

MULTI-GENERATIONAL LOOK AT GENDER ISSUES FROM PAST TO PRESENT

**by
Sarah L. Dent**

I have always been interested in history, and just recently, I have been learning about my family's personal history. I want to learn everything that I can because if I do not learn about our history, it may be lost. In late 2002, I interviewed the women on my mother's side of the family: my grandmother, my two aunts, my mom, and my younger sister. Briefly, this is the story of three generations of Kansans.

Lillian Jones, my grandmother, was born in western Kansas in 1924, and she has lived there throughout her life. Her parents were German immigrants who settled in western Kansas to farm. She had two sisters and a brother, and everyone had to work hard on the farm to keep it running properly. She and her siblings milked and herded cows; she said she hated herding cattle all day long. She was educated through eighth grade, but she did not go on to high school because the family did not live in the school district. It would have been too expensive for her family to send her to town and rent a room for her to attend high school, so she did not go. Instead, my grandmother got a fulltime job that paid \$2.50 a week. The house did not have electricity or running water, and she remembers the hard, physical labor she had to endure without modern luxuries. She remembers the terrible dust storms during the Great Depression in the 1930s, and how the dirt would be everywhere. Another memory is the horrible winter blizzards that would immobilize her family for days as snowdrifts as high as the house kept her family inside. She also remembers the grasshopper and jackrabbit plagues, and how the pests would "eat everything in sight, even the wood off the posts." Her father participated

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in jackrabbit round-ups to control and maintain the rabbit population in western Kansas.

She married my grandfather Carl in April of 1942. He left for World War II that November, and she missed him terribly. He was stationed in Germany for three and a half years. My grandmother moved back in with her parents, and she gave birth to in July of 1943. When my grandfather returned from the war, they remained in western Kansas. He was always bothered by thunderstorms because the lightning and thunder reminded him of WWII battles. He made the family go to the cellar during every storm.

In western Kansas, my grandparents farmed together. They custom-farmed until they rented their own farmland. They lived on their first farm near Monument, Kansas, for 20 years. Their seven children were born during those years. On the farm, they worked the land and milked twenty-five cows twice a day. They moved to their second farm near Jem, Kansas, in 1973 and lived there for about two years making improvements on the land and the house. It was a hard life, and discouraging at times because they worked so hard to make very little money.

My grandfather moved the family to the town of Colby in western Kansas in 1974. He worked at the hospital as a janitor, and my grandmother worked at the local IGA grocery store in the deli department. Grandfather decided he wanted to open a store, even though, as my grandmother said, she and my grandfather "did not know anything about owning a business!" But Grandfather quit his job at the hospital and they opened a furniture and antique store in Colby. Together, they traveled all over western Kansas and Nebraska to attend auctions. They bought anything and everything and brought it back to the store in Colby. When my grandfather died, my grandmother continued to run the business by herself. But it was very hard work, and she could not go to the auctions by herself, so after eight years she auctioned off the contents of the store. I remember that day very vividly as I was eight years old at the time. Still today she wishes she could reopen the store because it was a fun job for her.

My grandmother is retired now, but she remains active, She crochets all day because she is good at it and she enjoys it. During the summer, she works

outside in her garden, and she walks her dog Smoky. She has 20 grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren.

Her oldest child is my aunt, Jean Kay Eaton, who was born in western Kansas. As the oldest daughter, Jean was expected to help take care of the family from an early age. One of her chores was washing breakfast and dinner dishes. She remembers breaking several dishes as she was hurrying to finish so that she wouldn't miss the bus as it came to pick up children for school. After she completed high school she married Eugene and they moved to Wichita, Kansas. He worked outside the home in various printing businesses, and she worked inside the home raising their three children. They moved to Des Moines, Iowa, where they started their own printing business. They worked together to build the business, and still own it today.

Donna Maier, my middle aunt, was also born in western Kansas. She remembers her parents being very busy with the farm all the time, and she was expected to work hard as well. Donna thinks that Grandmother and Grandfather were very strict with her as she grew up, and as a result she was unable to interact with her friends very much. She completed high school and went to a vocational college in Greeley, Kansas. She was not allowed to have a car because my grandfather told her "girls did not need cars."

After vocational college, Donna married Tom, and they moved to Russell, Tom started an oil business that he still owns today. Donna cleaned two houses a day, five days a week, while her children were at school. Then she would pick them up from school and go home to do the same job. Recently, Donna earned her Bachelor's degree from Fort Hays State University. After she graduated, she had a hard time finding a job. She felt she faced discrimination because she is older than many of the other people applying for jobs, and felt businesses did not want to take a chance with her as an older worker. Yet, she persevered and is now working at a good company.

My mother, Debbie Thon, was raised in western Kansas and was in high school when the family moved from the farm in Jem to Colby. She finished high school there and attended a one-year secretarial training program at Colby Community College. After she and my father, Steve, were married, they moved to Lawrence, Kansas, so my father could finish his college education

at the University of Kansas. My mother worked to help support him through school. After my father finished college, they moved to Kansas City, where they have lived for over 20 years. My father works full-time, and my mother works part-time as a secretary and office manager at a law office. My mother was always home from her job by the time my sister and I arrived home from school. She works very hard at home because she is meticulous about the way the house looks.

My younger sister, Janelle Thon, is a senior in high school. She is smart, involved in school and church, athletic, and looking forward to going to college. Janelle wants to be an architect so she will be attending Kansas State University. She is excited about going into the field.

The family they grew up in and the places they lived shaped the lives of these five women. My grandmother, my aunts, and my mom all grew up in western Kansas, and they reflect the values of what could be called a typical Midwestern farm family. They all believe that women have responsibilities that tie them to their homes. They also all believe that women have the primary responsibility of raising the children. These four women have had the experience of being raised on a farm and learning the meaning of hard work. Though none of these women still lives on a farm, they have carried over the work ethic and female stereotypes that link them to their homes and families. My sister and I, having been raised in the city, reflect our generation's urban beliefs of equality and the sharing of responsibilities between men and women. I believe that as time goes on, place will continue to greatly influence and shape how people live and interact.