

Memoir of a Mindenite

By Deneena Davis

Memoir of a Mindenite is a personal reflective of the local experience of growing up as part of four living generations born and raised in Minden. Through a meandering retelling of the stories of her Grandmother and Great Grandmother, Deneena Davis weaves together a tapestry of one family's life in Minden over 100-year period.

Born in the original Minden hospital, Deneena Davis is a graduate of both Archie Stouffer and Haliburton High and is currently developing both a play and a novel inspired by, and loosely based on, life in Minden.

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Grandma Tessa's funeral was the same day as my English exam. She was ninety-eight. I did not attend, and I regret it. Of course, it was not that I did not care. In fact, as the oldest child of the oldest grandchild, I probably cared the most of my generation. It is not often that one knows their Great Grandmother into their twenties – certainly not anymore. As one of the youngest of seventeen children, Tessa had been born into the Cox family and had later married into the Davis family. Born in Minden, lived in Minden, died in Highland Crest, found that first morning by a girl that I had gone to school with since kindergarten. Grandma Tessa was her first death – and though Jenny doesn't know it, I have felt somehow closer to her since finding that out. Anyway, it was not that I did not care; it was that she had been dead to me for so long already. We all knew that things were changing the first time we looked out Grandma's window – that was when Grandmas and Great Grandmas lived side-by-side, and saw Tessa watering her garden in the rain. It was not until she was found frying her breakfast hash with the black potatoes she retrieved from the garbage that we knew she was gone to us.

Grandma was famous for her hooked rugs. Old burlap feed bags, and in the late days even the plastic ones, carefully hooked with strips of cloth made out of all of our old clothing. Some were simply rings of colour, but many were inspired by the array of "animals" in her yard. She gave away many with the red cardinal and blue – well, blue jay series, inspired by the ceramic versions on the big, front verandah of her little stucco house on Horseshoe Lake Road. Mine was one of the workhorse series and matched the two-and-a-half-foot, wooden Belgian staked out among the hollyhocks, his painted white mane permanently blowing in the breeze. The last few rugs had more burlap than cloth, and we only knew what the shapes were suppose to be by knowing what they had been on earlier ones. The last ones we saved; though maybe we should have saved some of the early ones – no one ever thinks of that.

Grandma used to tell me stories while she made her rugs, or when she sewed on the treadle sewing machine that she used right up until she decided that the number of times

that she was driving the needle through her thumb was making her too slow. She used to tell me stories about her childhood and how she remembered the men coming home from the shanty towns. The children were not allowed to greet their fathers and had to stay obediently back on the verandahs while the women carried tubs out to the road to meet their husbands. I don't know why I remember this story so well; she was sitting at the treadle in front of the window that overlooked the little pond between my grandmas' houses where the spring peepers always sang so loudly. I would listen and play with the ring on the trapdoor that led to the musty space above the dirt – the old, wooden butter churn just sitting down there calling to a curious seven-year old. We were not allowed to go through the trap door, but I was not all that concerned for I had a paper bag of her big cookies to keep me occupied – the ones that my aunt has been trying to find the recipe for. Actually, I probably remember this story so vividly because of the nakedness – nakedness is always important to a seven-year old. The women, according to Tessa, made their husbands strip naked at the end of the road and stand in the tubs, where they were first scrubbed with kerosene and then with soap and water and had their beards shaved off. When they were finally clean and towed dry – kerosene was poured over their clothes, which were burned at the end of the driveway before a child was allowed to bring out the new set of clothes. Grandma said that in those times, the logging had made it so that you could see all down the road where men were standing naked - without lice or bed bugs for the first time in months.

Of course, there were other stories, lots of them, and she certainly passed the story-telling gene down to her son, and her grandson, and possibly down to me. Or maybe that is not it at all. My aunts talk about the stories that my Great Grandfather used to tell. They claim that they knew something was dreadfully wrong the moment he asked that I be taken home because he did not want to hear me playing anymore. He was dead within the week. I was two years old. Maybe he passed along the story-telling gene, to my grandfather and father. They certainly had some great stories of life around Minden, stories of the spirits of boys coming home from the battlefields of war and knocking to be let in, stories of life around Bethel when it was the local hub for the families and “town” was where you got to go for something special, like a movie at the Beaver Theatre. My

father went to school in Bethel, the one-room school house across from Bethel Church, beside the cemetery that now not only displays head stones for both his Grandma Tessa and her husband John Davis, but for both of his parents as well. Grandma, as opposed to my Great Grandma, was a Stamp. Wanda Stamp married Garnet Davis, though everyone called him Garney - and she came from all the way the other side of Minden, orphaned with her sisters as toddlers when her father died of an under-developed heart during a wood-chopping competition, and her mother died shortly after of appendicitis. In her old, red recipe book Grandma used to keep letters that her father had sent to her mother while he was desperately roaming Ontario trying to find work during the Depression. They were sad letters where he talked about missing his children. I remember being surprised by his penmanship. He clearly took pride in the education he had. I came across them one time when I was writing out one of her pickle recipes. Grandma was famous for her pickles. He probably would have been proud that she grew up to raise a family of six. I find myself wondering where the letters are now.

Of course, now that I think about it, maybe Grandma Tessa got her story telling gene from her parents. After all, they did have seventeen children, and though their descendents have crossed and criss-crossed Haliburton County and far beyond, many of them are still at home – in Minden. Come to think of it – if there is one thing that I remember most about growing up in Minden, a member of a family that has produced five generations of Mindenites, it is story-telling. Everyone in my family tells great stories. Hell, I think everyone born and bred in Minden automatically tells a great story. My studies in English and Anthropology may have given me the opportunity to learn about cultures from around the world and read their great stories, but believe you me I did not make the same mistake twice. I attended my grandma's funeral and participated in the culture of story telling that is so rich and embedded that it often leads to the sound of laughter coming from Monk's funeral home. Culture is alive and well in Minden as long as we continue to tell our stories. Grandma Tessa would be proud.