

Monday, July 14, 2008

Revised 2<sup>nd</sup> writing for PLWP

Please bless this piece, as I am done with it. It serves my purpose.

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There are three cedar chests in my home. None of them were originally mine. One was my mother-in-law's hope chest. It contains blankets, quilts and afghans my mother made, and my wedding dress. That chest is upstairs and hard to get to. My mom's hope chest is in my living room. My grandmother's hope chest, my favorite, is in our dining room. My maternal grandmother's cedar chest is just that—cedar, with brass decoration and handles. It is four feet long by eighteen inches wide. Let me tell you, it is heavy. I would like to tell my grandmother about her hope chest. . .

Dear Grandmother,

It's been 37 years since you've been gone. It's been 17 years since I inherited your cedar chest. That treasure trove had not been opened in 20 years when I first got my hands on it. Why was I the one chosen to do so?

Yes, Grandmother, I was entrusted with a "Pandora's box" by your daughter, my Aunt Bernie—a box of what (I think) your children believed to contain a history of troubles. It was me, curious and fascinated by your stories years ago—Oh, the ghost stories, and the family curse!—Why did Mom tell you to "shush?"

Yep, it was me who wanted to open the box to see what I could find.

I was hoping to find a copy of Uncle Herbert's published sheet music. I wanted a framed, original copy to hang over my own piano. Aunt Bernie had your cedar chest in her home. She said, "Sure, come take a look. I don't know what you'll find." You see, Grandmother, your four children had never opened your cedar chest since you died in 1971.

I was looking for a piece of sheet music in 1991, and what I found was a genealogist's dream. Grandmother, you had collected and stored away six generations'-worth of primary sources of family history! I realized I found a prize when I picked up your mother's gold pocket watch and her inscribed gold bracelet. I did know that your father was a watchmaker and jeweler. Oh, and, oh my, there was a business card and receipt booklet from his business in Falls City, Nebraska! Now, I had proof. I couldn't stop. Aunt Bernie was downstairs in her kitchen, laughing at me and all my exclamations.

Yes, dear Grandmother Ruth, I found all your letters and photos. I learned that your grandmother emigrated from Switzerland and married before the Civil War. Yes, I know, now, that your grandfather left your grandmother, Elizabeth, with a baby girl in St. Joseph, Missouri, in order to fight for the North in the War Between the States. You had five children. Yes, I knew that; but I didn't know much about Baby Ruth who died hours after she was born. You had received an advertisement from Wrigley's Gum telling you how healthy gum chewing was for children. Only, you had received that ad package after Baby Ruth was gone. You kept the mailer, complete with a stick of gum. I have it now. It's in my family scrapbook.

Oh, I learned immensely the fall of 1991. I saw the way you had collected and organized the contents of your cedar chest; you had intended for the documents, photos, and objects to tell your family's story. After days, hours, weeks, a month of combing, I came onto an accordion folder marked "scrapbook." You were speaking to me, Grandmother. Yes, I knew what to do. You had already laid the groundwork. All I had to do was make it look presentable.

Well, your cedar chest is mine now—in a prominent spot in my dining room. Because of your wisdom and forethought to posterity, I have two volumes of family history presentable for perusing by anyone who is interested. I am asked to bring these volumes to family get-togethers. Walt and your grandson, Pat, are especially interested. It was Walter, your only son, who gave me Elizabeth Shettley's, your grandmother's, Lutheran confirmation document (dated

1842, from a church in Switzerland, written in some weird Germanic language)—Walt had confiscated that document printed on fine linen paper (When? I don't know.) He did, however, have it stored away in a shoe box in your husband's (Ray's) family home in Kansas. That ancient document is now preserved.

By the way, I have taught my family and friends about what I found in your "Pandora's box." They know why the chest is where it is—near the northwest exit of our home. They know to pull it out with themselves in the event of fire. Mom's cedar chest is near the north exit. It contains photo albums and ephemera documenting my own 32 years of marriage and family. I am assured that both chests will be saved in an exit from disaster. The third chest-- the one containing "stuff," may one day hold priceless things. When that happens, it, too, will be moved to a more convenient spot.

Aunt Bernie has passed on. She gave me your gift. Please thank her for that gift she gave me back in 1991. I am eternally grateful.

Your granddaughter,

*Jeanne*