

A JOURNEY HOME A Legacy of Love

From the pictures that I had seen of her as a young girl, there was no question that she was beautiful. Indeed, she must have been one of the loveliest girls of her day. Now, she was coming home—home to Hannibal, Missouri, where she had lived as a child, and grown to womanhood. She was 92 years old at the time, and there were still ample traces of the beauty of her youth.

It was to be her grand trip, and my heart welled up as I landed at the Quincy-Hannibal Airport. The countryside was very green, even though it had experienced one of the coldest, bleakest winters in years. Nevertheless, there were no signs of winter present now. From above, the rich farmlands of the Midwest spread out before us.

She met me at the gate, along with my aunt Betty—her sister's daughter, and my mother's sister—and she looked radiant. She had that wonderful, warm smile and presence about her that exuded love and caring, and youth. After a short bit, collecting the bags, etc., we took off for Hannibal by car. The countryside was as lush and green on the ground, as it had looked from the air and while taxiing in. As we drove toward town, she was alive with memories of the past, yet possessing a firm hand on the present.

Unlike others who tended to linger with yesterday, even at a much earlier age, such was not the case with her. In no way did she look her age, nor did she often look back, much less with regret. Rather, she looked almost twenty years younger, and had the vitality and spark of someone in her seventies or less. Put succinctly, she was alive and vibrant, and it was fun to be with her.

My aunt Betty had rented a bright yellow, brand new racy Mercury Capri that fit our traveling companion to a T. In fact, as we were preparing to get in, she noted that she had always loved "cute little cars".

As we drove to Hannibal, she remarked again and again how the town had changed. However, what struck me most was her statement that there was no one left in the town from her family, even though there were three dear old friends there, albeit somewhat younger in age. If there was any sadness present, she gave no hint of it for she was in love with life as it was, and the past was the past—flowered with cherished memories, but no more than that.

After touring Hannibal briefly, it was clear that the town lived up to my expectations. I had heard stories about Hannibal since I was old enough to remember; and at times, I felt almost saturated hearing so much about a little town, somewhere along the Mississippi River, in the Midwest. I had been raised in Los Angeles which is a long way from Missouri, both geographically and psychologically, or so it seemed.

My mother and her sister (who was with me on this trip) had come to Hannibal for brief periods of time when they were young. In those days it was the custom, at least in our family, for young people to move in with older members of the family—aunts, uncles and other relatives; what is now called the "extended family"—especially when times got tough. In the case of my mother and her sister, this is exactly what had happened. My grandfather was a gambler of sorts, in oil and other ventures; and when things were not going well, he and his family simply moved in with my maternal grandmother's parents. Since my now deceased maternal grandmother and the lovely lady with Betty and me on this trip were sisters, she had much to tell and we had much to learn.

We saw the house where they had lived, with remnants of a stable out back, which conjured up memories of happy times and people who were merely passing references in my own memory. The day before I arrived, Betty noted, the two of them had stopped by the old house; and to their disappointment, the place was now a run-down boarding house. When we drove by, however, it looked stately and handsome, as if holding its head high in keeping with its past dignity and decorum.

At 92, she could describe the neighborhood, almost house-by-house, giving intimate details of the families who had lived here, and how they played a part in Hannibal as she knew it.

She was 20 when she left, which was some 72 years before our trip and shortly after the turn of the century. What a grand town it must have been, if it lived up to even half of the memories she drew to mind.

After getting a thorough tour of the town, we headed for our motel to freshen up and relax before going out for the evening with her three friends. While her custom was to take afternoon naps in Los Angeles, where she lived now, this ritual was dispensed with today, for she was raring to go. Such vitality brought back recollections to Betty of the trip the two of them had taken to Spain several years before. After their return to L.A., even though more than 30 years separated them in terms of age, I remember Betty noting that it had been hard for her to keep up. Indeed, today, no sooner had I gone to my room at the motel, then I was expected to be ready to leave, to be picked up by one of her friends, and then off to the local country club for dinner.

The friend lived in a hilly section of Hannibal, and had an old and stately—if somewhat shabby—house which must have been resplendent in its early years. On our way to her house, I was told of the woman's past; nothing sordid, I assure you. It seems that her now deceased husband had once been in love with Sally, our companion. Since Sally had many eligible suitors at the time, she apparently did not take the gentleman's affections too seriously, or was simply not interested. In any event, she never married him, and we were now on our way to visit the woman who did.

Next door to the house which the woman occupied was a large mansion which had been built by her father, a lumber baron in his time, and reputed to be the wealthiest man in Hannibal. While I had seen many mansions in Los Angeles and elsewhere which surpassed this stately home in terms of architecture and elegance, there was no doubt that for Hannibal, this was a mansion.

We delayed our tour through the building, which was now open to the public, because we were already late for dinner. You see, Sally is very punctual, prim and proper; and we were "expected" at "the club". To be late is a sin which is seldom committed when one is escorting

her. When we arrived, we met her other two friends, a husband and wife who volunteered their time in the interests of tourism, on a regular basis, at the Mark Twain Museum in Hannibal. They were delightful people, and we spent a lovely evening reminiscing about the "old days", and simply getting acquainted.

During much of the evening, I tried to get photos of the group from almost every angle imaginable. Such an effort and imposition was justified on the ground that the trip was a long one, and we might never be back again, certainly not in the foreseeable future. In the final analysis, to my regret, as I realized when I returned home to Washington, D.C., my sophistication in photography left much to be desired and produced few respectable photographs. Thus, even though I spent a great deal of the evening posing shots, instead of listening, there were only a few photos of distinction; and I regretted my choice later on. In retrospect, I would have much preferred to have joined in.

The husband and wife who joined us were about my mother's age; and if she was alive, she would have been 77 years old. Even at that age, our guests were handsome and lovely; and the husband had a wonderful twinkle in his eyes. They were a great couple; and if she had been my age (or close to it), I might have fallen in love with her, or certainly understood why somebody else had.

Thus, these two old friends, along with the widow of Sally's beau, formed what was left of her ties to Hannibal, sparse as they were. Everyone else was gone, either deceased or having moved away. Unfortunately, most of her friends had simply been buried long ago; and to me there was a certain sadness about it all. Nonetheless, if she was ever sad or lonesome, she certainly never showed it. In my presence, she had only expressed grief (or anything approaching it) twice, once when my mother died and then again when her husband Collie passed away the year before this trip. Those two losses were very hard on her, and she often took me aside to reminisce about the old times with her loved ones and to shed a tear or two. Nevertheless, she quickly caught herself and turned to the present or the future, and away from the past.

The next day, we visited the old mansion which we had seen briefly the night before. First, however, we had to tour the smaller house next door, where the widow lived. It seems that this house had served as the home of the widow's family before the "great house" was built. Indeed, shortly before construction started, the smaller house had been moved from its original site, where the mansion now stands, to its present location less than a hundred yards away. That morning, we saw pictures of various phases of the moving process; and frankly, I was surprised that sophisticated techniques for moving houses existed in those days, just as I had been surprised to find a garden sprinkler system when I visited Pompeii. I was reminded that things were not quite as primitive as I had imagined.

After the woman's father died, the mansion was maintained by his family until it simply became too difficult and costly to keep. His wife and daughter (our hostess today) moved next door to the family's original house where they lived for many years in less grandeur, but with a certain degree of tradition and elegance for Hannibal. The larger house remained in the widow's family for twenty years until it was sold to friends who opened it to the public, and charged a modest fee for doing so.

As with so many grand houses of the period, it was much too costly to maintain privately; and based on some quick financial calculations which I made as we toured the house, it was unlikely that the whole operation was economically viable today, even as a tourist facility. Indeed, as we went through the house, I got the distinct impression that we were the only ones who had been through it in some time.

One could certainly imagine grand events taking place there many years before. When Sally and her friend were girls, Mark Twain visited the house as a guest; and these two girls and their dates were on hand to catch glimpses of him. There in the music room, with its Chinese motif and elaborate wood paneling, Mark Twain had been received, much the same as a returning monarch, for Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn and Hannibal were immortalized in the pages he wrote.

On the second floor of the house were several massive bedrooms for the children, and one for each of the parents, who apparently lived in opposite corners of the house. On the third floor was a ballroom and a small classroom where the woman and her sisters had tended to their studies, with a governess, when they were young.

Sally spoke with glowing detail of the parties she had attended there, and of the fun that she and others of her age had experienced. Her eyes sparkled as she recalled those times and her friends who had assembled in the house. One could almost imagine how it must have been. What fun to transport oneself back into those times, and eavesdrop as they danced the night away. Sally must have been the belle of the ball, for certainly she was the survivor, and a lovely one at that.

Her friend took us on a tour of the home; and it was remarkable how down to earth she was, considering the advantages that she had known as a child. She was truly delightful and charming, and one could see traces of her beauty through the thick glasses which she wore today. She maintained a garden that separated the mansion from her smaller home to the side, and she took great care and pleasure in keeping this portion of the once beautiful grounds in good repair. Her pleasure showed on her face, and was etched in her countenance and demeanor.

After having toured both houses in their entirety, she graciously declined our invitation for lunch, and we went off to the Mark Twain Museum to see our other two friends from the evening before. It is said that Mark Twain's mementos reside there, and that he and his family once lived in the old house which adjoins the museum. If so, it is certain that during his childhood, he never experienced anything approaching the affluence which we had just left. Twain's home was almost a shanty, even when compared to the home Sally had lived in as a girl.

Nevertheless, the people we met this day, who managed the museum, were delightful; and they made the surroundings feel at home. A young manager, who had recently joined the museum, was very kind to us. Sally had witnessed one of Hannibal's greatest tragedies as a girl, the sinking of a large party barge in the Mississippi near the old Hannibal bridge, and he was

interested in her recollections. In any other town—certainly L.A.—this would have been a footnote in history, but in Hannibal this was news.

The museum manager was genuinely interested in her memories of the incident, because there were few if any persons around who had actually experienced the tragedy. As it happened, she and other classmates were aboard, and barely escaped from the ship before it went down. To my complete surprise, everyone in the museum seemed to be aware of the incident; and they were all grateful to Sally when she offered to donate her ticket for the voyage to the museum.

We went across the street to a small cafe for lunch. It appeared that we were the only paying customers that day. The lack of traffic was attributed to the "energy crisis" and gasoline shortages which had diminished the number of tourists who regularly visited Hannibal in recent years. Nonetheless, local merchants hoped that with the onset of summer there would be an onslaught of tourists, and that tourism would return to normal levels providing Hannibal and its environs with significant and necessary revenues.

After lunch, we drove beyond the town to another old but less resplendent mansion. Despite the local tourist literature, we almost passed by without stopping, for it was hardly noticeable from the road. To my surprise, however, the details throughout the house were impressive. Period pieces of furniture, fabrics and other touches gave one a special appreciation of its times.

Sally loved every moment of her visit, and allowed as how she had passed this home many times with her parents and others on their way to her father's farm farther out the road. As was true of families such as hers, they often had a country home outside of town which was visited only on weekends or over holidays, just as New Yorkers flee the city to their farms in Connecticut and Pennsylvania today.

After leaving the house, we drove still farther toward a cemetery where her parents and other family members were buried. While her memory was excellent, her directions left a great deal to be desired, which was certainly understandable considering the years that had passed since she left here. All she remembered was that it was a Catholic cemetery "out in the country".

With some help from the locals, we finally found it tucked alongside a major thoroughfare, across from a fast-food restaurant, and next to a local secondary school. We even found the family gravestone which was an impressive edifice to my surprise. Off to one side of the stone lay Sally's grandfather—my great-great-grandfather—and off to the other side lay her grandmother, who was my great-great-grandmother. Spread out in different directions were other members of the family who had been laid to rest over many years.

As I stood on the site, I could not help feeling that it would have been fun to have known these people. Even now, it would be fun to talk with them about what they knew, and how their lives all interrelated with the times and the locale. Unfortunately, there is too little attention given to one's heritage or lineage, and that is sad. Having reviewed family trees on both sides of my family, I have come to appreciate the heritage of the past, even if only in a passing way.

There has been a revival of efforts to trace family roots which has sparked renewed interest in the past and prompted pilgrimages similar to this one. I have empathy with such efforts, for they often serve to put life in perspective which is necessary these days.

After leaving the cemetery, we drove back to our motel. On the way, we stopped at a river front park where there is an imposing statue of Mark Twain. The mighty Mississippi winds past, below the bluff on which the statue stands; and the site was aglow with beauty. She had come there as a young girl, and she had come today almost in the afterglow of life.

After freshening up at our motel, she and Betty joined me for dinner on the outskirts of Hannibal. We had exhausted our friends from the evening before, and needed a night to collect our thoughts about Hannibal alone, just the three of us.

Our restaurant reminded me of restaurants where the Rotary meets regularly. Most people seemed to be "regulars", and a piano player was present, with a piano bar around which the regulars congregated.

During the course of the evening, I coaxed Sally onto the dance floor, and we danced away. It was a lovely experience for both of us. She was petite and light as a feather, although a little nervous; and I held her firmly, and led her gently. She was radiant, and I loved her.

Although she complained that she hadn't danced in years, I sensed what it might have been like to be her beau.

I gave the piano player her background, as well as her age, and he and the others gave her affectionate nods from time to time. She seemed not to notice the special attention, but then she was a lady.

She was somewhat sensitive about her age; and I don't think she was even aware that I knew how old she was, for it was a well-kept secret in our family, and among her friends. She always remarked that it was too bad so many of her friends were either dead or in rest homes. She simply had better things to do with her time than to think about such things. Although she seldom gave thought to illness, she did her part in attending to the needs of others when sickness or injury was present.

She lived and moved with the power of positive thinking; and I can't remember when she spoke ill of others, unless it be of my father after my parents were divorced. Even then, she said that she loved my mother deeply, and she had been personally hurt by the matter, which was her explanation. Even then, she was not damning, vicious or the like, but merely turned a cold shoulder and took the side of my mother in all respects. This was so, despite the fact that she herself had been divorced at an early age, when divorce was unthought of in society.

She married a wealthy man, some years her senior, following her father's death when her life seemed in disarray. She remarked that she had respected him, and thought highly of him; however, she never really loved him deeply, and made a foolish decision to marry him. She regretted her decision after the fact, but it was too late.

They divorced; a brief period of time passed; she was pursued again and finally married Collie, who had courted her years before and had been a "proper gentleman" throughout the process. Collie loved her dearly, and his love continued. Following their marriage, he referred to the hiatus in their relationship as a time when Sally was away "shopping".

A few years ago, after Sally and Collie had been married for almost fifty years, it was evident that their marriage had been a happy one, with love abounding. His death hurt her deeply

and permanently, like a scar that never goes away. Indeed, his death at 92 probably represented the greatest single tragedy of her life, and she had not totally recovered, if she ever would.

In quiet moments, shared by the two of us, she expressed her grief as well as her belief that Collie was with her. She felt his presence throughout the day, regardless of where she was in their little house. I too sensed his presence, for it was a house full of wonderful times, deep friendships and lasting remembrances.

The next morning, we joined our two married Hannibal friends for breakfast at their home. It was not far from where Sally had been raised as a girl, for Hannibal is a relatively small town.

While we were there, the man's wife indicated to me—as others had in the past—how beautiful my mother had been when she was young, and how much fun they all had in Hannibal. Having seen pictures of my mother at that time, and viewing her childhood friend now, I imagined the belles of the ball, and with Sally, the prettiest young girls in Hannibal.

After breakfast, we bid farewell to our friends, and departed for St. Louis. The day was beautiful, and she was radiant. I took a picture of her sitting at a picnic table overlooking the river. She was vital and alive; beautiful in the true sense of the word. She did not reflect her age.

She had come home to Hannibal for the last time. She was leaving now with no regrets; yet she would never return. She looked not to the past, but to the present and the future -- to our visit to Washington, D.C., and to her return to California.

I brought elaborate camera equipment with me, as well as dictating equipment from the office, to record images of the trip; however, I could not use it. I tried setting up and taking down the photographic equipment; however, in the final analysis, I decided just to enjoy myself. Thus, the photographs were limited.

Maybe a better journalist or photographer could have captured each and every statement, and each and every look, and could have caught the essence of her moods with grace, color and feeling. But I was caught up in the moment. She kept me so busy I did not have time to photograph. No time was set aside to write—until now.

People speak of being old; however, she was 92 years young. If I had regrets about the trip, or any other detail of our relationship over the years, it was that I was not with her when she was young. Viewing the women of today, it is difficult to find true beauty—not just in a physical sense—comparable to Sally's.

We came to Hannibal with the spirit of adventure and nostalgia; and we left with the satisfaction of having accomplished what we set out to do. Following the trip, we embarked on plans for other trips: a class reunion of hers at Wellesley, and elsewhere. If time permitted, I would like to have joined her on those adventures. Sally was a rare individual; fun to be with.

To say that she was lovely and beautiful is to fall short of the mark. She was undoubtedly one of Hannibal's or anywhere else's finest; a wonderful human being whom God had blessed and who was a blessing to others. Although she was never interviewed, or photographed (except by me), or noticed when she came to Hannibal with us, her trip was momentous.

All of the stories I had heard as a child were brought to life as we wandered through the neighborhoods where she and my mother had lived. They are merely memories for me now, yet I have no regrets. It is not the past which is significant in this process, but our relationship to it through people whom we love. While Sally certainly dwelt in the "house" of the present and the future, and consciously so, there was enough of the past and those who had gone before to add deeper meaning to today and to the future for those who knew her.

She was beautiful then, but more so than mere physical qualities. She had style and class; however, those qualities were not attributes of money or material wealth, but were of love and breeding. It is true that she had come from Hannibal; yet the trip had taken on a deeper meaning about life than the streets and names and memories which were brought to mind, although they were important too. The trip and others like it put life very much in perspective, amidst the agonizing pressures and anxieties of a modern age. It told of deeper human, religious and moral values which all too often seem lost. She was beautiful then, and I loved her deeply, as she loved me. We have told each other this, and I miss her every day. Wouldn't this world be a better place if each of us could leave such a legacy of love.

EPILOGUE SALLY

She went quickly in the night, as we would all wish. Her life had ended as it undoubtedly began, with beauty. She was gone to her Maker from whence she came. Ninety-nine years had passed, almost to the day, and she had left her mark. As I have written, she was beautiful, lovely and radiant, with a wonderful, warm smile and presence that exuded love and caring and youth. She was alive with memories of the past, yet she had a firm hand on the present. She did not often look back, much less with regret. She was vibrant; fun to be with.

She was in love with life as it was, and the past was the past—flowered with cherished memories, but no more than that. She had much to tell, and we had much to learn from her. She had vitality, although she was very punctual, prim and proper; she was almost never late. If she was ever sad or lonesome, she seldom showed it. She would reminisce about the old times with her loved ones, and shed a tear or two; yet she quickly caught herself and turned to the present or the future, and away from the past.

Her eyes sparkled as she recalled her wonderful life and friends. Indeed, she truly seemed to love every moment of life. Her memory was excellent, although sometimes her sense of direction left something to be desired. There are some who knew her as a young girl, though they are few; and some who knew her almost in the afterglow of life; and in between. She was petite and light as a feather; she was a lady.

She was somewhat sensitive about her age in later years, and felt it was too bad so many of her friends were either dead or in rest homes. Yet she had better things to do with her time than to think about such things. She seldom gave thought to sickness or illness, even though she did her part in attending to the needs of others. She lived and moved with the power of positive thinking, and she rarely if ever spoke ill of others.

She married Collie, and their marriage was a happy one, with love abounding. Indeed, his death hurt her deeply, like a scar that never goes away. It probably represented the greatest

single tragedy of her life, although she bounced back. She expressed her grief quietly, as well as her belief that Collie was with her.

She was beautiful in the true sense of the word. She left with no regrets. She had grace; she was young; she was a rare individual. She was a wonderful human being whom God had blessed and who was a blessing to others. She had style and class; and she loved me and others.

She once told me that her longevity was attributable to two things: she never worried and she took a walk every day. I should also add that she took regular naps too. She had a strong belief in her Creator; almost a childlike innocence and acceptance which was beautiful.

Her life as we know it has ended, and yet she lives. We know it. She is with us now, urging us to go on, to believe, to fear not; to pursue our dreams and never give up, to believe all is possible; to believe there is love and beauty like hers to find and to give. All these things, she left as a legacy; a rich tapestry of life. God willed it and she followed. We too can do it. Though we stumble from time to time, we get up and go on as she did.

She never wrote a book or traveled much or was elected to public office or graduated from college. Like others, she never accomplished those things with which greatness is normally associated. And yet she was great—one of the greatest human beings that I have ever known.

She taught gentleness and love; the beauty of simplicity; the meaning of life without the need for material wealth. She found happiness in a flower and a friend; in her family and loved ones; and in the pure beauty of life itself. She did not waste time with tragedies or tales of woe, or politics or the like. She truly simplified life, even though her ninety-nine years had borne witness to the horse and buggy and the space shuttle alike. She simply did not worry; she made do and was happy.

Fortunately, she had found Collie, for he too was a gem. Indeed, they are together now; and if there was ever a marriage made under Heaven or in Heaven, this was it. Nevertheless, she had been divorced, at a time when that was taboo. Yet she found her soul mate in Collie and lived happily ever after. Aside from her life itself, her marriage was and is a great inspiration.

God blessed her and us. We are richer because she lived. We will miss her in a sense; though, in a larger sense, we know there is more goodness to come, for her and for us. Thus, while we have much to reflect on, with respect to her legacy, we also have much to look forward to, in terms of our own lives and beyond.

We will miss Sally, and yet we rejoice in her life. She was truly special, and so are each of us. This is what her life meant, and this is what God wills. Thank you Sally for helping us to put life into perspective. God blessed you, as He blesses each of us; and we have "miles to go before [we]...sleep, [a]nd miles to go before [we]...sleep."