary for the guy, Forrest Ackley. We had met at Kerman's Drive-In. He ran a trucking business and had big trailers that went all over the State of Connecticut, as well as a freight. At night, the truck went to Bradley Airport with his airfreight.

I worked from 5:00 PM until midnight. The trucks came in all hours of the night. Most nights after I finished work, the boss took me out for something to eat. I didn't think anything of it because I knew he used to take workers out for lunch at Kerman's where I used to work, but evidently other people thought we were dating. We were not. His wife was divorcing him, but I didn't have anything to do with it.

One day, his wife came into the office and sat her eight month old daughter on my typewriter. That little girl and I made a connection through our eyes, and for years when she was growing up, she called me "mommy." Whenever the boss took his kids anywhere, he took me as well, so I could help out. The little girl would not let me out of her sight and always wanted to sit on my lap. The boss also had a son eight years older than the little girl. We always had lots of fun, and I loved those kids.

At the terminal, I also had a couple of little dogs. The boss gave me a chihuahua. This very little dog sat on my lap while I typed. I couldn't take it home though. One day when I went to work, the dog was gone. They gave it away because the drivers thought they would run over

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it someday. There was another dog named Jody, and then I had another Jody. Then someone gave me a three-legged dog that was born that way. The mechanic made the dog a wooden leg with straps and he could walk better now. I had this dog for awhile, until it disappeared like the other one.

The biggest thing that happened to me while I worked there was my plane ride to Rockland Lake. My friend, Patsy, had one child, and asked me to babysit while she went to the hospital to have another child. I said, "Yes" with the boss's permission, and the boss even arranged for me to fly there when she went to the hospital. As soon as the phone call came into the office, one of the guys drove me to the Willimantic airport where a small plane was ready to take me for a ride. The guy driving me in the car to the airport told me about every airplane accident he ever heard about, so I was in a bad mood when I boarded the plane.

I was a wreck. Nice guy!!! When I got in the plane – a very small two-seater, I thought the door looked like it wasn't latched good. Even though the pilot said it was OK, I hung onto the bar in the front, and also held onto the bar in back of me. When I got off the plane, I had deep nail marks in both my hands.

Rockland is in the country, and the only landing field was a mud hole, so the pilot had to keep on circling a field to find a place to land. He dipped over on one side and then dipped over on the other side, while circling the field to find a place to land. I was petrified. When the pilot landed and I got out of the plane, my legs were rubbery and I could hardly walk. The people on the ground waiting for me couldn't stop laughing. Would I ever take another small plane ride? I don't think so.

I worked for Forrest Ackley at Ackley's Express for two years. He was someone I knew when I worked at Kerman's Drive-In. He used to bring some of his workers there, and treat them

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to lunch. When he used to take me to the Rock Garden after work, which was midnight, for something to eat, or go places to help him with his young children, I didn't think it was a date.

We went to the Big E in Springfield every year, and later he started taking me out to banquets and parties of people he did business with, like Brand-Rex for instance. He also took me to a formal dinner and dance for somebody at the American Legion. I would get all dressed up, and if some guy asked me to dance, I would put on my coat and be home before I knew it. I always lived with my mother and he would take me home at eleven o' clock at night.

At some functions, Forrest would leave me sitting in a corner somewhere so he could sit with people who like to talk risqué (telling jokes). I didn't like that kind of talk. One night at a nice dinner and dance for Brand-Rex in New London, a guy came up to me and asked me to dance, so I said OK and the guy said, "Watch this, your boyfriend will be here in a second," and sure enough, he came right over and cut in so I guess everyone knew what he was like.

I went out with Forrest Ackley for eight years. He picked the children up every weekend and we would go someplace and have fun. One day we went to Block Island with his children and his parents. Going out with him was one thing, but marrying him was a different story.

Marrying him was my big mistake. He wanted me to stay home all the time while he went out. He would get all dressed up in his American Legion suit and say, "OK, you're mad at me (which I wasn't), so you can't go with me." One night I laughed in his face because I didn't even want to go. I was not a party person. One day, years later, a guy at ECSU said to me in disbelief, "You were married to Cy Ackley? I've known him for many, many years and I never saw you before." Of course not. He wanted to put me in his pocket and keep me there.

The marriage only lasted for two years because he did the unmentionable: he took a lady (no need to mention the name) on a boat, to My Island, Fishers Island, and spent the

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night. I sat up in the window all night worrying if he had had an accident or if something bad happened to him. Later I heard from someone who was there, that he was dancing and having fun and then went upstairs in the hotel.

I had gotten my mother the apartment across the hall from us and I helped her out, since I was working, but she wasn't working anymore. It didn't take me any time to move my personal belongings across the hall to my mother's apartment and file for divorce. If I thought "divorce" was a bad word, "adultery" was an even worse word. I had been excommunicated from the Catholic Church because I married a divorced man, and I was his third wife. I felt bad about that.

He was the kind of guy that out in the world, he was a happy-go-lucky good time Charley, so it was better being his friend. He picked me up every day at noon, at my work, and took me to lunch and back to work. He asked me all the time to marry him again and finally I said "yes" like a nut. As a Catholic, I thought "divorce" was the big bad word. But then, lucky for me, I got thrown off the marry-go-round and got my sanity back. I like to say, "I'm lucky." I still have my mind and my heart. But I didn't have good health. I worked four blocks from my house to the office. Every morning, my poor mother had to walk me to work, go and get me every noon time for lunch, walk me back to work, and come and get me at five o'clock. We lived on the third floor, and that was a lot of stairs to climb. When I got upstairs, I had to lay down for a half an hour before I could sit up and eat lunch. It was bad for my mother too, because she was old. So we moved to a basement apartment on North Street.

After I had worked for the trucking business a couple of years, the boss got sick and closed down the business, so I went looking for work again.

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Chapter 25: Religion is a Way of Life

A couple of years after I got my divorce, I heard that I could be reinstated because I was not married by a priest (we were married by a Justice of the Peace in Columbia). So I went to St. Mary's Rectory and talked to the priest there, and he had me make out papers (one that said I would not get married again without making out a paper). Then, the bishop reinstated me in the Roman Catholic Church. I would not give up my religion again for anyone (the rules have changed since then.) Even though I go to St. Joseph's Church on occasion, especially in the afternoon, I consider St. Mary's my church, because it was my new beginning without marriage.

I like to think that I have been a devout Catholic all of my life, even on my bad days. Religion is very important in everyday life. Jesus gave us the commandment, "to love thy neighbor as you love yourself." I studied all religions, and studied the Catholic Holy Bible for eleven years. I took many Bible classes, and still make a daily habit of reading some of the Good News. For eight years, I attended Calvary Baptist Church. Here, I went to Bible classes and Sunday where I had a lot to learn and think about. I would also sing. The beautiful music at the Calvary Baptist Church would stay inside my head, and become the joy in my heart. This encouraged me to sing. I then sang at the Gospel Choir at Eastern Connecticut State University.

Willimantic's Calvary Baptist Church, established in 1916, was one of the first African American congregations in northeast Connecticut. It began on Meadow Street by Reverend William Sanders and moved to the Bank Street location that had been the side of Temple B'nai Israel for forty-two years. The Calvary Baptist Church bought the building in 1966 (I went there for a Sunrise Service one Easter), and in 1977, they built their own church on Valley Street. The church is still there under the guidance of Reverend William Sanders, and many of the church's congregation comes from Norwich. I have made many dear friends with some of these people.

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As a Calvary Baptist Church community, we went to many other places. With the choir, we travelled to many churches around the state to sing. I would also take the bus to many other town churches in Connecticut and Massachusetts, and I always enjoyed the services and the people. I went on a two day, Saturday and Sunday pilgrimage to all the churches in my town. In 1979, I went to Boston to see Pope John Paul II. It was a freezing rainy day and my feet were rooted to the spot, but that didn't matter. I was just across the path from the Pope and could have received Holy Communion from his hand, were it not for the path being so muddy. I saw a man fall in the mud, so I was afraid to cross over. After the mass, the person I had ridden on the bus with from St. Joseph's Church, was from Europe and couldn't speak a word of English, so I had stayed with him all day and he and I got lost and sat on a wall, in the pouring rain, laughing and laughing. Finally, the man and I found our way back to the bus. I believe laughter is the universal language.

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Chapter 26: Willimantic Parades

My mother's family had a veteran in every war, so we were brought up to be patriotic and honor our veterans. When we were little, my mother dressed us in white dresses on Memorial Day, and let us march alongside the parade to the Old Willimantic Cemetery, where the speeches were given.

Willimantic people loved parades. In May 1892, Father DeBruycker from St. Joseph's Church organized a procession for Willimantic's bicentennial anniversary. He had hung the American Flag over St. Joseph's School. The Polish men had the White Eagle's Polish American Band marching in the parades, while the French men had the St. Jean Baptist Society Band marching in the parades. In 1915, old School Week and Home week, at the old Natchaug School, had a huge parade on Thursday of the week.

The 1st Regiment Ct. National Guard was a guest of the city. In the parade, Hatch's Military Band of Hartford came first, then the 1st Infantry Connecticut National Guard, the United Spanish War Veterans, and Veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic. Next came the Willimantic Fire Dept., Colt's Military Band, The Governor's Foot Guard Band, Nathan Hale Fife and Drum Corp., Local Unions, French Societies, St. Mary's Church and schoolchildren, fraternal societies, Polish societies, other churches, D.A.R women, and many floats and automobiles in the procession.

We have had many parades during the past years but now we have the best. In 1982, our parades were nothing to be proud of. Then a lady, Cathy Clark, had the great idea of having a parade with band music, which was to come through bomb boxes from our local radio station WILI. It was the greatest idea that anyone could ever have thought.

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So every year, everyone who has ever wanted to march or ride in a parade can ride in our parade. Thousands of people participate in our Boombox Parade, and Cathy Clark is still our Parade Mama even though she is no longer with us. Our parade is known nationally, and every year it grows bigger with floats, horses, and people of all nationalities. We even had a State of Connecticut governor march one year. Everyone, from the youngest babies in carriages or wagons, to the oldest walking, or riding in cars or riding bikes, can participate. Every business has a spot, and anyone, even those from surrounding areas can be part of the parade. Bringing up the rear of the parade are the fire engines from the entire surrounding town. Because there are so many participants in the parade, it is a wonder that there are people to watch. Every year there are hundreds and hundreds of men, women, and children lining the street and sitting on the lawns watching the best parade in the whole country. People listen to the speeches given at the Old Willimantic Cemetery, and watch as the different groups of Willimantic march by.



Claire Meikle at Willimantic's parades

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Claire at the Willimantic parades



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Chapter 27: Mother's Family (Cemetery)

At this cemetery are some very beautiful, life-size statues located on some of the graves. The statues are on high pedestals, and all are sitting except for one. This standing statue is a lady with one hand on her chest and the other hand holding a book. She is looking skyward. There are other sitting statues. I noticed two lady statues sitting and holding roses, and another lady statue holding a bunch of flowers, with her chin in her hand and made into a fist. Another statue looks like a lady holding something in her hand, and holding it to her heart. There is a statue of a mother and a child, and the mother has an open book and looks like she is reading to the child. The child is gazing up at the mother. Our cemetery has just as good statues as there are in museums.

The stones for the graves come north by rail. Willimantic had five trains in and out of our town every day. Our town was flourishing in those days. Because of the five trains, the Liberty Bell from Philadelphia was able to stop here. We also had two United States presidents stop here with thousands of people to welcome them. Our 26th President, Teddy Roosevelt came in his own private train. He rode from the train to Church Street and talked for a few minutes to the crowd of thousands of people who came out to see him. Our 27th President, William H. Taft also came here to Willimantic. Isn't it a shame that we lost our trains? Without them, Willimantic is cut off from the rest of the world.

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PART TWO The Summer of my Life

Chapter 28: The World

It is the summer of life when a person is out in the world (the world is society, the public, people, friends, and events and politics), working and meeting new people. This is the plant of life, your spirit that should grow tall and strong with good leaves that develop your personality. In the summer, I loved to work at the beach because I always loved the seashore. The seashore reminded me of Fishers Island. In the winter, I worked in the mills. I never really liked working in the mills because I felt trapped. Once you go inside the big building, put your card in the machine to mark your time, and sit down at your workbench, there is the feeling that you are trapped for the next eight hours or so.

At this job, a boss stood over you to make sure you were working. I had one boss who would always stand behind me, and if you were to ask me how to add two and two, I couldn't have told you the answer, because he scared me. An experience like this made working at the mill quite intimidating. I really loved the free atmosphere at the beach better.

After I graduated from high school, it was hard to get a job in an office unless you had done office work before, so I jumped at the chance to work in the office at the wet wash where my mother and sister worked. It was just a couple of blocks from our house. My mother ironed shirts, and my younger sister put sheets through a mangle. That was very hot work. I was lucky, I thought, and worked in the office that was in the house. The owner of the business was old and retired, and the office was in his house next door to the laundry (which was on the side of the Natchaug River).

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One of my jobs was to make lunch for him and he appreciated that. He was a very nice man. No one had done any bookkeeping for three months, so my work was cut out for me. I kept quite busy.

There were a lot of nice people working at the wet wash: The Rabitailles, Agnes DuBlois, Mr. Greenup, Raymond Maynard's grandfather and Mike DeFlippo, Little Mikey, Frances Hill's father, and Walter Rabilaille and Walter Descher, who both lost their lives during the Second World War.

The boss's son on the other hand was a prankster. One day he came into the office and took my full pack of cigarettes, and then returned to the laundry. He had left a crumpled pack with a couple of cigarettes in it, and I ran out to the shop and got my cigarettes back from him. I lit a cigarette and nearly died choking. He had put pepper in the cigarettes. He thought it was very funny. Another day, he called me on the phone to come out to the laundry. When I got there, he picked me up (I only weighed one hundred pounds), threw me in a large basket on wheels, spun me around, and wouldn't let me out. I don't know what my mother thought. Then another day he asked me to ride with him to give the bookkeeper his books. Instead of seeing the bookkeeper, however, he drove us to Windham Center just to deliver shirts. I ended up bringing all these heavy books for nothing, other than just making sure he didn't ride alone.

On Saturday afternoons, I went to my boss's house (his wife was there) to do work on the bookkeeping machines. One Saturday, his son picked me up, and then stopped at a restaurant. He told me to wait on the restaurant side and he went into the bar side. Then the waitress told me he was drinking whiskey in his coffee. As a conscious worker, I didn't know what to do. Then the boss's son came over and said he had to give a guy a ride home, so we left and he drove the guy home. It was in the country, and he drove the car right into a tree in front of the guy's house.

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They both went in the house, leaving me in the car. I was scared. It was winter, cold, and we had had an awful lot of snow. I decided I had better leave. I got out of the car and ran down the middle of the country road (no sidewalks) and it must have been a couple of miles to a gas station. Luckily, a guy I knew was working there and was kind enough to give me a ride home. Early the next morning, a policeman found the boss asleep in his car. He had driven into a huge snow bank, and half the car was in the snow. He was lucky he wasn't dead. Needless to say, I quit the job. So much for office work.

For one week, he loaned me out to a friend whose secretary was on vacation. I didn't have much to do—just answering the phone and greeting people who came in. On my last day of work, the guy offered to give me a ride home so I said, "Oh." Then he said he had to stop somewhere to check out some property. The property was on a dirt road, and when he stopped the car, we had to walk way down a hill to see a little empty house near a pond. It wasn't the house he looked at, but me. This old guy, probably about sixty years old, tried to get fresh with me, so I ran as fast as I could up that hill, and got back in the car. I don't know what he thought he was doing. He was heavyset and had to huff and puff to climb the hill. Then he got in the car, and neither of us spoke as he took me home. When he came to pay me for working, I refused to take the money from him and he had to give it to my mother—It served him right.

Would I ever get farmed out again? No.

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Chapter 29: Rockland Lake, N.Y.

I went to visit friends who had been asking me to visit. My friends came to Willimantic every two weeks from New York to visit family, so this time, I packed up and went back with them. I thought to myself, why not see what Rockland Lake is like? I had heard so much about it. It was a lovely summer resort town a few miles from Nyack, New York, and several miles from New York City.

My friends lived in a trailer on relations land, next door to a Milk Bar (that is what they called the restaurant where they served hamburgers, hot dogs, French fries, etc). It was the shape of a diner. I got a job there the first thing, because I'm not a freeloader.

Working there was a fun job. My friend worked there as well. We both worked from seven at night until two in the morning. After we finished work, her husband and his brother picked us up, and we went to a bar for a couple of beers, then to an all night diner for breakfast. I always ate a BL&T sandwich. That was my favorite.

Everything was going along fine until the people who owned the trailer took it back. Then, my friends and I moved to a hotel (summer resort kind). Right from the start, I got scared. I heard a noise and peeked out my door and saw an old lady with very long gray straight hair. It was so creepy. I couldn't lay down and go to sleep, so I stayed up every night reading and writing until it was time to go to their folks home near the Milk Bar. Then I went to sleep on the couch in their folk's and everyone thought I had sleeping sickness, because they didn't know I was awake all night.

The couple who owned the Milk Bar were from Florida. They were very nice people. The man used to tease me, so much of the time I finally complained to his wife. She said, "Be glad about that, because if he didn't like you, he wouldn't even talk to you at all." That was a

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good lesson to learn. While working at the Milk Bar, I also learned that people can be "cultivated." One guy got mad at me because the price of coffee went up – from five cents to ten cents – so I learned to be especially nice to him and he finally lost his "mad."

At Rockland, we had plenty of places to go-New York City for shows, Bear Mountain and other areas for fishing. On one fishing trip, someone's fishhook came flying right at me and the hook stuck in my hand. They joked that I was the biggest fish they caught all day.

There were plenty of places to go for fun and recreation in those days. One day we went to Palisades Park and I had my fortune taken by a little old man who looked like Mahatma Gandhi. He told me I had too vivid an imagination and that it would kill me one day. Of course, I don't go to fortune tellers anymore, and that is good, because fortune telling is against my religion.

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Chapter 30: Kerman's

In my day, the pay was not very good. Ladies made fifty cents an hour, while men made seventy-five cents an hour. I had to work two to three jobs to make ends meet. My mother didn't make much money either, so I always lived with her to help out. My mother used to make eight dollars a week ironing shirts and our rent was eight dollars a month.

One day I was sitting on a stool at the counter of a drive-in restaurant where we all used to go. Just as I asked the waitress if they needed anyone, she was speaking and asking me if I wanted a job. So, I went to work there nights and weekends as I also worked in an office during the day. I made fifty cents an hour and tips, though the tips were mostly changed. A guy working there got seventy-five cents an hour for doing nothing while I worked.

Besides waiting tables, I worked in the kitchen, peeling potatoes, etc. and doing other jobs like cleaning out the ice cream boxes in the freezer. I can't get my hands cold, and that was so cold that I got the "grip" (they called it in those days), which made me sick for days. Nowadays people call it the "flu."

I had a car in those days, so I could get around, and go back and forth to work. I worked every night until 2 AM. After the restaurant closed, I cleaned the grill with pumice stone, as well as cleaned the kitchen and dining room. The guy's wife used to beg him to give me a night off to go out somewhere with my friends, but he wouldn't. He wanted to go out every night himself.

One thing I liked about the place was the customers. Sometimes, my grandfather, Jackie Nichols and his wife, Ella, came in. My grandfather liked to talk to me about when he ran his restaurant.

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I did like the work but I only had an hour between my office job and the restaurant work. The work became tedious after a while. I had just enough time to soak in the tub a few minutes, put on my uniform, and drive to work. I worked night and day, seven days a week. After two and a half years, I tried to quit, but I ended up calling him on the phone to say, "I quit" before hanging up. After I did this, he didn't talk to me for years.

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Chapter 31: Mansfield Training School

Mansfield had a school for what I would call "special class." Lots of students were there in those days—some who should be there, and some who shouldn't. One lady had been there for years because she was blind and her IQ was over a hundred.

My job was typing medical reports in the morning, and going after lunch to the hospital to work for the psychiatrist. The psychiatrist gave me small cards to type stuff on. After a while, she asked, "Are you sure you know how to type?" She didn't realize that putting a card in the typewriter and taking it out took time. It wasn't like typing a full page of type. When I typed, didn't have a certain place to work, so I was moved all over the place with my typewriter. One day, someone opened the elevator door and there I was with my typewriter.

Luckily for me, the psychiatrist went on vacation after the first week, so I was able to get established. The guys she left in charge gave me my psychological exam, and I passed well. When she came back after two weeks and saw my report, she said she was both pleased and surprised. But what really cracked the ice with us was when she ran out of cigarettes and had to borrow one from me.

When I was in the room and patients came in, I was always nice to them. I took some in wheelchairs to look out the window, and I would hold the little babies. This took away any misgivings the psychiatrist might have had about my work, and she was very sorry to see me go. I left after three months because I used to have nightmares that something like that would happen to me. My mind and my eyes were my most important possessions.

Since then I have studied the mind and the brain. My very first class at Eastern University was just that—thinking and learning. I got an A in the class and it was because of my job at the

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Training School. We never know at the time how much something might mean to us in the future. It is a good thing to remember that after the seed, comes the plant.

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Chapter 32: Rockland – second trip

I needed a change of pace after the Training School, so I travelled back to Rockland to visit my good friends. These friends were the same ones whose porch I sat on, way back when, when it took me weeks to let my guard down and talk to new kids on the block. We became friends for life.

On my second trip to Rockland, I got a job at Hotel St. George in Nyack, New York. I love restaurant work-the banging and clanging of pots and pans reminds me of all the restaurants I grew up in. My grandfather had restaurants, taught all his sons to be chefs, even my father. My first choice of work was becoming a waitress, so on my second trip to Rockland, I got a job at a hotel in Nyack, New York.

Three things stood out to me from that time: Don't let anyone put words in your mouth. I was considered the least of the waitresses as two of them were the owners' daughters, and one was their friend. When the cook, standing at a hot stove all day, got grouchy, he picked on me. The other girls told me that the next time he picks on me to tell him to "Go to hell." Well, I told him that and just as I did, the swinging door opened and the two ladies were waiting, having heard and seen me. They had shocked looks on their faces.

Then, I went out and brought the ladies some sauce they wanted. It was my job to make all the salad dressings etc., and this sauce was catsup and horseradish. When they ate it, it was so hot, the tears rolled down their faces. There was too much horseradish in the sauce. I hope they forgave me.

There was an old man who came in every day and was so grouchy that no one wanted to wait on him. I was actually scared to wait on him until one day someone said he had a terminal

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illness and was never getting better. This changed my attitude, and my heart went out to him, and he could read it on my face. I had softened to him, and after that he wouldn't let anyone but me wait on him. So sometimes thoughts speak louder than words.

A little added note about people: A group of men, the mayor and some businessmen, came in every day for lunch. One day when I was waiting on them, the guy in the kitchen made me upset, and there I was putting down their lunch plates, crying. They all felt so bad for me, they gave me bigger tips than they usually did.

The third most important thing I learned at the hotel was from one of the daughters. She had had an accident and hurt her back badly. She told me to always take care of my back because once it is gone, it can't be replaced. I am very careful about lifting and other things that might hurt my back. It is a good lesson to learn early. I cry when some people I have worked with want me to lift something heavy. Why, in the world, would I put my life in jeopardy?

I worked at the hotel until one day, the hills around Rockland were beautiful with shining silver from a freezing rain during the night. However, the roads were dangerous. We had an accident on the way to my work and I was a few minutes late. The owner told me to take a couple of days off to think about being late, so I quit. She knew that they were not going to be busy, so she didn't need me.

I went right away to a factory where they made sewing machine parts. People working there said at once that I was from Connecticut because I said: pots for parts and potty for a party. It was fun working there and I made lots of friends. Most of them were Catholics. One day the priest from their church took a bunch of us to West Point to see an Army

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and Navy football game. At half time there was a marching band playing on the field. It was a big thrill for me. We also took day trips to New York City.

When I was leaving to go back home, my friends took me to New Jersey for pizza. It was the best pizza I ever ate. They take the slice of pizza in their hand and fold it to eat.

I had been going out with one of my friend's brothers, and when he thought I was going to marry him, and his family thought the same, I ran. I went back home again. Why would I want to give up my freedom? I liked being footloose and fancy free.

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Chapter 33: Bob Drake

When I was fifteen years old, I got a really big crush on an eighteen year old boy who lived near my grandfather's restaurant. He used to stop at our house once in a while, and everyone liked him.

It was wartime and he and his friend joined the army. He used to write to me but just as a young friend. His friend was older, was married, and had young children. As the war progressed, his friend was killed. Later when the war was over and the boys came home, my friend, being the wonderful person he was, married his friend's widow to help her bring up her children. It was a wonderful way to honor a friend who might even have asked him to marry his wife, in case he was killed. So, the crush I had on him was over, because he belonged to someone. I still remember him as the nicest person I ever met, and to me, Bob Drake will always remain the nicest person that ever lived.

When I was a teenager, I used to hang around with a group of boys and girls at a place called the College Shop. They were mostly French and Polish kids, and were church goers. We ate hamburgers, drank soda and danced all night to the Juke box. Together, we had a lot of fun. People didn't have to pay taxes on dancing in those days. We used to go home at midnight and one of the boys would walk a girl home in whatever direction each was going. We had good fun in those days, and it all had to do with upbringing and religion. These were neighborhood kids. I didn't want to get involved with anyone because I valued my freedom above everything else. I went to the beach every summer and had friends there.

Later I started going roller skating and meeting new friends. My circle of friends grew. We all went to the same places, and had boyfriends, but no one was really going steady or getting married young.

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In my twenties, I would go out with one of the boys to the movies or the State Shows in Hartford. I went miniature golfing with Fred White, or rollerskating with Jackie Connell, but mostly we were all together at the Cozy Corner or Al & Irene's or Sherman's Corners. We danced or played a lot of cards.

I wasn't serious about the guy I dated more than the others and then I met another young man through my uncle. He was going to college in another state, and hardly ever came home. He was from the west end of town and wasn't anyone I knew before. He asked me out, so I went and told the guy (JB), who I was sort of dating, that I met someone else, and would you believe it, he asked me to marry him. I didn't think we were even going steady so I said no. He later got married, had five children, and died young. I would not want to be the girl he left behind.

My new boyfriend, Tambo, who never used to come home on weekends, starting coming home every weekend. He had told me: "Go out. Don't stay home like an old maid." He said he didn't want to go steady, so I had dates, and on one occasion, I was invited to the Senior Prom by an Eastern Connecticut State University student. He was a really nice guy from New York, and the dance was formal, so I borrowed an evening gown from my friend, Patty. The gown had a black skirt and a blue top with only one shoulder and I guessed that I looked nice.

After the dance, we went to the Shell Chateau when everyone went at the end of the evening. We were sitting at the counter, and my boyfriend from college was home and probably looked for me. He came into the restaurant, stood behind us and sang: "Don't cry, Joe, let her go, let her go." I pretended I didn't see him, but after that he told me he would be home every weekend. Then one day, he came running in my house, told me to pack a suitcase, that he had gotten an offer of a coaching job in the State of Washington, and that we were going to get married and leave right away. I said, "I'm not going to go clear across the country and leave my

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family.” I always came home every two weeks when I went away anywhere and I would never miss Christmas with my family. So he gave up the job and didn’t go.

Tambo never mentioned it again, but shortly he was drafted in the army for the Second World War, and even though I saw him when he came home on leave, it wasn’t the same. He transferred to the Air Corp and went to a new town where he met a girl and got married and had two children. They were stationed at the Panama Canal. One day, when his wife and two children were waiting at the Panama Canal for his plane to land, something happened to the plane and it exploded in mid-air, killing everyone on board. His family watched it happen. I would not have wanted to be that girl standing next to him and watching the plane explode.

One never knows what life holds for them. I thought it was time I came home for awhile from Rockland Lake, so I came on the bus early in the morning, at about 3 A.M. I got off the bus at the bus stop, between six and six A at the west end of town. It was miles from my house Down Sodom. I ran most of the way, with my suitcase banging my leg, and I was scared every time a car approached.

I finally got home, climbed up the stairs of the house where we had lived for more than twenty years, and when I put my key in the lock, the door didn’t open. The key wouldn’t work. I peered in the window and the first thing I noticed was that my big black stove wasn’t there. My house was empty.

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Chapter 34: 305 Main Street

I ran back down the stairs and ran six blocks to my younger sister's house. I knocked on my sister's door and sat on the stairs between the second and third floors, huffing and puffing. When she came out, I could hardly speak enough to say, "Where's momma?" My sister laughed and pointed upstairs to the third floor. They had moved my mother from a six-room house, full of furniture, to a furnished attic apartment. All, and I mean all of the furniture, clothing, and things were taken to the dump. All my collections, button pins, pictures on my wall, especially the one of Dopey from Snow White, my records (Glenn Miller and Country Western) and my special record, "You're Just a Brown Gal," my books and sets of Steinbeck, and Hemingway, and others, as well as all my clothes, were gone. In my button collection I had some political buttons, and luckily one day I gave them to Bill Jordan, Bear Jordan's father, and Michael Jordan's grandfather. If I hadn't, they would have ended up "in the dump."

Whenever I asked my sister: "Where is this or that?" Her answer was, "In the dump." But I never asked, "How come you didn't call me on the telephone?"

I had to start all over. I had to buy a small bed, a place for clothes, and whatever else I needed. The best thing that happened to me in that attic was a visitor I had one day. A guy named Joe from Providence knocked on my door and wanted to sell me a Holy Bible for \$35.00. I said, "I don't have any money." So, he said he would leave the Bible, and I could send him \$2.00 a week to pay for it. That's what I did.

I had never read the Bible. In my Catholic grammar school, we were taught not to read the Bible until we were 35 years old (A priest, Father Red, at St. Mary's Church, told me years later that this was a man-made rule and that it was wrong). I never opened the Bible (The

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Douay Version – St. Jerome) until years when I got upset at one of the jobs. Then, I went home and opened the Bible.

The Bible read, "as long as I know the truth, don't worry about anyone else." So that straightened me out.

In the summertime, it is the WORDS we speak and hear that add a great deal to our personality. I quit a lot of jobs because someone used bad language and I was taught to leave the room when someone talked badly. Often, it wasn't always possible to leave the work room, so I would quit. I judged people by their speech, and I'm sure other people do too. I believe there are two classes of people in the world – those who believe and those who do not believe. I am a believer and I always think that is what makes me keep going.

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Chapter 36: Main Street Office

A lawyer I had known when I worked as waitress gave me a job, but before I could start, his sister wanted the job. So he got me another job.

The day I went for my interview, it started pouring rain before I had walked halfway there, so I entered the insurance office soaking wet, with my hair hanging straight and wet. I didn't think I would get the job, but I did, and I worked there, off and on for seven and a half years. The guy I went with, Tambo, told me he would drive past the office, even in the middle of the night and toot his horn, even though I was not there.

I liked working in the office because I worked alone except for the bookkeeper who came in for a couple of hours twice a week. She was very smart and was one of my role models and a good friend. The boss, on the other hand, was an "odd duck." He thought a secretary was supposed to sit on the boss's lap, so I had to fend him off once in a while. Luckily he wasn't in the office much.

Another thing, in the summer the boss used to put the air conditioner on freezing and I had to wear a sweater all day. I didn't know how to turn it down. I would go out for lunch, and take a taxi to my sister's house for lunch. I would sit in the front seat and the driver would say: "Take off that sweater." And when I did, he would touch my arm and say, "You're dead." I don't know enough to lay down because my arm was like ice.

I was staying at my sister's house then, and the same cabby would come for me in the morning. When I heard him toot the horn, I would jump out of bed and holler, "Wait a minute, Joe." He would come in the house, sit, and have a cup of coffee while he waited for me.

There isn't much to tell about working in the office except that I quit quite often.

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I would go out for lunch, after a squabble with the boss, and say: I quit. I would eat lunch and go back because I am a responsible person.

One day when I thought he was trying to have his wife think we were having an affair (I am in my 20s and he is about 60 or so), I got so upset that when I went home, I opened my new Holy Bible for the first time and saw one passage:

“As long as you know the truth, don’t worry about anyone else.”

That took care of me for a time.

Whenever I complained to my mother about any job, she always said, “If you are going to complain about the job, then quit.” So finally after seven and a half years I really did quit.

I was married then, and my husband made me go to the Unemployment Office to complain. He said if it was him acting like that, then the person would run to the State office to complain. I went, even though I didn’t want to, but I didn’t complain. Why should I let someone put words in my mouth?

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Chapter 37: Unemployment Office

I went to work at the Unemployment Office, as a clerk typist. I checked and double checked everyone's work before it left the office. One day a big shot from Hartford came to the office to see why the Willimantic office was the only one in the State that never made mistakes. He said I did good. He checked our supply room and saw that everything was filled and perfect, so he was also impressed that I kept on top of things and kept good records. They used to call me the FBI because when no one could find a file, I went right to the files and found it.

At the end of the day, my last job was to fill in numbers in small spaces on a record keeping paper, so I could total the day's work. One day, everybody was in a big hurry to leave and stood at my typewriter telling me to hurry up. They kept talking around me, and got me rattled, so I cried. The boss told them to leave me alone and she said to me that she didn't realize that she overloaded my circuits until I blew a fuse. She was a good boss, but when she got transferred to another town, things seemed to go downhill.

During the coffee break, people talked really bad. I stopped going to break, and one man said he would give credit for taking a stand. He said he wouldn't want his wife to work there. One thing I learned from one of the ladies who stopped talking to me for no good reason, was that it was her problem and not mine. I racked my brain trying to figure out what I said or did wrong, and I came to the conclusion that she was in a bad mood and had to take it out on someone. That someone happened to be me. Whenever it happens again (and it has a couple of times), I say, "It is their loss, not mine, because I am a good friend to have."

I quit working at the Unemployment Office three times, and they came after me every time. The new boss almost got down on his knees (when I was at Barkers) and begged me to

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come back. I did go back because I heard that a girl who worked in the marking room before me had to go to the hospital with a rupture.

I have one more thing to say about the way some state workers used to be. A man transferred from another office, and the first thing he said to me was, "Are you going to bring in cups tomorrow?" I said, "Why?" and he said, "Well, you treat the claimants so nice, I thought maybe tomorrow you were going to serve them coffee."

Imagine just because I treated people nice and was good to them because if they were in the wrong line (long lines) and went to each one and put them in the right line because if I didn't when they got to the window, they were told they were in the wrong line and had to go stand in the back of the right line. These were old people, (a lot of women) who had worked in the mills for years and some couldn't speak English.

It is lucky now that the system has changed.

One time I quit was because I had to have all my teeth out (24 teeth and two teeth out every week for three months). When the dentist pulled out one of my teeth, my face on one side was badly bruised and swollen. When I went to work, one of the men on the employment side thought that someone had beat me up and wouldn't believe me until a couple of weeks later, he had a tooth pulled and he was also swollen and bruised. So be it.

I was in constant pain for three months and then it was another three months before I got my false teeth. When the dentist made the impression, he sprayed my throat with Novocain, because I was a gagger. Believe me, that was no fun. I couldn't tell that I was breathing, and I got so panicky, I got in my car, drove to Columbia, and went in the church there sitting for hours saying, "My peace I leave with you," which is a saying from Jesus.

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Then when I asked the dentist about infections, he said the only way I could get an infection was if food got in the open wound. Well, I take everything to heart, and so I didn't eat any solid food for three weeks. Instead, I drank good stuff. When I went in to the drug store to get malted milk, the druggist took one look at me and said, "Lady, you had better start eating solid food right away or you are going to end up in a wheel chair?"

I weighed only 75 pounds. I never knew anything about the body or nutrition so I didn't know I could have died. Of course, I started to eat little by little to build my body back up. It took a while for me to get back to my normal weight, which was 100 pounds all my life. Even though I ate, I walked everywhere and that was the balance to my weight.

When the lady interviewing me kept asking why I quit my job at the Unemployment Office, I kept saying I just didn't want to work there anymore. So the lady said, "OK, you don't have to say anything. We know him." And then she hired me as clerk-typist because she said I knew how to keep my mouth shut. Their rule was, "What you see here, what you hear here, leave here." I was to work there three times over the years because they kept coming after me when I quit.

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Chapter 38: Barker's Dept. Store

After I quit the State of Connecticut Unemployment office, I went to work in Barker's Department Store marking room. It was the only job the Unemployment Office had available, so I took it. The marking room was very long and narrow, and when the trucks came in with freight, they piled it high in the middle of the room.

It was a shock to walk in the room for the first time and see that mound of boxes. I actually had to climb the pile to get the boxes off the top, take down a heavy box, open it with a box cutter (they gave me my own box cutter), and take the merchandise out. I then put the merchandise on a low bed carrier to wheel it out to the store and put on the shelves. There was a guy working there that did not know I was replacing him as "boss" of the marking room. I have never wanted to be the BOSS of anyone, as it is not in my nature. I have seen, even young people, become the boss, and all of a sudden they stand ten feet tall with a mouth to go with it. That is not my way, so no one working in the marking room knew I was hired as boss.

There was also an elderly lady who had worked there for twenty-five years, and she was the real boss, so I let her be. It was an eerie feeling knowing that they were going to let the guy go and he didn't know it yet.

It always takes me about three weeks on a new job to see "what way the wind blows," and lucky for me, I recognized that the elderly lady was really the BOSS. I never, never let anyone know what my position was, and that I was getting more money in my pay. So, I got along well with the lady and it was a good thing because she and I moved the heavy boxes together. I couldn't do it myself.

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Whenever I wheeled the boxes out into the store, someone, somewhere, played music. The song was "Au Clair du la Luna" meaning "to Clair of the 'moon'" but I never found out who did play the music.

One day I went to work in the morning in a very good mood and after awhile, I started to feel grouchy and I didn't know why. Then it dawned on me that the two ladies I worked with were standing at the work bench with me, one on each side, arguing. Their bad will was actually getting to me, so I got out of their way.

The most important thing that happened there was an incident. The young boy making labels was cleaning his machine and became overpowered by the fumes of the cleaner. I saw him flopping on the pile of boxes and called the big boss right away. We carried him out into the hallway for fresh air, called 911, and they transported him to the hospital. He recovered.

For many years, every time I saw his mother, Ruth Ridgeway, she thanked me for saving Michael's life. I also found out that the nice banker, Mr. Ridgeway, who had saved my "life" years ago when he gave me money to pay the rent when I didn't have a job, was Michael's father. I believe God works in his own mysterious ways. How do you like that for retribution?

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Chapter 39: Main Street People

For many years, our Main Street in Willimantic, Connecticut was family oriented. All of our families knew the shopkeepers and business people, and they all knew us. For many years, our Main Street never changed. I would like to show some of our Main Street, as it is very nostalgic when people get together and say, "Oh yah, I remember this" or "I remember that." This is Main Street in the fifties and sixties.

Starting on the north side of Main Street, we had Santa Lucia Grinder Shop and Grocers run by Remi who was very famous for his grinders. Then there was Roy Auto Parts and the Willimantic Town Hall, with all of its many offices including the mayor's as well as Anna and Barbara. The last mayor John Lescoe was the last mayor we had, and he picked me for Cupid of Romantic Willimantic in 1983. Ann and Barbara, who are granddaughters of Meme LeClaire, work in the office where I get my dog's license. The police station was there when my father worked at one time, and at the back end of the building was the library where I spent a lot of time. It had a small room for children's books and I think I read them all.

On High Street, there was the Post Office. Coming from school, we always went in the door at High Street, through the building, and out the Main Street door. Heller's building was next, and I worked in their office for many years. Patsy LaMorte's Paper Store was in the building too, as well as Moore's Package Store and Gaudette's Plumbing. A guy named Rudy Polak lived in the building and he was a grandfather parachute jumper. That is what he told me. Mazzola's building was next, at one time a store for both groceries and appliances. There were apartments upstairs in all the buildings. Then there was Welch's Restaurant, where a bowl of spaghetti was sixty cents and lobster was two dollars, if I remember correctly. Then Brett Pharmacy was next.

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At Walnut Street was the Luncheonette. At lunch time when I worked across the street in an office, I used to run over there at twelve o'clock, and wait tables. They were short of help, and I would take a few minutes to eat, then run back to my office at one o'clock.

There were furnished rooms upstairs, then Terry's Kiddie Shop was next, and then Menditto's Barber Shop, Callahan's News Center, where we used to stop after school for ice cream sundaes. Next was Jenal's Clothing for women. Next came Peter's Tavern (later Tony's Barber Shop). The Nathan Hale Hotel came next and the Thread City Garage and the Nathan Hale Drug Store. After, there was a Record and Radio Shop. The Hotel Hooker had Archambault Barber, Hersant Development, and Contos Windham Card & News Store.

Crossing over Bank Street was the Willimantic Savings Institute with offices upstairs. Years ago, the Teachers College was upstairs in that location. Dr. Rafferty, dentist, was upstairs and was the first dentist to tell me why whenever I got a toothache, all of my teeth ached. He said it was my "Achilles Hell" and whenever I got tired and rundown, that is what made all my teeth ache. His brother was also a doctor there. Next came Kucharski and Tarpinian, lawyers and Lincoln Insurance Agency.

Benny's Auto Store was there. Cecila's Snack Bar was also there, and upstairs was the Gibson and Driscoll's Beauty Parlor where my aunt Alice worked. I used to stop there every day after school and run errands for them. Whenever my aunt's customers needed a babysitter, she sent me. There was Weldron, an architecture.

Surplus Center was next, then the Connecticut Bank and Trust Co. and the Windham National Bank where Mr. Ridgeway gave me money to pay the rent for my mother and myself when I didn't have a job. What a nice man he was.

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Then Brown's Department Store where we were able to trust things we needed. W.T. Grant's Dept. Store was next, and this was where my younger sister, Margie, worked. Then F.W. Woolworth's where my mother worked for many years. This building replaced the Loomer Opera House. When Mr. Loomer, who owned a lumber company, built the Opera House, people thought he was foolish but many people came to perform, including Summer stock, and many, many people were in the audience. Nassiff's, (Susan and Rick's parents,) had been in that location for years.

Crossing over North Street, was Todd's Department Store, a new building. This building replaced the old building where my grandfather had a restaurant and where I lived upstairs when I was a baby as there were apartments and porches there. There was also Wilson's Pharmacy, Bill's Number Seven, a favorite nighttime restaurant, Mac's Cigar Store, and Ames Butter and Egg Store, which had the best tub butter and peanut butter ever. There were a lot of businesses upstairs in these buildings, with Dr. Tobi being one. Others included Cooley & Co. stock brokers, Saunders, dentist, Home Roofing Company, and Shippee School of Dancing.

Down the street was Art's Jewelers (I used to babysit for their son and they had me work in the store once in a while) and one day I caught my finger in the door and nearly fainted and I was wringing wet because of my poor circulation so I couldn't work that day. The H.C. Murray Company (Boston Store) was next on the corner of Church. They had four floors of just about anything anyone could want. They had a nice man, Calvin Harris, who ran the elevator and we used to go upstairs to buy hats and I used to take one of the kids with me, because lady's hats didn't fit me and I was embarrassed to try on kid's hats.

Church and Reed Company (men's store) was next, and there were apartments and businesses upstairs. These businesses included Willimantic Area Community Chest, Civil

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Defense Headquarters, Willimantic Redevelopment Agency, Jordan Agency, Harvey, lawyer, Polymica Company and Sun Life of Canada Insurance.

My sister and I used to babysit there for my Uncle Bobby's son, Bobby. The Country Squire was next and I bought the dress I got married in there. Sherwin Williams Paint Store was next (it burned down), and then the Bay State Drug Store and the First Baptist Church. Then Union St came.

This is the south side of Main Street in the fifties and sixties. I would like to start with the Windham Grill Restaurant, which was at the Railroad Crossing. It was owned by two families, and some of their children went to school with us. When I was very young, my father worked as chef at the Windham Grill, and years later when my aunt worked there as waitress, she got me to work as a waitress whenever they needed an extra hand. I got written up in a book when a lady wrote about diners, all the trolley cars that were turned into lunch wagons when they closed down the trolleys on the tracks.

Willimantic had a unique piece of land in the middle of the road, which had Main Street on one side and Union Street on the other side, and a gas station at the end of the piece of land that divided Main Street from Union Street. On the north side of this part of Main Street, was the Windham Gas Station and Martin's Radio and Martin's Home Appliances. These went up to Knight's Service Station. On the south side of Main Street was the Eastern States Farmers Exchange, and Goettlich Brothers Furniture the Saba's Package Store (Later I used to stop in to talk to Phosy about baseball because he went to Windham High School and played sports with my two uncles). Next to Saba's was the City Lunch, an early morning restaurant, and next to that was Gene's Shoe Hospital, where we got our shoes repaired. Next was the Willimantic Music

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Company and the School of Music. Then came the Willimantic Frozen Food Center. After that came Rosen's Department Store which we frequented often.

On the same side, there was the Jordan Building, which housed the Jordan Hardware Store and many offices upstairs: insurance offices, beauty parlor, lawyers, and State of Connecticut Employment and Unemployment Offices (where I went for my first job after getting my working papers at age sixteen). Then there was the Willimantic Trust Company and next there was Willet, plumber.

Next came Hurley's Men's Shop, Wolmer and Caisse Jewelers, Fullerton-Fournier Women's Clothing (this was like a New York store, with seamstresses, then Wolmer, and the optometrist (where I was sent from high school for glasses when I was sixteen years old and I never wore the glasses and 10 years later, I was sent there again from a job and Dr. Wolmer said my eyes were better and that that had happened only one in a million times). Then came the Internal Revenue Service, Lizee Jewelers, Hurley's Boy Store, Gerry Studio (Mr. Gerry was a friend of mine and looked back in his archives and found two pictures of my father for me. One of the pictures my father was sixteen years old wearing his first pair of long pants as boys in those days wore knickers, and in another picture when my father was a bit older) and it was so nice of Mr. Gerry to do that. Hurley-Grant Company was next and some of the stores had steps in front and people, mostly retired senior men, could sit there and talk to their friends. On the second floor there was Getzoff, a dentist.

Crossing over on both sides of the footbridge we come to Curran's Pharmacy, which had a soda fountain. (This is the pharmacist I went to when I wasn't eating because of having no teeth and he told me I better eat solid food or I would end up in a wheelchair). There was also a water fountain on that corner, and just about everyone stopped for a drink. Even little children

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could, as they had a cement block for them to stand on to reach the water. We used to stop for a drink every time we went by. Next came Weick, Jr, Optometrist, Dorwart, lawyer, Keegan. Dentist, Barrows, optometrist and Phil's Barber Shop, and D & L Auto Accessories, and then Hallock's Restaurant.

I went to work at Hallock's Restaurant when I was seventeen. Just about everyone working on the street went there for lunch. I even got two jobs out of it years later from two of my old customers. Next to the restaurant was Puritan's Clothing, and the best thing about it was that we were able to charge. I bought my niece, Martha, a beautiful white coat in there that she still has. Then there was Lorraine's Beauty Shop and Tubridy's Ladies Clothes where they also had seamstresses if the clothes needed altering.

There was Plotkin's Jewelers, Cohen's Shoe Store, the Federal Land Bank, Eastern Connecticut Farm Loans, and Sadd Block, where we lived for awhile when I was nine. There was 36 families living there at one time. Underneath it, on the street was the old Woolworth's 5 & 10 cent store. Sears Roebuck was there, along with J.F. Carr Clothing and Carroll's Toiletries. Upstairs there were offices - Southward Real Estate, Mustard Insurance, Healy Insurance (where I worked once), Atwood Hypertrichcholy, W. Krug, lawyer and Family Finance (that was managed by a very nice man, Mr. Bortolan, who loaned me money to buy a bicycle when I was sixteen years old and I had this running account none stop, even though it changed hands and names over the years, for forty-one years and I could always count on them because I always paid on time.

Sweeney's Stationary was where we went for school supplies and Smith-Keon has the store next door. Then there was the Windham Pharmacy. The next building housed Ben's Eagle Shoe and I. Krug, a lawyer (who was in court when I got my divorce) said to me, "how could I

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still go out with Ackley after I was such a nervous wreck?" Then Safenovitz and Spector, lawyers. Next was a store called Frank's Sundial Shoes. This was a family affair, and we are still friends with the young Benny Prague and his sister Jay.

The Franklin Building came next and Singer Sewing was there. Then the Arnold Building with the Willimantic Camera Center, Arnold Insurance and Travelers Insurance, Charlie Shell Plumber, and Windham Underprice Clothing Store, and apartments upstairs.

Still on the south side of Main Street there were accountants, insurance lawyers, the Social Security Administration, Selective Service, Adult Probation, another finance company, Western Auto, Dr. Basden who made house calls, Beller's Package Store, the YMCA where we went swimming and later took exercise and yoga classes. The Gem Theatre was there also, which was one of three movie houses we had there all at the same time, and also Colonial Studio Photos and Evelyn's School of Dance. In the Kimball Block, there was the Department of Motor Vehicles where I had my driving test and got my license. T.V. Sales and Services, the Hartford Courant, real estate office, chiropractor, and Hyde's Magazine Shop. Then A&B Poultry Market, and Jim's Coffee Spot which was a very, very favorite spot for hamburgers, hot dogs, and grinders, each with their own special Jim's sauce and people are still nostalgic about it.

Next was the Air-force Recruiting Service and Star Furniture Company. Sam Moskowitz, the owner, and his wife were true friends of my family. Sam, the owner, was a true friend and one day when my mother and I wanted to move and couldn't afford to pay \$50.00 per room for movers and we had four rooms, I was walking by Star Furniture and Jesus' words came to me: "Sell all that you have and come follow me." so I went into the store and made a deal with Sam - he took all of our furniture and gave me credit and brought the second-hand furniture to his store and brought our new furniture to our new apartment (no carrying charges) and I just had

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a small monthly payment to him. He said he usually wrote numbers under second hand furniture but he wrote Claire under all of mine.

The next building housed The Lucky Strike Bowling Alleys, Bus Terminal, Luncheonette, Travel Bureau, Greyhound Bus Lines, New England Transportation buses, The Arrow Line Bus, the Blue Line bus terminal (we had a lot of ways to go to Hartford or Norwich or Providence) and Haggerty Insurance. Mario's Bakery was in the next building, and Ebsmith's Gift Shop, run by Arlene Archambault, Andre and Pam's mother and their Aunt, Anna. There was Fox, dentist; Brainard, dentist, Steinman. Dental lab. And Toney, Hair stylist, where I had my hair done.

The Capitol Theatre was in Willimantic as well (My friend Patty and I used to go the Capitol on Sunday afternoon, go to eat at the Lucky Strike lunch counter and then go bowling. That made for a nice Sunday). Over the theatre, there was a dentist upstairs. Dr. Mason, and that is where I had my twenty-four teeth taken out. I will never have to do that again. There was another office upstairs and a lawyer, Omar Shepard, who had me as a witness whenever he needed me to sign something for a client, when I worked in the Insurance office. Next to that building was a taxi at one time, and next to that was the Italian Garden Restaurant which had been there since the late 1800's, and I was to work there for nearly thirteen years. Past that was the WILI building where Wayno sat in the window to broadcast. Next in line was a shoemaker, Mangano's and the Metropolitan Insurance office.

Upstairs over the theater, there was an insurance office where I worked for years, a life insurance company, Grossman Homes, a doctor, a dentist, Dr. Mason (where I went to have all my teeth taken out), a lawyer (who had me be a witness whenever he needed one), the Textile

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Workers of America Local 460 and The Council of Eastern Connecticut and Horn's Clothing Store was downstairs. At one time, there was a taxi next to that.

The Italian Garden Restaurant came next and it had been there since the late 1880s by the same family. (I worked there for many years). Many of the buildings on Main Street also had apartments upstairs where people lived. The Capitol Diner was next to the restaurant and we called the diner Sputniks because that is what the owner's name sounded like. I used to stop there for coffee in the morning. There was a shoe repair shop next to that and the Metropolitan Life Insurance.

That was our Main Street during the 1960's and then in the early 1970's, someone decided that Willimantic needed an overhauling and they went through a large portion of the city, knocking down building after building and called it revitalization and drew up a map showing what the restorations were to look like but this did not come to pass and left Willimantic with a blank area, called the parcel, that once had at least nine streets where many businesses were and where many people lived and now I ask:

"Where did all the people go?"

First I will start with Union Street where the only building left standing is the First Baptist Church. After that there was Columbia Cleaners, two families, Losen's Tailor Shop, Goodwill Industries, 6 families, Willimantic Glass Company, Morris Hardware, nine families, Central Building and El Barrio.

Next came Walter Gottlich and four families. Next came the Library Service Center and Laperle Memorials. Mademoiselle Beauty Parlor, Lindy's Restaurant and Rose Haddad and five families. Hickey Drug Store and La Esquina Records were at the end of Union Street at Jackson Street.

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Going north on Jackson Street from Main Street, there was the Friendly Variety Store, Frenchy's Tavern, four families, Wonder Tavern, two families, McGraw & Durand Barber Shop, seven families, Lenny's Package Store and one family. Haddad Furnished rooms with thirteen families. Next came Sussman Oil Company, Sunkist Donut Shop and one family. The American Legion, John J. Shea Post No. nineteen was next. Then came Dukes Restaurant, one family and Knights of Columbus Hall, two families and Mrs. Belair's Candy Store (her daughter, Phyllis, was in my class at St. Joseph's School) and then three families.

Coming next and turning right at that corner building was Jackson Place. At one time this street was called Cork Alley because the Irish mill workers lived there. Going east on Jackson Place, there were thirteen families on the right side of the street and eleven families living on the left side. The street ended with a fence near the tracks on Milk Street. We used to sneak through the fence as a shortcut and walk the tracks to Ash Street where we lived in Down Sodom.

Back onto Jackson Street were Klosowski & Son Tailors and then six families. Then came our favorite place for hanging out at night and dancing to the juke box - first Bill Orange's Coffee Shop and then George Bourey's Coffee Shop. It was the place to be with lots of swell young people having fun. There were two families living there then Kinczyks Tailors and four more families. Osso's Candy Store was on the left side corner where children for many, many, many years went there to buy candy and toys because it was in a great location amongst three grammar schools: St. Joseph's School; St. Mary's School; Natchaug Grammar School and there always was a nice Policeman, Pinky White, who would carry the little children across the street, yours truly and my sisters included.

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Taking a turn to the right, was Valley Street Extension, where there were eleven families on one side of the street and eleven families on the other side of the street. The street ended at the tracks on Milk Street. At one time there was a fruit and vegetable warehouse at the end of the street because, in those days, produce was carried into Willimantic by train so many businesses had their back doors facing the tracks.

From Jackson Street, we turn west and enter Valley Street. There were three families on the south side and St. Joseph's Parochial School on the north side of Valley Street and two families on the south side of the street and one family was the family of John J. Shea who was the first young man to die in the First World War. A member of his family was also a Godparent of my father when he was baptised. This house was a very small cottage and was on the corner of Valley Street and Broad Street.

There were fourteen families living on Broad Street. At one time the Strand Theater was there and we spent many happy Saturdays there watching serials of cowboy movies and maybe taking home a free plate they gave away.

Valley Street from Broad Street going west had St. Mary's Parochial School, on the north side of the street and Willimantic Plumbing Supplies on the south side. There were four families living there. Valley Street from Broad Street to Center Street had St. Mary's French Roman Catholic Church and two families across the street. Electronic Radio Television Inc was on the side where the families lived.

Center Street, from Union Street to Valley Street, had twenty-four families living from one end of the street to the other end of the street. Also the Franco-American Club (French Club) was housed there half way in between. It was in an old factory building and was used for many parties. My cousin Helen McShea and John Smith had their wedding reception there and I

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was called upon to help serve the dinners. I also gave my mother her seventy-fifth birthday party there.

Ray's Electric Company was on this street, as was the Center Street Garage. My cousin, Twiddle Lucey, liked to tell what was a joke that was really true. Someone asked him where the Center Street Garage was. (On Center Street, of course). Riquier Vending Machines was also on that street.

Temple Street, which ran north from Union Street to Valley Street, housed Willimantic Institute Hair Dressing and Cosmetology and twelve families on the street. My friends, Faye, Benny and David Semel lived there and I visited there often.

On Valley Street between Temple and Church Streets, there was the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company and Liquor store and that building still stands there but only the Liquor Store remained open. The front of the building has been remodeled and now houses the Co-op Store.

And so I say again – like in the song –

“WHERE HAVE ALL THE PEOPLE GONE?”

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PART THREE Autumn of my life

Chapter 38: Emerald Ave

It is in the autumn of life that the flower grows on the plant. For people it is the flowering. Your flowering is your heart, your charity, your good deeds, what you show to the world, your reputation.

In the autumn of my life, I decided to retire from the world by staying home after work. I had been excommunicated from the Catholic Church because I married someone who had been married and divorced. I was his third wife and he went on to have two more wives.

I was divorced in 1960, and because, as a Catholic, I thought that divorce was bad, and because the guy wanted to marry me again, I went out with him for a year. At the time, I lived with my mother and then, luckily I got thrown off the marry-go-round when the guy married a girl with four children who he had known only three weeks.

That set me free. His ex-wife, the mother of his two children, got married without telling him, and he was furious so he ran off and also got married. I like to say that I was the innocent by-stander and my only regret was that I lost touch with his two children. I didn't know he was only going to stay married for a month, and then come after me again. However, I knew better than to ever bother with him again. I did not go to my sister's house for three months because he went there.

It was my fault that I lost Terryl, his little girl, and I shall always regret it. I had known his little girl since she was eight months old and I loved her from the first moment I saw her, when her mother sat her on my typewriter in her father's office. As soon as she learned how to talk she called me "Mommy," and wouldn't let me out of her sight. When she was ten years old,

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her mother remarried and her father also remarried. Terryl wrote to me and told me how much she cared about me, and I wrote back and said that now that she has a new step-mother, step-sisters and brothers, a new step-father, and another step-sister that I didn't want to complicate her life. I mentioned that it would be better if we didn't see each other anymore, as she lived in a different town. I did not know how badly I hurt the little girl. She had her father bring her to see me when she was fourteen years old, and I did not know what to say, so I let her go again and I have always regretted it.

I never knew how to deal with teenagers since I was a leader in the grange youth group, "four H club" during the war years. I tried to teach the young girls how to make beanbags, but they just wanted to talk about the boys they were writing to. I should have known that Terryl wasn't an ordinary teenager, because she was always so smart. I wish I could turn the clock back.

I had learned somewhere in my literary travels that when a person reaches age thirty-five, that they have the choice of following the world, or following God. So, in the autumn of my life I chose to follow God.

I was very thin, weighing only seventy-five pounds after having all my teeth out. In order to sleep at night, I had to roll a quilt to place at my side, because I had no fat to protect my vital parts. Taking a bath, I had to squeeze the soapsuds from a face cloth, because once I touched something vital taking a bath, a shock went through my entire body. Another time just rolling over on the couch, I hurt myself. During the 1960's, I did not watch television or listen to the radio or read newspapers. The only thing I knew was when President Kennedy was killed. I worked in an office by myself so I didn't hear anything much that was going on in the world.

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For eleven years or so, I read the Holy Bible and took the parts I wanted to remember and read them over and over again, at least ten times. When it came to me that the word "Lord" was "Truth," the living truth (which is the opposite of false), I was ecstatic, and wanted to run around and tell everyone that I found Jesus, but I didn't know anyone who would care or even know what I meant. Jesus is the "Word" of God and God only speaks the "truth." Jesus, the Lord, is the "living truth." It is good to search out the truth in every circumstance so that there can be no question as to right from wrong, and right the wrong if need be. It was like a big revelation and whenever I saw the word "Lord." In any storybook of Jesus, I crossed it out and wrote "Truth." I learned many things from reading the storybooks.

It was the messages in the Bible for everyday living that I tried to remember. I read most of the Bible, except for parts where there was fighting and killing, because I do not like war. I would spend hours and hours at night studying. In order to study, it was necessary to have several books on the table for reference, and maps to look places up. I studied history, and I like to learn history from the ground up. The beginning of mankind and Noah Ark, was a story which seemed to be known by all peoples even though they lived on different continents.

This was my Renaissance. In order to remember what I learned, I wrote more than fifty poems. I wrote four children's read-aloud stories. I painted many "paint by number" paintings. I was lucky enough to find a number painting of the "Boy with a Rabbit," my grandmother's favorite picture. It is a fifteen by nineteen painting and better than the one my cousin threw in the dump, because I painted it with love. I also painted a twenty-six by twelve number painting of the "Last Supper" by Da Vinci, several paintings of "Our Lady" for my nieces, and several paintings of Jesus for my nephew when they made their First Communion. I made about fifty pictures with crayons and planned on redoing them in paint someday. However, when we moved

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away from Emerald Avenue) I didn't want to drive anymore and wanted to move downtown where I worked), all my crayon artwork got lost.

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Chapter 39: Renaissance- Beautiful Black Pant Suit

Back in the early days of the eighties, the Theatre Guild was started, thanks to Victor and Martha. They put on a lot of nice dinners and theater nights. Some plays were at churches. Still other dinners and plays were at the Polish Home, because it had a good stage and dance floor. The tables were set up for the dinners, and there was a small bar set up in a corner.

I call it the Polish Home because my family moved near the homes of the Polish people when I was nine years old. My sisters and I spent every Sunday at the Polish Home after church, and other days too, so it was like a home to us. (my father was gone and my mother worked every day.) I basically grew up there. We ate Polish food (kielbasa, pierogos, etc.), learned a little of the language, listened to Polish music, and learned how to do the Polish Hop dance, which was like a few skips and a hop. My Polish friend says it is like an energy waltz with fewer steps, ha ha.

We had a really good life growing up. When we did "grow up" as teenagers, we went to the Polish Home once a week, dancing to the best Polish orchestras ever. Later, all the teenagers and older youths from the town went to the Polish Home dances, as it was the place to be for meeting new friends. Young men from other towns, especially Norwich, came to our dances and married local girls.

By this time, when we were teenagers, it was "the forties" and "fifties." There were soldiers, from down south, stationed at the Armory in our town, so there were plenty of young men to dance with. I danced a lot because I loved to dance, but that is where it stopped. Not only was I very, very bashful, but my mother was very strict with her "do's" and "don'ts," so I would never, ever bring a stranger home or even date a stranger (some of them were married and kept it quiet). I believe that what a child learns in their heart early stays with them for the rest of

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their lives. I do not think that my mother had to keep telling us to "beware of strangers," "do not talk to strangers," and "do not ever take money from a stranger."

One of my best friends dated a soldier and when I heard he was married, I asked her if she would get mad at me if I told her she was dating a married man and she said, "No, of course not." I told my friend, and she quit going out with the guy. At the next dance, I felt someone's eyes boring holes in me and when I looked up at the balcony, I saw this guy, Sutton, looking at me with hate in his eyes, but at least I saved my friend from some "heartache."

I write about the Polish Home because it was "home" to me for most of my life. Even when I was older, I went there for many town affairs and parties. So, when I went to the plays there, it was like "old home week" for me, and I was as comfortable (even with my falling black suit) as though I were home.

I first met Victor and Martha when my great-nephew, Stevie, and nieces, Monica and Amanda, were in the play "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever." This play was so good, it played in three towns: Willimantic, Columbia and Vernon. Amanda was the littlest angel, Monika was Mary, and Stevie was a Sheppard. They were all good, very good.

I, also, enjoyed several dinner shows at the Polish Home. I guess I am a funny person because I only like to watch plays or baseball games, etc. if I know someone that is in them. One of the plays had a guy I knew named Jeff in it. I knew him as he was one of my customers at the restaurant where I worked. The customers who came to the restaurant, IG's, were like a clique or club, and they all used to meet at our place, morning, noon, and night. Also, almost like a group, they all went to the same places. I, their waitress, was like an "honorary member" of their club, so I was invited to go with them, too.

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A funny thing happened to me at one of the plays. It was a rainy night so I wore a tan trench coat and was walking down Valley Street, in the rain. I entered the club and hung my coat up in the cloakroom that was right inside the door. I was so excited to meet my friends and see the play, I did not notice anything was amiss. My friend, Tony, was standing in the entrance way, and as I stood on the side of him, looking for my party, he put his arm around me and said, "Hello." I replied, "Hello, how are you?" Then I went to the right of the room when I saw my party sitting at our table, and Tony went to the left of the room to his table where his wife, Cathy, and his friends were.

Tony and Cathie were "great people." One Christmas when I had a broken wrist, they made an entire Christmas dinner and brought it to my house for me to share with my family. Then they went somewhere else to eat Christmas dinner.

I had gone to my table where my party was sitting. I can't remember who else was there but a guy named Al was there with his wife, and Lucille, who was a second cousin of mine (weird as it may sound, her mother, Grace was my father's relative and her aunt Floss, was my mother's relative. It is a small world.) I had only sat there a minute when someone said, "What are the black spots on the table cloth spot under your arms?" It really was black. I was wearing, for the first time, a beautiful black pantsuit that had golden threads running through it.

You should have heard Al, who was a born comedian, who worked in the cemetery during the day, and ran a restaurant at night. I can imagine how he entertained his customers at night. He said, "Don't light your cigarette near her. She might go up in smoke." He had some other choice words during the night. Everybody was poking fun at "my black," but I could take a joke. I had funny things to say about it, too.

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Someone gave me their white napkin to cover the spot and that got all black. The waitress gave me some other napkins and did everything except change the table cloth. The black wouldn't stop falling off me. If I had anything underneath, I could have taken the jacket off but this was a very dressy pant suit (pants and jacket) and it never dawned on me to wear anything under the jacket.

I finally got up, went into the bathroom, and went into the stall. When I got up, I saw the seat was all black. When I washed my hands in the sink, that got all black. I thought, *what in the devil is happening here?* I made my way back to my table being very, very careful not to touch any one's coat hanging on their chair. When I told the others what happened in the bathroom, they all howled. I think it made their night as everyone had a chance to say what they thought "my black" was. It especially made Al's night as I gave him fodder for his jokes and, of course, the play was Dracula, so it was as if I was part of the play – a play on play.

Of course, I could have gotten up and left, but why should I? I paid for my ticket and expected to see a show. Of course, I did not know that I was to be the main attraction at our table, but believe me, I could not have picked a better group of friends to be with. There was not a "snub nose" in the bunch.

After the nice dinner, the show went on, and I believe everyone enjoyed it. It was a scary play that night (Dracula), so I was right in tune with my mysterious black suit. I couldn't remember if they lowered the lights when the play began. If so, I wonder if I would have glowed in the dark with my golden threads. Probably not, but I'll never know. If that had happened maybe some people would have thought I was part of the play. I really enjoyed the play and everyone else seemed to enjoy it, too.

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There were a lot of people there that night, as there was every night Victor and Martha put a play on. Some of the tables were round, and some of the tables were square, so I had quite a time trying to get past the chairs. Whenever I got up, people had their coats draped. Our table was quite a ways away from the bar where the soda and drinks were, and away from the bathroom, so I would try to pass by tables where I didn't know anyone. I didn't want to have to stop and talk to anyone. I might have been tempted to tell them about my plight and I didn't want to do that. It was bad enough that the people at my table had the giggles and I felt fortunate that the story didn't travel around the room. Besides, as I look back now, I know I would not have the fun Tony had if he had known what really happened that night.

When the night came to an end, I went into the cloak room and happened to see the inside of my tan trench coat - it was all black. Ha, ha, the mystery deepens. So, Tony, at this table, had his mystery, and I, at my table, had my mystery, too. My friend, Al, must have added this to his list of jokes, and had many a chuckle over it as the years rolled by. Telling funny stories was his thing, and as I said before, he owned and worked in a restaurant/bar, so I am sure his customers heard about my "black suit" and had a few laughs about it, too.

As a matter of fact, I still laugh about it every time I think about it because that night turned out to be one of my best times - a nice dinner, a nice play, and good company with lots of laughter. What more could anyone ask for? Isn't that basically what life is all about?

I think it stopped raining by the time the play was over, and I walked home since the play was a short distance from my home. I took my coat off in the bathroom and hung it up in a closet. Then I took the suit off and prepared to get in the tub, and would you believe it, all my under clothes were black and I was all black, too. I hopped into the tub and cleaned myself off really well because I had no idea what the black substance was, and that made it scary not

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knowing what the black substance actually was. I threw the under clothes away and I think I threw the coat away too.

The next day, I went to the store where I had purchased the suit and told them what had happened and they let me pick out another suit (not black). Now I wish I had asked them to find out what happened to my suit as I am curious about it. It could have been tarnished gold or something in the black dye.

But this is not the end of my story. A few days later, I saw Tony go into the Victorian Lady. I went in and told him my story, because I knew he would get a kick out of it. He listened, patiently, with a twinkle in his eyes, and when I had finished telling him my story, he told me his story.

His story was, when he went back to his table and sat down, someone said, "Tony, what happened to your coat sleeve?" Tony said, "I don't know. All I did was put my arm around Claire." Guess what? The inside of Tony's nice white sleeve was ALL BLACK.

Tony and I roared with laughter, and everyone in the place looked at us and probably wondered what could possibly be that funny. But only Tony and I knew, and we weren't telling.

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PART IV Second Springtime of My Life

Chapter 40: Day Care

I started the second springtime of my life by working at the age of seventy-two for AmeriCorp-AmeriCorp Reads (a National Service of the United States). This job was for two years. Besides being paid a salary, there was money for schooling. The job site was at Kellor Hall Day Care at Eastern Connecticut State University campus, and the school was run by the Windham Public School System.

I met there for the first time, Linda Brown Kelley, whose father was my mother's first cousin. Her brother Roland made a beautiful genealogy of the family tree that they shared with me. Also working there was Amy (nee Sypher), whose family I had known when I was young and used to go to my grandfather's house over the river on South Street. Years later when I worked at Ackley Express, I worked with Irving Sypher. Then I met a young boy named Gary Sypher (their nephew), who lived next door to my sister, and was a friend of her children. Young Ron Burnman was their neighbor also. What a small world Willimantic is.

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Claire Meikle at Americorps

Kellor Hall was a beautiful school with a toddler room, three pre-K rooms (also used for after-school children), and a beautiful back yard with a lot of room for the children to play.

Every day in the yard, I really played with the kids. I pulled each, in turn, in the wagon around the road of the yard, pushed some on the swings, or helped them on the jungle gym, a rocket to the moon, or caught them when they came sliding fast down the slide. I also played ball with the children or went with them in the sandbox.

In the yard, there were sandboxes, swings, a play train, a boat, a jungle gym, and other climbing toys. It is very important for children to run, play, and climb because exercising helps them in other areas, such as learning in the mind, and health for the body. They had many toys to play with, such as the wagon. I bought a kite, in the shape of an eagle, went on the hill outside the fence, and flew it for the children. I knew how to play, because I had taken care of so many children. It was a benefit for me also, because playing with children was therapy for an older person like me.

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I took pictures of the children and their families and pictures of the kids doing each of the activities. I put them in a book, which shows the wonderful world of daycare for toddlers and pre-K children. I thoroughly believe that professionals should teach little children, because parents are not always qualified and many mothers work. For the family photos, I cut and pasted cardboard frames and gave them to each family when we had Family Day. I got to be friends with many of the families, and remain so to this day. I give books to some of the children every year and they appreciate it.

In the wintertime, there was a big hill, which was perfect for sliding down on sleds. The children who went there had a big advantage because of the various things they could participate both indoors and outdoors. Indoors, there were many areas for playing, reading, eating, or even for having a rest. There was so much to do that the day passed quickly. My job was reading only. I couldn't teach anything because I wasn't a certified teacher. I read hundreds of books to the eight children that I was assigned to. Children love to be read to. I read the *Rainbow Fish* to one boy fifty-two times, and then stopped counting. This little boy was very interested in math and counted everything. One boy loved the *Gingerbread Man* and one little boy loved dinosaurs. I have always loved children's stories, so it was a pleasure for me to read them to children who loved them as well. Many of the stories I read over and over again as the cry was always, "Read it again."

It was more fun than work at the daycare. The pre-k children were three and four year olds. That is the precious time when they begin to really learn. A child would be in the toddler room, hardly saying a word, and then the very day they turned three years old, they would be walked down to the pre-K room, and like a miracle, they would be very talkative. It was amazing what they knew.

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These children were very intelligent and learned quickly. They were taught many things, such as how to grow flowers, how to do artwork, sing songs and how to do jobs like setting the table for lunch. The children had many things to play with inside, like the water table, doll house and dolls, trucks, building blocks, and many books to read. I think reading books was their favorite thing to do. They would look over the picture books and sometimes use their fingers to trace something. Each child had their own favorite book.

I was still going to school at Eastern Connecticut State University and was very interested in teaching. In one of my classes, I found out that at age three, a child has an addition to their brain called myelin. This myelin attaches to the cell at the bridge that crosses from one cell to another. The myelin is an insulation that allows children to learn quickly when they get to be three years old, so that solved the mystery for me about why these children are so smart.

I also went to many classes of childhood studies at EastConn during my time with AmeriCorp. I earned credits and almost made it to certification, but they took it away from me to give it to a younger person. They said because of my age I didn't need it, but I feel that I earned it.

Even though I wasn't allowed to teach anything, not even the alphabet, I did get a job later as a teacher-sub at Natchaug School and Valley Street Daycare. It was rewarding because children are so great.

At one time earlier, I had a class at Eastern Connecticut State University that was for a teaching certificate. It was a special program called ACCESS, and it was offered because schools needed teachers. Debby Jones from Eastern called me up one day at the Mail Room and said, "There is a special program for teachers, come sign up for it." So I did. But after a year and a half, the Federal Government cut the program, thus losing a lot of good teachers.

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I feel that my time at the daycares, both Kellor Hall and Valley Street Day Care was a success because I was able to help many children, some that were very bashful, and some that cried a lot. These children from the daycare still know me. One time, at the Halloween Party, I had to wear a costume and one boy, Danny, let me wear his Cat in the Hat hat, so from then on I was the Cat in the Hat.



Claire Meikle as "The Cat in the Hat"



I made at least a dozen appearances as the Cat in the Hat reading Dr. Seuss stories in different places around town and on Channel 14 television. So I am still Cat in the Hat thanks to Brenda and Danny Bouchard.

One thing though, I was never sick before I went to daycare. One day, I had to stay home in the morning because I was sick. At lunchtime, I went to work, walking along the fence

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that enclosed the yard. All the children were in the yard playing, and at least a dozen children ran to the fence to see me. They put their little fingers through the fence to touch me and some of them cried, "Claire, what happened? Where were you?"

This showed that they missed me, and I was so overcome by emotions that I cried and left the fence so they couldn't see me cry. I went inside the building and the director said I should take the afternoon off because I was still crying, and it wouldn't be good for the children to see me crying. When I wrote this to my "worker," she said she cried too.

During the years at AmeriCorp, we went to the State Capitol in Hartford for two years. One year, I gave a speech in one of the smaller rooms at the Capitol. I had had great success with at least two of the children, and maybe more that I wasn't aware of. One little boy didn't talk for the first year. He was there in the toddler room and only talked to me in my room. We bonded, and he talked to me and followed me around. Come to find out he was a very good artist and could think up lots of things to draw. He drew a picture of him bringing a card to my house when I was sick. He drew a picture of me and him riding on the back of an animal. He loved to draw dinosaurs. I bring a birthday present to his mother for him every year.

One other little boy wanted to always be near me, and so when I went for lunch, I had to promise I would be back. So I talked about my successes in helping children in my speech at the Capitol. Representative Dyson, who heard my speech inside, said to me right on the steps of the Capitol that my speech was better than the speech given on the steps of the capitol by the girl who said what the program did for her.

My two years at AmeriCorp went by quickly and it was the answer to one of my wishes to be a teacher. I learned there are other ways to teach children, not just out of a book.

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Chapter 41: My Travels

I like to say, I've been there, I've done that. While I haven't been traveling to too many places, I have travelled throughout New England and on the East coast from Canada to Key West Florida, and west to Illinois and West Virginia.

In the 1950's, I had a car and would take my mother for a Sunday ride to Colchester, where she came from. We would eat at a roadside snack bar (Harry's) or buy something at the Colchester Bakery, which was the best.

Sometimes we would ride to Norwich, which had a zoo, or to Watch Hill, Rhode Island, which had a merry-go-round, because we used to take my sisters' children with us. My mother loved the New York Yankee's baseball team, so I took her to Boston to see them play against the Red Sox. I also took her and her Sister, Annie, to New York, to see the Yankee's play. They had a great time.

In New York, I took my mom and my aunt to an Italian restaurant for pasta and they each had a glass of red wine (neither of them ever drank), and my aunt got silly. It was probably the best time she ever had in her life. I was all dressed up in a white linen suit with small raised flowers on the jacket (I had bought in Florida), and I was wearing blue high heels, and a very large oval blue picture hat. My mother and aunt were walking behind me and got a surprise. A man poked his head around under my very big hat and said, "hello" before he went on his way. I love New York, and knew my way around it from all the times I've traveled through it by myself via the trains or buses. About the time I was there with my mom and aunt, there was a special excursion train leaving from Hartford to New York, and the fare was only \$10.00. So, we had many, many trips to New York, with my sister's children, Clint, Jr, Sis, Steve, and Pete taking

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turns to go. All the children had a turn to go, except for the littlest. When it was finally their turn to go, I wasn't going anymore.

I used to drive my car to Hartford and get on the train. Going to New York was ok but the first time we went, and were on our way back on the train, I keep saying "going back on the highway is different so I don't know how to go." I worried all the way to Hartford and when I got to the entrance of the parkway, one car was in front of me, so I got out of the car and asked the other driver if he was going my way, and he said, "yes," that I could follow him, and so I did. But the problem was that he went on the fast side and was out of my view so quickly that I couldn't even see him.

Well, here we were at midnight, my mother, my little nephew Tom sleeping on the back seat, and I riding on the fast side of the parkway. Cars behind were tooting their horns and flashing their lights, singling me to pull over. I, on the other hand, was crying and my foot was shaking up and down on the gas pedal. Finally, I said to my mother, "Keep an eye on your side and let me know when no cars are coming." When she said, "ok," I closed my eyes and went over to the slow side. It was a nightmare and I got off the parkway as soon as I could.

Of course, I was lost and stopped at a gas station for directions, and the young guy working there said he never heard of Willimantic. Finally, I found a policeman and asked him and he told me how to get there. It seems like we were in Tolland, somewhere I had never been before, and I got back on the road and made it home safe and sound. After that I was able to go back and forth without any trouble, but it would have been better if we could have taken the train from Willimantic like in the old days. That was the first of many wonderful trips to New York.

When I was working in New York, I had my mother take the bus to New York City (that was brave of her because she never went to many places in her life), and I met her at the bus stop

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and took her out to eat and shop, as it was Christmas time. We were walking down one street when all of a sudden, I cried out, "Misery, Misery" and my mother grabbed my arm and said, "Claire, what's wrong with you?" She was scared. I had seen a boy who was at Watch Hill years before when I was working there and he worked in his brother's Linen store, so here he was standing in the doorway of his brother's New York store. His name was Misiaire or something like that, and we called him Misery. So my mother knew I wasn't going crazy.

One nice sunny day in the summer, my friend who lived in Columbia and I decided to take the excursion train that went direct to the Bronx Zoo. I took my nephew, Tom, and drove to Columbia where we were to meet. On the way, I had a blow-out just over the Columbia line. Alice and her daughter Patricia came after us, and she drove to Hartford and we took the train to the Bronx Zoo. We had a wonderful time. I took pictures, and one of the pictures was what I call a classic. The picture was of a small boy, in the Bronx Park, standing on the bank of the water, with his reflection showing in the water (do you have a copy of this to put in here?).

We got back home fine, and when we stopped at Burt's Cycle Shop where my car was, the guy told me that someone had to have hammered a very large nail into my tire because it was impossible for me to pick it up on the road. He said Tom and I were lucky because we could have had a bad accident. That took some of the pleasure out of the day. Who could have put the nail in my tire?

For some of my other adventures, I went to some of the beaches in Maine and New Hampshire, and to a place way, way up in the woods, past Canaan, New Hampshire. I used to babysit the two little Gaudette children, Billy and Julie, while their parents went to New Hampshire every weekend with Archie Woods (who owned the Woods Lot near our house), and one weekend they decided to take the children and I.

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It was quite a ride up into the mountains and we stayed in his house that was miles from any other house. The nearest house was a long way away and the people who lived there had about ten children. They were woodsmen. Every child in the family played a musical instrument that they got from Sears and Roebuck, and they had music and dancing every Saturday night. We went there and it was fun. There were wild animals near the Woods' house. We saw bears and porcupines in trees so we didn't go walking too far. I slept in all my clothes at night, because an animal used to come in the house and chew the legs off tables and chairs.

One day, I went to Saxon's River, Vermont, with my cousin, Ethel's husband. He often went to Saxon's River for a load of lumber in his truck. Together we went to a logging camp, and I saw them rolling logs into the river and sawing them at the sawmill. The village was very small with a couple of houses, a store, and a post office (I mailed a card to my friend Patty because we were supposed to go to the movies, but I wasn't going to be there). There wasn't much else in the area. The best part of the trip was sitting in the office around a potbelly stove and listening to stories told by some old Yankee men. I wish I could have written some stories down, so I could write about them later.

When we were on our way back home from Vermont, we were going down a very, very big hill. Arba, my cousin's husband said, "I don't want to scare you but hold on (This was before seat belts), there is something wrong with the truck." Luckily, when we reached the bottom of the hill, there was a gas station, and we pulled into it. The guy there looked at the motor and said the motor had lost two bolts, and was hanging there by two bolts. He said we were very, very lucky (but I call it blessed), and he fixed the truck so we could ride home safely.

One day there was a special train trip out of Willimantic for the fall foliage in Vermont, so I took my nephew Tom to Brattleborough for the train ride and a nice chicken dinner at a

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community house there. There wasn't much else there except a few houses, a church and the community house. Nonetheless, we had a good time and the trees were beautiful. We took many pictures. Somehow, the film was lost for years, but we found it. Unfortunately, only one picture came out. It was Tom and I, all dressed and waiting to board the train in Willimantic.

My most favorite place to go to was Florida. When the guy I worked for got sick, he went to his mother's house in Hallendale (Hollywood) Florida to rest. When he was ready to come back home, he called me and asked if I could get him a ride back home. I asked my friend, Alice, and she and I went (she drove all the way) to Florida along the coast route (route #1). It wasn't too bad, except for Georgia. Georgia didn't have well paved roads; they had roads that were just a narrow piece of land with gullies going way down on both sides. At one time, there was a truck in front of us, and he was probably either sleeping or drunk. His truck weaved from one side of the road to the other. We got so scared that we stopped at the first place we could. We stopped at a tiny store with a few men sitting around. We were afraid to buy any food, so we just got some milk to drink and waited until we thought the truck was far ahead. There were some other bad spots, but we finally made it to the end. It was at the very tip of land somewhere in the outback, and we could have driven right into the water. The funniest thing was that there was an out-door telephone booth. We called Hallendale and they came to get us, so we were saved again. It didn't stop me from loving Florida. We went to a lot of places like the race track, and we saw flamingoes. We also went to Key West, riding along those long, long bridges and we ate Key Lime pie and pecan pie along the way.

I went to Florida three other times: Miami Beach at the Flamingo Hotel with my nephew Steven, West Palm Beach to visit my nephew, Clint Jr., and a week to Collins Avenue. I loved it every time.

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When the years rolled along, I got to take my great nieces and nephew to New York City. Because I always wanted to be a writer, one of the first places I went to in New York City was the Algonquin Hotel where the best writers met every day and sat in the special room at their special round table. Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley and others who sat in those seats were my heroes. They even bought an island together, so they could get together to talk shop and pray at the same time. At the island, they invited lots of famous people there. I think Art Buckholt was the only survivor left until he just passed away this year.

I took my nieces, Amanda and Kim on a bus trip to New York, and we spent the day eating, shopping, and spending time at Rockefeller Center watching the skaters. I took my niece, Monika, to a special place, called Seaside. At Seaside, we were near the water, and could sit on the porch and look at the Brooklyn Bridge. There are many shop windows to look at works of art. We ate outdoors at a little table. I had a corned beef sandwich on rye (what I like to eat in New York), and a piece of cheesecake. I don't remember what Monika ate, but when we paid, I left a tip on the table (10% was the going rate). The waitress came after us and asked for a larger tip, so I gave her more money because I didn't want to have a scene.

Another time, I took Kim to the Big E in Springfield and she loved it, especially the horse show. I took many trips to New York on the bus from Eastern Connecticut State University. One day in the winter, I went to New York on the bus and after we got back to the university, I stepped out onto the pavement. I didn't realize the pavement was glare ice, so my first step out my foot went forward, and I fell down with my leg under me. I couldn't walk well, and the bus driver told me to get back on the bus. The driver drove me right to my door and helped me up my stairs. The next day I was okay.

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I also took many trips to Boston on the University bus, and enjoyed myself very much. Except for one trip. I decided to follow the Freedom Trail, and I continued walking and walking until I was lost. I found myself at the restaurant that was on TV, the Cheers show. I never watched it, but I knew the name so I went in and used their bathroom. Then I asked for directions back to where I came from. I made my way back to catch the bus, and then I entered a restaurant. I was cold, tired and hungry. I put in my order, and right then a couple came in and sat at the table next to me. The waitress went from my table to the couple's table. Then she took their order and brought them out their soup, bread, and drink. The waitress ignored me. I had been a waitress for many years, and that was a big "no no" to ignore a customer. I was cold, tired and hungry, so I went and complained to the manager, and finally I got my food. I never would have done this before. I invited my niece, Jessie, to go on another trip on the bus with me to Boston but she didn't want to go.

One year my mother, my niece, Martha, and I went to the Great Lakes Naval Station. My nephew, Clint Jr. was having his graduation there. We tried to take the train to the Great Lakes Naval Station, but there was a train strike, so we had to go by bus. I love to ride the bus anyway. So, we went to Chicago, got off the bus, and took another bus to the Great Lakes. It was a wonderful experience. The Navy put on a great show with all of their sailors marching in formation to the music of the Military Band. I had seen something like this before when I went to the Naval Academy for a football game (Army vs Navy). The band performed at half time. We had a wonderful time visiting with my nephew, Clint, and I was happy we were able to go for his graduation. It was quite a show.

I also took a trip to New London with my niece, Robin, and my mother. We wanted to go on the boat to Fishers Island, but we missed it. So then, I hurried with my mom and Robin to the

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Block Island boat and we got on it just before the boat was leaving, and before the boat attendants could say "no." It was a horrible ride. The ride there was okay for the first but half, but then the boat hit a "buoy." People were running around and everything seemed crazy. Robin thought they hit a real boy and she got the dry heaves. My mother kept saying, "I don't know how you are getting me back, but I'm not getting on this boat again." I was a nervous wreck. Neither of them knew how to swim, and I kept thinking, "which one should I save?" if the boat were ever to sink. Finally, the boat didn't sink, and everyone reached Block Island safe, but I was a nervous wreck all day. I couldn't eat anything.

My mother and Robin made a miraculous recovery. The very minute we stepped on the dock, they both had a turnabout. My mother and Robin were full of smiles, and as happy as anything. They both ate, and ate, and had a wonderful time, but I couldn't eat anything. All I could think of was "how am I going to get them back on the boat?" I shouldn't have worried. They both got back on the boat happy as could be, and spent the entire boat ride feeding the pigeons popcorn off the back of the boat. I, on the other hand, sat huddled on the bench and finally bought a hotdog and ate it. It was the first meal I had all day. When we got to New London, I drove all the way home listening to those two talking about what a wonderful time they had all day. Would I ever want to do that again? I don't think so.

Years later, I took my great-nephew, Nick, to Block Island by way of another bus in another town, and this trip was almost just as bad. Some of the passengers were dogs, not people. It seemed that on a certain day, people can bring their dogs to the island for a special event, and there were dozens of dogs. I like dogs, but not strange dogs. We couldn't walk around without stepping over a dog. We were more or less huddled in a corner.

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When we got there on the island, we stayed at a small beach near the dock. It was okay with Nick because he had fun playing in the sand and water all day. However, I couldn't think of anything else besides the ride back with all those dogs. Someone said it was a special day on the island for dogs, and of course, I would have to pick that day. Nick and I ate at a place near the dock, and bought a few souvenirs. Then got back on the boat for our next stop, the bus, and then home. Nick was braver than me. He pet some of the dogs and even stood at the railing for a time while I huddled next to a wall.

I am not a good traveler when I am responsible for someone else. That is why I usually travel alone. Some people can't understand how I can walk around New York City by myself, but I am happier that way, and at least I can eat whatever I want whenever I want. I do not have to worry about what someone would say or do and maybe get in trouble and because I am responsible for someone else, I cannot unwind and feel free; that is why I like being "girl alone."

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PART IV The Winter of My Life

Chapter 42: Back in the World

In the wintertime of life is when people use what they produced from the seeds of springtime, and the plant of summer that grew a flower. A Life, what you produced, is the fruit that grew from the flower. No one ever knows what lies ahead.

I was still working in an office downtown and decided that I needed a change, so I went to work at Surrel's Colonial House for lunches and went to work at the American Thread Company in mill number four from three o'clock in the afternoon until eleven o'clock at night. It was tough. For the first three weeks, I had to take rug yarn off a machine and no one told me to spray the cone with silicone, so I was wrecking my chest and my fingers. I had band-aids and many bandages on my fingers because they bled so much. I cried every night. I should have quit the first night but I stuck it out.

One day, one of my old neighbors, Cichons, who lived next door to Muriel and Barbara Bergeron, who lived across the street from me on Ash Street, came to me and happened to be a boss. I put up my hands and said to him, "Sammy, look what they're doing to me." So he got me another job. This job was taking baby yarn off, and that wasn't too bad. Then they took me off that and had me take full trays of racks and bring them to the ladies for them to put the paper wrapping on and that was heavy work. You had to be fast and I couldn't even go to the bathroom so they gave me another job. I was then cutting stacks of paper with a big paper cutter, but I couldn't even move the cutter, so I said to the guy, "Get me a box to step on so I can move the cutter down." He said, "Get out of here. I'm not having you get hurt in my shop."

By then I had worked there for three months and it was a bitter cold winter. I had to walk from down back, cross over the bridge, walk up Main Street, past all the mills and walk quite a

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ways home. I worked from three o'clock in the afternoon until eleven o'clock at night. One night when I got to Thread Mill Square, a policeman, Ronald Burnham, stopped and said, "Get in. It is five below zero and I can't see you walking home." Then he said into his phone, "Don't make book on this lady. She's a friend of mine." So, he gave me a ride home. I was lucky that it was a friend that saw me. I quit the job after that.

As it was my habit to walk around my block for a job, I ended up at the Italian Garden Restaurant. I knew the guy, Al, because we lived in the same house at 52 Ash Street years ago, so he hired me to make pizzas. Mama, the lady in charge, said I wouldn't last a week because I was so skinny. I weighed a hundred pounds. So I made pizzas and kept getting burned. I burned the top of my hand on the top of the oven and I burned my fingers on the hot pans and I even burned my foot by dropping hot pizza on it. There was no time for sitting down as we were busy all the time. I fooled Mama because I lasted a year making pizza and almost thirteen years there altogether. When the waitress quit, they gave me the job and got a new pizza maker.

When I brought my first pizza out to the dining room to two girls, I slid it off the pan as nice as anything, right onto the table, because I was used to sliding the pizza into a pizza box. The girls didn't mind, and ate it anyway.

In the meantime, Mama would make me a big dinner every night, after eight o'clock and in just a short time, I gained forty pounds. I lost it after awhile, but for awhile I was fat. When I went to work there, I was a vegetarian, but she made me eat sausage, veal cutlet, and what she called Italian beef stew. One night, the seams of my jacket split and she fixed it with pins.

Mama was very smart. One day when I was walking down Main Street near the Mills, I was counting breaths like I did when I was playing the cornet – ten breaths in, and ten breaths out –

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suddenly, I had such sharp pains in my chest that it was like I was being stabbed with a giant knife. It was in September and the air didn't feel cold to me but evidently it was cold enough, so I should have kept my mouth shut. I hurried back to the Italian Garden and told Mama about my pain, but not about my breathing and she said right away, "You have a cold in your lungs. Don't worry, it will be gone in three weeks." And it was. I still take her word about "three weeks" when anything happens to me.

Another thing she was smart about was when I carried something heavy and got pains in my chest. She would say: "Sit down a minute and drink a little water and it will go away. It is only muscle." And it did go away. I am lucky I had such a smart lady to work for. It is in believing the truth (Jesus) that we are saved.

It was fun working there, and I met lots of nice people. The people from the Willimantic Chronicle came there every day and had a birthday party for whoever's birthday it was. They gave me a lot of good write-ups – front pages too. Sometimes when they ordered a pizza, I would put candles on the pizza for the birthday person. The workers at the Chronicle gave me the honor of writing me up, on the front page more than once. I appreciated that. Pam Shorey called me "Renaissance Woman" in 1982 and also showed my button pins collection I had in the Willimantic Library.

In 1983, when I was the 2nd Cupid of Romantic Willimantic, they gave me the front page again. Mark Swetz put the picture of me throwing out the first ball at ECSU's girl's softball game in a few places and a friend named Ted put me in a paper showing what people over age forty can do.

In 1983, when it was time to pick a cupid for Romantic Willimantic, John Lescoe, the Mayor picked me because he got a lot of phone calls from people who I helped – either by

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buying them food or listening to them or lending them money.



Claire as "Romantic Willimantic"

Bill Pike, the Editor at the Chronicle, came down in the afternoon and gave me a huge picture of me as Cupid, which he liked better than the one in the paper. I put this picture in a gold frame. I had a lot of other write-ups, and valentines from a lot of the business people, valentines children made, and some special ones from the Shorey sisters: Kate, Sandy and Peggy. I certainly did not expect it, but I appreciated it and I take it to mean that that is the fruit I produced from my flower.

The same year, in 1983, I was asked to throw out the first ball at the ECSU girl's baseball game when they were playing for the Nationals. I think Clyde (Chubby Washburn) was a coach that year, and maybe Bill Sayers also. All the girls on the team signed a softball for me, calling me "Miss Willi" and I gave the ball to my niece, Monika (who looked beautiful in an old fashioned dress with a poke bonnet) who was sitting in the bleachers behind the fence.

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Claire throwing out the first pitch

Well, a coach (not Washburn or Sayers) asked me for the ball to be thrown out. I said, “I don’t have the ball.” And one thing or another, like Abbott and Costello, he insisted I had the ball and I had to go to the bleachers and get my ball and give it to him. He gave it back to me and I threw out the ball that was supposed to be used for the beginning of the game. However, they had to give it back to me because it was mine and believe me the crowd roared with laughter, and so did the players, so the game started on a good note even though the ECSU girls lost.

I was taken to the Eastern Connecticut State University musical by the Manager of Willimantic and his family. When the conductor, Bruce Bellingham, invited me on the stage, I talked to him about the Strauss music he was playing, because that was always my favorite. He was going to play five Strauss Waltzes, so that was special for me. Afterwards, he gave me a kiss on the cheek. I reminded him about it one day years later when I saw him at the Textile

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Museum, and he said he didn't forget.

Chapter: The Italian Garden Restaurant

The Italian Garden Restaurant was the stopping off place for many people. It was the "in" place for the whole town. Whenever anyone wanted to have a party, that is where it was. The restaurant was for both kids or grownups. The same people would come to the Italian Garden Restaurant morning, noon and night. I know and remember because I took pictures of everyone and still have them.



The fruit of the spirit is peace and joy, and after my many years of reading the Holy Bible

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and studying, I came back into the midst of people being "a little friend of all the world." This is what Kim says in my all time favorite storybook, written by my favorite author, Rudyard Kipling. When people would say to me, "How can you be so nice to those people when they are so rude to you?" My answer was "Because they come in here probably tired, hungry, and maybe cold if it is winter, and after they have a drink, even if it is water, they relax a little and feel better. Then they eat and 'all is well'." I carried a piece of paper in my pocket to remind myself to be nice. I also tell myself when something is not so good to let it 'passover'.

I know and remember mostly everyone because I took pictures of my customers from July of 1982 (Solomon Nagassi's birthday) until February, 1983 Valentine's Day. There are one thousand six hundred and fifty pictures. It is easy to remember people when you have their pictures. I would take their order, bring the food, put it on the table and then I would take my camera (which I won at a "Street Fest") out of my pocket and take a picture. Some people would stand on the street, watching me work, or so I was told.

Many of my customers became my friends and among them were two brothers who came from another town. They loved to bring their friends there. Raolf Pettingil and his brother were the first I knew who used the Willimantic River for canoeing (later I learned that Scott Beatie was a river boater too). One day, the brothers came in the Italian Garden and said, "Where can we park our canoe?" So I said, "It is ok to park in our backyard," so they did. Then they came in to eat. A little while later, I received a post card from England and it was signed by the "canoe boys."

One day the young men mentioned that their folks were from North Stonington. Well, as usual, I cried when anything about my grandmother was mentioned. She had come from North Stonington. One of the boys, Raoulf, got on his motorcycle, in the rain, and rode down to

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North Stonington and brought me back the wedding certificate of my grandmother's mother and father. I had told him that when I went to the town hall to get my grandmother's death certificate that it read "mother unknown" so now I knew who my grandmother's mother was.

My grandmother never had a stone on her grave as she was buried as a pauper and the town does not give memorial stones. I never blamed my mother because we were poor but my grandmother had another daughter and a son. I also was horrified that the certificate read, Father Lorenzo Dow Knapp and Mother Unknown. Everyone knows the mother, at least I would assume so. From this day forward, I wanted to know who my grandmother's family was and this was how I got started doing genealogical research. I was the one who finally bought my grandmother a stone which incidentally is quite near my mother's final resting place

It pays to be in the right place, for another of my customers was a lovely lady, Marilyn "Randy" Landry, wife of Arthur Landry, who turned out to be the secretary of the Mayflower. When I told her about my grandmother and the name of her parents, this lady told me that her parents also came from North Stonington and that we were related far back. Then she was nice enough to give me all of our ancestors who came over on the Mayflower, and I only had to put in three generations: my mother, her parents and her grandparents.

So, because of one nice young man, Raouf Pettingill, and a sweet lady, Marilyn Landry, I have my family tree. This started me on a wonderful journey. In order to trace family trees it is a good idea to know history. Because of this, I finally made it to college to study history and philosophy, which is my second love. Of course, that was a few years later, but I spend lots of time going around to certain libraries and graveyards to further my knowledge of my family tree. I have a lot of people to thank for helping me in my search, especially my nephew Steven Grylls, who drove me to all the cemeteries with his three children in tow, Stevie Jr., Monika, and

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Amanda.

Incidentally, my friend, Marilyn Landry, was a dance teacher at Eastern Connecticut State University for many years. A lot of the Eastern Connecticut State University people came to the restaurant and brought their families too.

Dr. David Roth and his wife came often and he said I had history in the making with my photographs, and he wished I could put the names of everyone on the pictures but I couldn't. I have given my pictures to John's Frame Shop to be put on his web site, Ten Town Buzz (www.tentownbuzz.com) by Michael Ricquier.

There was a time when hundreds of Eastern Students came to the restaurant at night for beer. There would be twenty-five students outside the door waiting to come in, and inside would be wall-to-wall young people. I couldn't get to the tables. A lot of the students called me "Mrs. IG," which was short for Italian Garden, and some of them wrote to me after they left.



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Claire as “Ms. IG” when she worked at the Italian Garden Restaurant

There was a group that frequented the back room for parties, and when the restaurant was to be closed down, they wore black arm bands. When I started writing this story, I didn’t want to use any names because I didn’t want to leave anyone out, but the professor said I should use some names, so I have used a few for special remembrances. Tony and Kathy Clark loved the back room and the music and the people.

In the winter of 1983, I fell on ice and broke my wrist, and had it in a half caste. During that time, Kathy and Tony Clark cooked a whole Christmas dinner and brought it to my house for me to share with my family, and they went somewhere else for dinner. They and their children and grandchildren are exceptional people.

Kathy made a beautiful quilt for her husband, Tony, out of his t-shirts that signified his life, and I am going to use her idea and make a quilt for all of my endeavors: I walked about five times, did Buck A Cup, swam at ECSU for Cancer, and walked at the high school one night with Willimantic Town Hall, rode a bike a little ways, worked as docent at Windham Textile Museum for a couple of years, including one year at the Big E; and worked at Brand Picnics for four years. I have several other t-shirts (one from the therapists when I broke my same wrist a second time) that mean something to me for my quilt.

The Italian Garden Restaurant was like a home to many people and no matter where I go, there is always someone who says: “I know you from the restaurant.”

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Chapter: Plainfield Dog Track

I had been working in the kitchen at the Italian Garden Restaurant for a year, so I seldom knew what was going on in the front, in the restaurant or bar. Mama Todaro, the owner, on the other hand, always knew exactly what was going on out front (as though she had long distance telepathy from so many years in the business).

One time Mama and I went out into the dining room to stop a fight and I got knocked on my rear end when one of the guys stepped back quickly. Mostly though, I did not know what was going on, as we were very busy and I made the pizzas and grinders. Besides, Mama believed in being busy every minute. She was right.

Then one day, the waitress quit, and I was lucky enough to take her place. I had been working in various restaurants since I was seventeen years old, and since my grandfather owned restaurants, I grew up in one. There is no place better in the world to meet people than a restaurant, because even at restaurants, travelers need to stop to eat. Often, it was easy to know who was a stranger in town.

Being out in the front, I finally got to know what was going on in the world, and what other people were doing. I had come back into the world of society after my little retreat from the "world" for eleven years, so I had to get back into the swing of things. But when anyone asked me to go somewhere, I always said, "No, thanks."

Then on one Tuesday, which was my half day off, John, the bartender asked me if I wanted to take a ride to the Plainfield Dog Track. Of course, I said, "No, thanks." That was my first reaction and then when I thought it over, I said, "Ok, I'll go." So I called my mother, who I lived with, and told her I was going to the dog track with someone I worked with. She probably wished she was going too, because one of her daily rituals that I often used to do as well was to

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pick racing horses from the newspaper that raced at the race track. I had gone to Yonkers Race Track when I lived in Rockland Lake, New York and loved it.

It was my habit on Tuesdays to make myself a salami grinder and eat half with a cup of soup to drink, and eat the other half for supper. So I took my grinder and ate it on the way to the track, and that began a Tuesday ritual for me. After we parked the car and walked through the parking lot, which was full of cars, I got really excited. This was something new for me and I just knew I was going to like it. We paid to go in, bought programs, and found a place to sit where we could see the track well. Even though I knew a lot of the people there who were my customers at the restaurant, I was bashful. I looked around trying to see what was what. There was a food stand, a place to buy beer, and televisions on the wall for people who wanted to sit inside. I was surprised to see a lot of older people there. Some were in wheelchairs. There weren't any children, because the rule said I person had to be eighteen to get in.

John was one of the regulars going to the track. He gave me some tips on how to bet. I am not a gambler and hate to lose my money, so I was only there for fun. Besides, I was a two dollar better and could not lose much. Or so I thought. The night went by so fast and there were fifteen races. Before I knew it, we were on the way home and I had lost thirty dollars. It was money I was saving, and I was really upset and mad at myself all the way home. It took away from the fun I had. So, I had a good talk with myself and decided if I went again, I could not ever get angry.

I do not know how or why, but I fell in love with the dog track and all the dogs. It was the best time I ever had in life, barring none. I do not know how I picked the dogs the first night (certainly not by name or number or colors). You would have thought I would never go again after losing thirty dollars. Well, I decided to set aside thirty dollars every week so I could go to

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the track with John. For me it was a challenge because I am somebody who wants to know how things work, so I bought myself some handicapping books and got down to business. I studied night after night until three or four o'clock in the morning. It was a challenge trying to figure out what was the best dog, what was the best time, what box did a certain dog like, which dog liked the short run or the longer run, which one hated to run in the mud (because the dog in front threw mud up in the face of the dog behind), which dogs were leaders, which dogs were followers, or which dogs liked to run together. This was the biggest challenge I ever had and I worked hard at handicapping the races.

I got to know the mother's and father's dogs, their litters and their different kennels. Tim-Tom Kennel was my favorite. One night while working at the restaurant, some new customers came in. They sat down in a booth in the front part of the restaurant, and ordered all kinds of food. There was so much food on the table that there was hardly any room for a glass of beer I brought out for the gentlemen. When I put the glass of beer down, it was too near the edge of the table, and the cold beer spilled in the man's lap. Instead of him getting angry, he laughed and everyone else laughed too. From that night on, we were good friends, and believe it or not, this man, whose name was Eddie, worked at the Tim-Tom Kennels at Plainfield Dog Track.

So this man, Eddie, and his wife Helen, and their friends came to the Italian Garden Restaurant once a week to eat. But from that first night on, they sat in the back dining room because the wooden tables were larger. Some nights they came in just at eight o'clock, and that is when the kitchen closed. I could not let them go somewhere else to look for food because other restaurants in the area also used to close their kitchens at eight o'clock at night. The cook would take off his apron and go sit in the bar to rest awhile and watch television, so I would become a cook. I had started out making pizzas, because I knew how to. After bringing them

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their drinks, I made a large, everything on it pizza and put it in the oven. Then I made them an antipasto salad and served them that while their pizza cooked. They really appreciated what I did for them and we were friends.

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Chapter: Eastern Connecticut State University

When the Italian Garden Restaurant closed, I was out of work for six months and one day. I was visiting the university, and I went to Snack East for a spaghetti dinner. My friend, Alvie (who I used to work with before) was working there. I said to Alvie, "You're lucky, you have such a nice job." On the very next Sunday, two ladies came to my door and asked if I could come to work at the snack bar. It seemed that a person working there just up and quit.

So I said, "Right now?" And they replied, "No, tomorrow." So, I said "okay." I was waiting to hear from a guy at the UConn Cafeteria for me to go to work there with my friend, Rose Haddad, but when he called the next day, I said I already have a job. So, I started work in the snack bar at ECSU for nine years.

I was fifty-seven at the time. I worked in the snack bar during the winter, and in the cafe during the summer, or whenever they needed me. When I turned sixty-two, I wanted my Social Security check every month, so I signed up. I expected to only work the time the government allowed me to, but I put in so much overtime between both cafe and snack bar, that I went over the amount. Therefore, I had to quit for a while when the government said they were going to take money from me. If I had it to do over again, I would say, "Okay, take what you need, as long as you give me a portion." They scared me because I did not know any better. For a few months, I had no money and had to wash dishes, pots, and pans at Alexander's Restaurant for food only. I couldn't work for money or collect unemployment. I also worked at Tsin Tsin Chinese Restaurant for food only.

One day while I was at Alexander's, I got a phone call from Debby Jones at ECSU. She had a job for me (I could go back to work then) in the Registrar's Office, so I worked there for two years. Actually they made a job for me - purging the old files from way back when the

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college first started. I went around those files five times, according to certain dates, and at one time they gave me a young boy to help. From there, we brought the files down to the old Nathan Hale building where the college used for some offices and storage.

Later on, I also went back to Food Service. I worked for food service for a total of nine years. One of the food services was Marriott. One day when I was in New York City, I saw the Marriott Hotel and thought I would go to the restaurant on the top, and look over the city. I forgot I didn't like heights. I got in a glass elevator on the outside of the building. When the elevator got very high up, to the 39th floor, the other people in the elevator got out, leaving me alone. Another thing I did not think about - it was a hotel and the people who got off had rooms there. I was too scared to touch any buttons on the elevator. I was in that elevator for what seemed to be a long time before a man got in and I told him what happened. He said, "Do you want to go to the restaurant on top?" I replied, "No, thanks, just get me down. I want my feet on the ground."

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St. Paul's Soup Kitchen

I have been eating at the Isaiah 58 (deal your bread to the hungry and your health will speedily increase) St. Paul's Church Covenant (the Promises of God as revealed in the Scriptures) Soup Kitchen since June of 1983, when the Italian Garden Restaurant I worked at closed. I never had to buy food or cook food. It was the sensible thing for me to eat at the Kitchen, as I have lived on the same block for many years.

Many, many of the Volunteers at the Kitchen were my customers at the Italian Garden Restaurant, and I always feel that they like it because now the tables have turned and they are serving me. That makes us both feel good. I thank all the volunteers who come, especially those who give up their holidays. I feel a connection of good will towards all the people who eat at the Kitchen. Thank you, all you volunteers as we could not do anything without you all, and nor could we do anything without the director Paul, the secretary Shirley, manager Tom, or the lady chef Pam.

The volunteers and the people who eat at the Kitchen are like a family circle, and like a family circle, they all do their part and work together for the good for everyone. We have volunteers who come from as far away as St. Andrew's Church in Colchester and Hebron, and St. Thomas Aquinis from Storrs (Fran and Ed), young people from the schools, and even the big sports guys, like my friend Jordan of the Rugby team from Eastern Connecticut State University.

Willimantic is fortunate that the undercurrent of our town is run by church people. There are 39 churches of WAIM (Windham Area Interfaith Ministry), and there is the No-Freeze Shelter (David Fenn and Tom McNally), the Holy Family Home and Shelter, the 1st Baptist Church, and many people who are working to see if there isn't something we can do to put a stop to homelessness, no matter how long it takes.

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One of my favorite sayings is, "If two horses are pulling a wagon and one horse wants to go left and one horse wants to go right, the wagon isn't going anywhere." So I would hope that all the people of the wonderful city would try to go in the right direction.

Chapter 43: Washington D.C.

It was in the second spring in my life that I had my last journey. This journey was to see my great nephew, Stevie, Jr., his wife, Holly, her mother, Sheila and friend, Mac in West Virginia.

It started off as a beautiful day on July 26, 2005. I got a ride with Richard Murphy, to Hartford, Connecticut. It was early in the morning when I boarded the train with my six pieces of luggage (never again) for a one week visit. Some friendly people had to help me on the train, by helping to put my luggage up on the racks and down again. When I reached Washington, D.C., the first leg of my journey was to get all that luggage off the train. I had to carry all six pieces of luggage from the train into the station.

As soon as I got in the train station, I searched for the luggage room and left all my stuff there except for one shopping bag with a handle that I was carrying to the monuments. I had flags, roses and names to look for, as well as other people's loved ones (Skip and Sue) on the veterans' memorials, and my half-brother, Reggie. I also had to look for my mother, my and my sister Martha's name on the Second World War memorial. We had done our effort for the war by working at Pioneer Parachutes. My sister, Martha, worked as "Rosie the Riveter," at Electric Boat during the war. I sent one hundred dollars for the building of the Memorial.

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I walked half the way down Constitution Plaza and decided to go back the way I came, because it was too far and I only had four hours until the train to West Virginia. But the way was blocked and there were policemen standing around on the streets. The President had called a "red alert," which I might wrongly add. It was July 26, 2005 and Constitution Plaza was blocked, so I couldn't go back the way I came.

I had to go another way and found myself lost in Washington, D.C. for two hours. I walked and walked and walked until finally I saw the young policeman I had met before when I came out of the train station. I told him, "I'm really a tourist" (even though I looked like a bag lady, wearing dungarees, T-shirt, head kerchief, sneakers and carrying what looked like a bag of clothes [my hooded sweatshirt]). Luckily, it was the same young policeman I saw when I came out of the station before. I said, "Am I on the way to the monuments?" and he replied, "Yes, and right over there, you can see the Capitol."

It was a very hot day, and noontime, and I did not have a hat on, nor sunglasses, so when I got halfway to the monuments, I decided to turn around and walk back to the station. I had been wearing a hooded sweatshirt because of the air conditioner on the train, so of course I took it off as soon as I got outside and pushed it into my shopping bag, ripping the bag and pinning it. I had a kerchief on my head, and with my torn bag showing clothes, I looked like a bag lady.

By the time I saw the policeman again, I had put a piece of paper in my pocket saying when I was going to Ridgely, West Virginia, and the telephone number in case anything happened to me. At one point, I had to cross over a highway (where cars could speed right in the middle of Washington, D.C.), and the policeman told me I had overshot the train station by two blocks. He told me that I was on the other side of the train station, so I had to ask some men working there how to get in the station. I finally made it back into the station and asked two men

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at one of the counters how to get to my train and they started joking with me because I guess I looked funny. I could hardly wait for the train to take me to West Virginia.

I had a wonderful time visiting and actually fell in love with Cumberland, Maryland, which is just across the bridge from Ridgely, West Virginia. I took pictures for two days, Saturday (with lots of people), and Sunday, a quiet day. I took these beautiful pictures back to Willimantic and showed them to everyone. I showed them what a town could do after Walmart wiped them out. It seemed that they were made at Walmarts and everyone came back to Cumberland and made a beautiful town. Everyone also came downtown to shop and visit with their neighbors, as there were plenty of outdoor places to sit, talk, and eat.

After my nice week of visiting was over, I was to take the train back to Hartford for my friend, Richard Murphy, to pick me up. Well, I think it was still about the "red alert" because Sheila brought me to the train station for my 8 A.M. train back to Washington, D.C., and the train did not show up until twelve noon. A guy waiting was going to be in big trouble because he was going to miss his flight to California.

After I got back to the train station in Washington, D.C., I had another delay, and I had to call Murphy's house in Willimantic every time they changed my schedule, three times. Luckily, I was able to leave some of my luggage in West Virginia, for my nephew, Steven to bring back as my family went by car. I am not a good rider, so I took the train.

At the station, they had to change my tickets for me to go to New Haven instead of Hartford, and they gave us the oldest railroad car in existence. The train had red felt or something like that, and I couldn't sleep because it was too itchy and had overhead lights that the conductor said stayed on all the time. Then, another train on the track next to us had some kind of a problem, so our train stopped to help them and all their passengers came on our train.

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In New Haven, I had to take a cab back to Hartford where Richard picked me up early in the morning, and I fell asleep riding home in the car. I think it was eight o'clock in the morning when I finally made it home.

Last summer when I was getting ready to go to West Virginia, I fell and broke my wrist, little finger, and hurt my ribs so I couldn't go. This year I am going to wait until fall, October or so, to go and see the Veteran's Monuments. This time, I don't think the new President will call a red alert.

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Chapter 44: A friendly voice

For awhile, I volunteered answering the telephone for people who needed a friendly voice to listen to them. It was incognito in another town. It was at a hospital, and I worked nights. Many normal people can get depressed and only need a friendly voice to talk - no faces, no names.

Sometimes, people get a phobia and no one knows why. I had a special person who couldn't come outside for a while. It was ruining his life, but after talking to me for a time, he ventured outside. He actually got a job and did well.

One day, on his way to work, he had an accident. He ran off the road, was trapped in his car, and had to be extracted by the Jaws of Life. He was so happy to report to me that he did not panic. He thought of all the things I had talked to him about, and he remained calm until help came.

It just so happened that I was in the hospital room at exactly the same time as the accident occurred. I wasn't usually there during the day, but I had stopped in to get something of mine. I might have been thinking of the guy at the exact time, and so I called. It was a minor miracle, but I was glad I was able to help him.

As I like to say: "God works in his own mysterious ways."