

A story about your Great Grandmother, Amy Atkinson Written by Dhyan (Kathleen M. Atkinson)

It was beautiful in Boulder this morning. Last night we had another big wind storm and a little rain and this morning the air is crisp and clean, smelling of mountains and pine trees, and the sky is super blue. I was out hand-watering the garden early as the sun was coming up, dragging the hose first to the front and then to the back gardens and as I was watching the cascade of bright drops sprinkling the baby plants I got to thinking about how Uncle Dan once told me they had to haul water to the garden by hand when he and his little brother, Gaylord, were kids, bringing a bucket from the well and either dipping out a little water for each plant or making a game of watering the garden by creating runnels and dams in the dirt so that the water moved down through the plants, watering each, and not wasting any. *(Megan, you probably get your interest in engineering, in part, through your genetics.)*

Last night Dad, who doesn't talk about family history very much, shared a story with me and I thought I would pass it along to you. I asked about his atomic clock, the one that is sync'd to the international clock in Fort Collins, which he is so proud of, and he mentioned that they used to stand outside in the morning on the farm so they could hear the 6 o'clock siren in Pawnee City in order to set their clocks and know when to leave for school. *(The siren blew at 6 in the morning, noon, and six in the evening and was the standard time-keeper for the little town. In the recording I made of Grandma Atkinson years ago, you can hear it blowing in the background of one of the interviews. It is interesting to think that "back then" you had to wind up and reset the time of your clock often so that it would tell time accurately.)*

I asked Dad what time they left for school and he said it depended on which route they took. If they were walking the long way around by the road, which was a full two mile walk to school, they left earlier than if they walked across the fields or walked down the railroad tracks that ran through the farm. "Of course when I was little," he said, "my mother wouldn't let me take the tracks even though that route was a half mile shorter walk."

"How come?" I asked.

"Well, it was during the depression and dozens of men would pass up or down the tracks every day, walking the rails."

"Where were they going?" I asked. "And why did they walk along the railroad lines instead of along the roads?"

"They were looking for work or maybe just walking because they had no place to go. We would see them every day walking... walking... walking. Sometimes if they were on the railroad tracks they might be able to jump a train and ride for awhile. My mother used to feed them. I expect they had a mark somewhere along the property that told the next man "A sucker lives here." No matter who came to the door, she would always give some food if they asked."

I didn't like to think of anyone, especially my father, calling my grandmother (who was one of THE kindest people I have ever met in my lifetime) a "sucker" so I asked him, "Did your mother being kind to those homeless men ever mean that your family went without food?"

"No," he told me. "We were among the lucky ones. Our well didn't go dry so we always had food from the garden. Our cow gave lots of milk. We ate really simple things but the food was always good and there was always plenty of it." He paused for a moment and then he said, "Megan still can't believe we ate popcorn and milk most Sunday nights but it was good."

(Dad has lost many of his memories of his younger days but he still remembers those Sunday suppers fondly. He has told me about them many times. They would go to church Sunday morning and have a big Sunday dinner in the middle of the day when they got home. So they would have a "light supper" in the evening – which is a pattern he and my mother followed when Janet and I were children. Come evening, someone would go out and get a pail of un-popped popcorn and they would make a big, big bowl that sat in the center of the table... all nicely buttered and salted. Then each person would have their own bowl of cold milk and you would reach into the big bowl and get a handful of popcorn, plop it into your milk and then eat it like cereal, which, if you think about it, is basically what cold cereal is – popped or toasted grains. I remember that sometimes when Janet and I were little our family would also have popcorn and milk to eat on Sunday evenings after a big Sunday dinner in the middle of the day.)

"So, your family didn't suffer because Grandma fed the homeless men?" I asked. No. "So what was the problem then? Why do you think she was a "sucker?"

I think he wasn't thinking about Grandma, really, just about the hobos of the time who had their own system of marks they would put on a gate or down low on a fence to let

others know if that was a generous house or a mean one. "After all," Dad finally said, "Those men were not homeless by choice. They couldn't find work... there was no work to be had and thousands and thousands of people in those days had no homes, or food, or money and no way to get any. They were very hard times."

Personally, I think it would have been easy for Grandma to not be kind. By luck they had good farm land, a well with water, and plenty of food when that was *not* the case most places -- in fact, Mom's family ate tomatoes and bread most of one summer and nothing else. They had no water and nothing would grow in their garden except tomatoes. Grandpa was sick and out of work, there was no money except the little they got from his Veteran's pension. -- Grandma Atkinson might have been afraid to let hobos come to the door, what with young children in the home -- she didn't let them take the short cut to school because of the hobos -- but Dad says no matter who came to the door she always cut them two thick pieces of home-made and buttered bread and made them some kind of a sandwich -- anyone who was hungry and asked.

There are all kinds of generosity in the world and people who donate to one cause or another without ever really seeing the person who is the recipient of their kindness, but I wanted you to know, when people were starving all around her, your great grandmother Amy personally fed and was kind to anyone who came to her door. These are the kinds of family stories I think we should remember.

Dhyan