

Remembering Mammaw

Flossie Bell FLANARY (1910-1993)

She stood 4 feet, 11 ¼ inches tall. Describing her, I once omitted the fraction. She corrected me; I never repeated my mistake. “Mammaw”, as she was known to her 37 descendents, could cow men twice her size and half her age. It wasn’t that she was spunky or scrappy. She just seemed to know where your defenses were weakest; she had no problem using that knowledge to utter advantage.

Flossie Bell FLANARY was born on May 16, 1910 in Haskell County, Oklahoma. In 1910, Oklahoma was barely a state, having been admitted to the Union only three years before. She was the second youngest of 11 children born to Lorenzo Dow FLANARY and Louellen GILBERT. Her brother, Mack, once told me that, when his parents finally had her, they were short of baby material. That was why she was so much smaller than everyone else in the family. She was mixed together from leftovers.

Actually, Mammaw had a younger sister, Edith (pronounced “EH-dith”), who was, yes, taller than Mammaw. Still, I’ve always loved Uncle Mack’s cheeky explanation. Mammaw was the youngest of the “stair-step” offspring. Sister, Edith, was born six years after Mammaw. By then, I suppose, Dow and Louellen had garnered a bit more “baby material.”

Her parents must have named her from leftovers as well. Mammaw hated her name. She thought that “Flossie Bell” sounded like something you’d call a cow. You addressed her as Mammaw, Momma, or Flo; Mrs. Van Horne if you didn’t know her well. But, If you used “Flossie Bell,” you did so at your peril.

She was a recycler before it became politically correct, saving tin foil, plastic bread bags, and butter tubs for reuse. Every time a bread bag was emptied (oh, yes, “boot heels” were eaten), she shook the crumbs out, smoothed it flat, folded and stored it in a special place on top the refrigerator. Plastic tubs and lids had their special place on a shelf in her kitchen cabinets. In fact, everything in her house had a place to go and she made sure that it was put where it belonged.

Soda bottle caps and fabric scraps made good hot pads for the kitchen stove. My earliest lessons in sewing included cutting circles out of fabric scraps, stitching along the edge and gathering the material around a crimped soda cap to form a “yo-yo.” Mammaw took the yo-yos that I made and joined them together to form a pad on which to set hot pans. Old t-shirts were torn into strips and clamped to one of those mop handles made for replacement mop heads. In those early years, I don’t think she used a “store-bought” mop. Nothing was ever wasted if she could find another use for it.

I once asked her why she saved and re-used everything. She replied that she lived through the Great Depression when there was very little to have. People had to “make do” with what they had. She just thought it was a good idea, so she kept making do. As a child in the 1950s, the Great Depression was an unimaginable time for me and Mammaw did not elaborate. She just said that “you had to make do” with what you had.

Actually, I think Mammaw's life lesson in "making do" began even before the Great Depression. I think that it began when her father, "Dow," died in 1917.¹ He and Louellen were tenant farmers and farm workers. With eleven children at the turn of the century, her parents scraped hard Oklahoma dirt just to get by.² By 1917, older brothers were mostly gone from home. Some went to Arkansas; others remained nearby in Haskell County. Six girls, including Mammaw, were still living at home³. While the number of mouths to feed lessened, growing crops from the hard clay of Haskell County was as difficult as ever. Mammaw was only seven when her father died.

Dow's death changed everything for Louellen for the worse. By 1920, without property to sell and without the support that Dow provided, Louellen put the youngest girls into the fields to work. They picked cotton, corn, and whatever produce that could be picked for a few cents a bushel. While much of the U.S. was experiencing the excesses of the roaring 1920s, the Flanary family was forced to "make do." By 1920, little Flo, then age 9, was working full time in the fields. Her schooling stopped at the fourth grade.⁴

From Farm to Town

It was while working in the fields that Flo met Hugh COLE. Hugh was eight years older, a very hard worker, very strong, and *oh, so handsome*. He "took a shine" to this petite girl with steely blue eyes. In time, the attraction became a romantic one. About 1925, they married in Haskell County. Flo was only fifteen.

For a while, married life seemed to suit Flo. But times were still tough for the young couple. Farm labor was a family business, of sorts. Even in the prosperous 1920s, it took everyone to support the family. Married life did not provide any escape for Flo from the crop fields. She still worked the fields close to home, taking her babies with her. Using a harvest basket for a bassinet, she placed her babies in a shady spot nearby her. She, then, turned to gather crops. There were no daycare facilities for farm laborers.⁵

¹ FLANARY, L. Dow Gravestone, Whitefield Cemetery, Whitefield, OK. See also, George Elbert Flanary, *WWI Draft Registration Card* (Washington, DC: NARA). Note: George stated on his draft card that his father, mother and six sisters were dependent upon him.

² US 1900 Census - AR, Franklin Co., Household of L. D. Flanary; US 1910 Census - OK, Haskell Co., Machire Twp, Household of Lorenza D. FLANRIE.

³ On brother George's WWI draft record, dated 5 June 1917, he stated that he supported "mother, father, & six sisters." By 1920, he and two sisters would be married and gone from home.

⁴ Reading was one of her life-long passions, although she was not one to read novels. She loved to read magazines and kept subscriptions to her favorites: *Ladies Home Journal* and *Readers Digest*. I remember that she also liked to work the daily crosswords in the *Dallas Times Herald*. My favorites of all her subscriptions, however, were the Sears, J. C. Penney, and Montgomery Ward catalogues. At that time, they were free, full of words as well as pictures. "Wish books," she called them.

⁵ Mammaw once told me the story of when my mother was about age 3. She tied young Virginia (my mom) to the bed, placing a rope around her waist. Mammaw, who was only 19 at the time, thought that this would allow her to work in the crop fields without worrying about her toddler wandering off or getting into things

By the time Flo was twenty years old, she was a mother of two.⁶ That year, 1930, marked the beginning of truly dark times for farm people living on the southern plains. The crash of the stock market marked the beginning of the Great Depression. Small banks permanently closed. Farmers could not get loans to plant crops. Mortgaged farms were foreclosed.

Those farmers able to plant crops fared no better. Severe drought covered the region for almost a decade. Crops withered and perished for lack of rain. The absence of native prairie grasses, plowed under in order to plant crops that never grew, left the land desolated. High temperatures and swirling arid winds swept the earth into dusty blizzards that blocked out the sun, stripped orchards of their fruit, and threw dust into high drifts resembling photos of the Sahara. They gave it a name, "The Dust Bowl."⁷ Those families dependent upon crops for their livelihood, entered into a period of poverty and despair as never before imagined.

Flo hated farm life. She wanted Hugh to get out of farming and into work that provided a steady income. However, Hugh was a physical man who seemed to thrive from hard physical labor. He would have been unhappy clerking in a store or selling Fuller brushes. Still, he wanted to provide for his family. When he learned that the Midland Valley Railroad was hiring, Hugh signed on as a section hand for the railroad and moved his family thirty-six miles north to Muskogee.

As a section hand, Hugh's job was to maintain and repair the tracks along the routes between Stigler, OK, Ft. Smith, AR and Topeka, KS. Sometimes after a derailment, Hugh would have to work around the clock, removing cars and repairing the damaged tracks. It was steady work. It was very hard work. However, the job paid so little that Midland Railroad could find few men like Hugh to do it. To help supplement Hugh's pay, Flo took a series of jobs, clerking at a grocery store, then another at a canning factory.⁸ By that time, she had borne three children, Virginia (my mother), Bill, and Don.

During the 1930s, things were beginning to change for Flo and Hugh. Along with extended absences from working on the railroads, Hugh began drinking. This combined with the financial stresses of the Depression placed a real strain on their marriage. The couple divorced about 1940. Unable to support herself and three children as a single mom, Flo left the two boys with Hugh to care for. She and daughter, Virginia, supported themselves on a series of low paying jobs.

By 1943, Flo found work as a waitress in a small diner in Muskogee near an Army training camp. There she caught the eye of an easy-going sergeant from Ohio, named George Van Horne. George was stationed at Camp Gruber while training for service in

she shouldn't. The image seems horribly abusive and neglectful to us, today. Yet, this was considered an acceptable solution at the time when there was no one to look after young children while mother worked.

⁶ Daughter, Virginia, was born in 1926. First son, Bill, followed in 1929.

⁷ To see an interesting movie of a dust storm taken during this period, go to the following link:
<http://www.weru.ksu.edu/vids/dust002.mpg>

⁸ SSA-5 Application for Flossie Bell Cole (deceased), 443-07-7557; See also, Cole, Don. E-mail messages from <doncole1799@sbcglobal.net> to Sharon Gayle, various dates. Subject: Flossie Flanary (Mammaw).

the Pacific Theatre. They first met on her birthday, which must have seemed a good omen for Flo. But it was a brief courtship. George was quickly sent out on maneuvers until late August. By October, they became engaged and, during a brief trip to Ohio to meet George's family, they married. On October 17, 1943, Flo became a war-bride.⁹

No sooner were vows exchanged when George's unit was sent to Europe. While waiting for his return, Flo and Virginia, then 16, followed the California path taken by some of her siblings who had escaped during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. For unknown reasons, Flo did not remain in California long. Her son, Don, thought that perhaps she missed her two boys. They were still living in Muskogee with their dad. Throughout her lifetime, Flo was known for devotion to family. So Don may have been right. Whatever the reason, before the end of WWII, she and Virginia were back in Muskogee.¹⁰

With the surrender of Japan's forces, by the end of 1945, George returned home from the Pacific Theatre. He and Flo settled in Muskogee for a couple of years where Flo delivered her youngest son, James Edward (Jimmy), in 1946. The post-war years were promising, but Muskogee was a small town and offered few opportunities for work. Dallas was beginning to explode with employment opportunities and, being a larger city with more manufacturing companies, George and Flo decided to move to Texas.

Moving to Texas

By 1950, the family was living in one of the several trailer courts established along West Commerce St. in Dallas. Although Americans have always been a migratory group, the 1950s symbolized mobility more than ever before. That decade is sometimes symbolized by the sleek, silvery image of the Airstream™ "house trailer," the kind you could attach to the back of a car and move across the country in style and comfort. The image still evokes a romantic time of freedom and carefree living. As a vacation home, it was—and still is—a rather carefree lifestyle. As a primary home in the 1950s, well...that was a *different* story.



Flo, young Don & George, 1943. Flo took a break from her shift to meet George for an appointment in downtown Muskogee. Don said his mom was irritated with them in this picture because George had allowed Don to come along without wearing any shoes.

⁹ Our Wedding Vows. Wedding book of George Van Horne and Flossie Flanary Cole, ca. 1943. 9x6 vinyl clad binder. Handwritten entries attributed to Flossie Flanary Cole and unknown author (possibly George Van Horne) by granddaughter, Sharon Gayle. As of 1993, the book is in the possession of James E. Van Horne, Carrollton, TX. The book details their courtship and marriage as well as some genealogical data.

¹⁰ I never recalled Mammaw mentioning WWII shortages and rations as a factor in her learning to "make do." George's military pay may have helped provide while he was overseas. I also do not know if she worked during that period, but I assume that she must have. Military pay, even for a sergeant, was meager during WWII.

Trailer courts of the 1940s and 1950s were more than just the RV parks of their time. They were also semi-permanent home addresses for transient workers and their families, the kind of people that the more permanent, more up-scale citizens of the city called “trailer trash.” Trailer courts, of the kind found along West Commerce St., were not vacation rest stops. They served mostly the migrant population coming into Dallas looking for jobs.

Paying about \$15 a month, you could rent a small, one room trailer (150-250 sqft). This included electricity and water, but you had to buy gas for the cook stove and oil for the heater. Bathrooms, if the trailer had one, were not of the style and amenities that we know today. It would have had a small walled-off section with a port-a-potty toilet that was emptied once a day at the community sewage facilities, and, maybe, maybe, you’d have a sink for dishes. Bathing was done in a wash tub. The same wash tub served as laundry facilities, as well. Clean, wet laundry was hung from a corded line strung between two posts or trees.

Sometime in the winter of 1949, George and Flo rented three tiny trailers, none with a “bathroom,” for their extended family. The trailers were parked at the Café Trailer Court on W. Commerce St.,¹¹ just over the bridge from downtown Dallas. Sons, Bill and Don, resided in one trailer. Daughter Virginia and newborn granddaughter, Pat, occupied another. George, Flo, and Jimmy, then 2, occupied the third trailer. The summer of 1950 was reportedly no hotter than other summers in North Texas. Still, the heat of the Texas sun on the metal roof and walls of those tiny trailers turned them into human ovens. The heat was one of Don’s strongest memories of that time. He recalled “That [living in the trailer] was very hard for Mom. These were very small trailers and no air conditioning. Mom had to do the wash on a hand rub board and wash tub.” Showers and toilet facilities were located elsewhere in the park.¹²

While living in the Café Trailer Court, George found work with Dallas Power (later to become Dallas Power & Light). As the three older children moved out on their own, George and Flo could afford to move into small rental homes. The extra space—and lack of metal—made living a bit more comfortable.

George had only a seventh grade education, so steady work and the promise of a career job were sparse. For several years there were up-and-downs in employment, even in Dallas, but George always managed to find work. During lean times, Flo “made do” with whatever she had.

Mammaw’s House

Progress toward the Great American Dream seemed within reach for Flo. By 1952, George and Flo had their own phone and, about 1954, they bought their first and only home. It was located in a remote rural section south of Oak Cliff, called Daniieldale Estates. Daniieldale was not incorporated into Dallas at that time and the street on which

¹¹ Despite the fact that it was on the edge of downtown Dallas, maps and documents described it as a “rural precinct.”

¹² Cole, Don email messages. Subject: Flossie Flanary (Mammaw).

they lived was locally known as Concord Ave. However, another Dallas city street had primacy over the name. So, when the city annexed the neighborhood, the city changed the name to Whitehall Lane.

The house, itself, was less than 600 sqft. Still, compared with the trailer, it was spacious. It was simple living, containing two small bedrooms, a living room and a large kitchen. The house was just that sort of starter home that many returning veterans purchased after WWII.

Just as with the trailer, there was no bathroom. The privy was a single-stall edifice located in the backyard. Bathing was done by standing at the kitchen sink or filling a large galvanized tub with water placed in the kitchen. Lighting was provided by bare bulbs hung from the ceiling. It would be several years before the City of Dallas ran gas and water lines to the neighborhood. Until then, fuel for heat and cooking was provided by a propane tank. A drilled well in the front yard, powered by an electric pump, sent water into the kitchen.



Mammaw in front of her house on Whitehall Lane, ca. 1970.

Flo loved her home. It gave her a sense of permanence. She and George lived there the rest of their lives. Within a few short years, Flo was able to be the stay-at-home mom that she dreamed of being. She never worked outside the home again. Still, money was often tight, so Flo continued to “make do” with what she had, canning some fruits and vegetables,¹³ stitching

patches on clothes to make them last longer. Reusing and re-purposing what she had.

Over the years, she and George made several improvements to their home, adding a front and back porch, updating the kitchen. In the mid-1950s, George and my dad found a way to squeeze an indoor bathroom, complete with plumbed toilet, tub and sink into 40 sqft, taking a small part of the kitchen and part of one bedroom. My dad was an experienced carpenter and painter; George was willing to learn and to do. After it was finished, Mammaw was righteously proud of her new bathroom and its privacy door. Soon thereafter, the outhouse was demolished and the hole filled with dirt and rocks. We grandkids almost grieved over the loss of the outhouse as it provided us with a great, albeit stinky, place to hide during hide-n-seek games.

Mammaw “compensated” us, however, by planting two big mimosa trees in the front yard. She loved the sweet fragrance of its pink, spidery blossoms and the delicate shape of the lacy frond leaves. It was not her intention to give us a place to climb, hide or play. Quite the contrary. She repeatedly threatened us with “THE FLY SWATTER” if we left *terra firma* for the loftiness of those spreading limbs. But how can you play “Tarzan and Jane”

¹³ A fig tree grew up outside her kitchen window. It can be seen in the above photograph. Every year, she canned fig preserves from its fruit. She was also partial to canning bread-n-butter pickles, served every holiday.

standing on the ground? We had to climb those trees. Neither side ever gave into the other, and both sides remained vigilant of the other's whereabouts to keep tensions in balance.¹⁴

Mammaw's house became a gathering place for family. Many evenings, my mom and dad would join Mammaw and "Pappaw" George in a game of cards or dominoes. The four adults would often play until late, while the younger kids played hide-n-seek or "red light" in the front yard. The older grandkids, "too mature" for hide-n-seek, played Monopoly[®] in Jimmy's room.

Holidays were celebrated at her house as well. I recall ever present bowls of fruit and nuts. Holiday activities for Mammaw began days before, baking pies, cookies and making fudge candy. She took pride in her cooking which was basic, wholesome and lots of it. Every holiday, she made a cherry pie for son, Jimmy, a pumpkin pie for George, and a lemon meringue pie for her "favorite son-in-law."¹⁵

I suppose that it is the nature of every child to believe that her grandmother was the best baker of sweets there was. In the early years, Mammaw made her desserts from scratch—no mixes, no frozen ingredients, no shortcuts. Many a holiday, I stood next to her in her kitchen, trying to emulate her skill at kneading pie and biscuit dough, hoping to reproduce the flakey baked goods she made. Kneading dough was an art which Mammaw's hands could sense when the dough was ready. She patiently talked me through the process explaining that she knew when the kneaded dough "felt right." Sadly, my efforts never reproduced her skills. Her recipes for beef dumplings, lemon pie, and fudge are legendary among even her great grandchildren.

Turbulent 60s

The years, 1962-63, were turbulent years for Mammaw's family. She witnessed her two eldest children, Virginia and Bill, divorce. Bill became involved with another woman. Once Bill moved out of his house, he rarely saw his five children and did not send money for their support. Unable to qualify for state welfare in Texas, Bill's wife, Thelma, returned to Oklahoma with the children. There, she was able to find work and receive welfare assistance denied her in Texas.

Mammaw did not feel that state subsidy was sufficient. Every few months, she had George drive her to Oklahoma to visit Thelma and children, taking clothes and other necessities for home and school. Even if Bill abandoned his family, Mammaw could not. She helped Thelma "make do" where she could. Even in the years after the children were grown, Mammaw maintained close ties to Thelma.

Virginia, too, was unhappy with her marriage and became involved with another woman. In 1963, she began a lesbian relationship that lasted eight years. She too left home and children searching for something that seemed vital but was missing in her life. Unlike Bill, however, Virginia saw her children as much as she could.

¹⁴ The sound of her voice still rings in my ears. "You kids better not be up in those trees! I'll get out my flyswatter!" We would immediately leap like monkeys onto the front porch and yell back, "We're not, Mammaw! We're playing on the porch!"

¹⁵ Well, my dad was her *only* son-in-law, but even after my parents divorced, she and Daddy maintained a fondness for each other. Besides, George and Daddy remained best friends.

Although his work was seasonal, Virginia's husband, Harry, was able to provide a home for the children. Moreover, he lived only six blocks from George and Flo. Thus, Mammaw was able to see her grandchildren on a daily basis. Just as with Thelma, she maintained a close relationship with her former son-in-law. She continued to invite Harry to family gatherings. Harry would send the grandchildren, but he rarely came himself if Virginia was also present.

Mammaw once remarked that she disapproved of Virginia's lesbian relationship. To her mind, it was wrong on many levels and she hoped that her daughter would "come to her senses." Yet, she added, nothing that Virginia did could ever cause her to reject or stop loving her daughter. Mammaw was not so forgiving of Virginia's lesbian lover or Bill's love interest. She viewed them as destroyers of the lives and relationships within her family. She would not embrace them. She never welcomed them into her home or to join in family gatherings.¹⁶

Mammaw's abiding love for her children was evident. Perhaps she understood something of their yearnings. After all, when she divorced Hugh, she left two sons in his custody while she tried to make a better life for herself and Virginia, first in Muskogee and later in California. Yet, she returned to Oklahoma and her boys. From that time forward, she remained close to family even as she and George moved to Texas and her children moved toward their separate lives.

Despite her self-reliant nature, Mammaw never learned to drive a car. When asked why, she replied "Don't need to. George can drive me." Which George did. Whether to the local store or across country to visit relatives, George drove her there. After his death in 1968, everyone was certain that she would learn to drive; but she didn't. She gave George's car to son, Bill, and afterwards, she would tap one of her children or a neighbor to take her to the store or the bus stop. After a DART¹⁷ bus route was extended to her south Dallas neighborhood, she walked the half-mile to catch the city bus to get to many destinations.

Losing George after twenty-five years was hard, but she seemed to draw comfort of family, neighbors and friends nearby. Perhaps it was a blessing that he died in early January as it gave her nearly a year to mourn in solitude before holidays returned. Mammaw was not known to show her emotions. By the time holidays again approached, she had settled into a new daily existence. No doubt she still grieved because someone else would "play Santa," passing out the presents. Still, the following Thanksgiving and Christmas were as traditional as she could make it.

In 1970, son, James married. Grandchildren were nearly grown. That year, Flo felt that it was time to visit those distant relatives in Arkansas, Oklahoma, California and Ohio, many whom she had not seen for twenty years. So for about a year, Flo traveled, leaving the house on Whitehall Lane in the care of James and his new bride. By the end of 1971, James bought his own home in Richardson, on the far side of Dallas. Flo returned to

¹⁶ Flo acquiesced to Virginia only once. Virginia told her mother if her partner was not invited that she (Virginia) would not come to dinner. A photo of Flo with Virginia and partner sitting on Flo's living room sofa serve as the only evidence of this event. Their body language in the photo indicated the tension that must have existed between them.

¹⁷ Dallas Area Rapid Transit System.

Dallas and was again living a single life in the home that she and George purchased in 1954.

“Virginia and Me”

Flo had a close mother-daughter relationship with Virginia. Yet, the following years saw the two women become closer than anyone could have imagined. Although Flo’s sons also kept close contact by phone and often visited, Virginia lived only a few miles away. Thus, Flo frequently called upon Virginia to take her shopping and running errands. Flo, in turn, helped Virginia by doing laundry and household chores.

By 1975, Virginia was dealing with growing financial and medical burdens. Between 1969 and 1975, Virginia’s ex-husband, Harry, died leaving a mentally retarded son who would always be partially dependent. Virginia and her lesbian partner ended their eight-year relationship. Complications from diabetes affected Virginia’s ability to work in the restaurant industry. She needed to change careers. The sum of all these issues made it impossible for Virginia to support herself and son, Robbie. So, Flo took them into her home. This practice of taking in family was nothing new for Flo. For years, her brother, Mack, came periodically for extended stays while under treatment at Veterans Medical Center on Lancaster Ave (now Martin Luther King Blvd).

By 1977, Virginia and Robbie were living at Whitehall Lane. It was intended to be a temporary arrangement, and in a sense, it was. Virginia made several attempts over the ensuing years to regain her independence and to move into her own place. Yet circumstances often forced her to return to her mother’s house and care.

Virginia and Robbie were living with Flo about a year when Virginia’s youngest son, Andrew, approached both women. His wife had abandoned him with two babies, Anessa, age 3, and Duane, age 8 or 9 months. Andrew was trying to develop his own business without success. The children had no place to stay or anyone to care for them. The only alternative, as the two women saw it, was to place the children in foster care. Despite the fact that neither woman was in good health, neither woman could allow the children to go to foster homes. They, with Robbie’s support, agreed to take the Anessa and Duane into Mammaw’s home.

Soon after the children were settled, Mammaw decided that it was time to wean little Duane from his baby bottle. I had long known that Mammaw had some folk ways about her. Notions, I suppose, that she learned from her parents. She held a few superstitions, such as “it is bad luck to give someone a gift that is sharp.” I gave her a set of steak knives for Christmas one year and she insisted that she pay me a penny for them. Otherwise, the gift was bad luck for the giver and the recipient. She also once used a penny to “rub” a wart from my finger. The wart did not immediately disappear, but—yes—it did disappear within a few weeks.

So, when it came time to separate Duane from his baby bottle, Mammaw knew that there was a best time to start weaning an infant. She claimed that when the moon was in various phases, it affected different parts of the body. When it reached the phase where the knees or feet were most prominent, that was the day to begin weaning. She required a copy of the *Farmer’s Almanac*. The almanac was not easy to find in metropolitan Dallas in 1978. Yet, find one, she did. So, with lunar chart in hand, Mammaw weaned Duane by

the cycle of the moon. I never learned if the task was as quick and easy as she said it would be. For Mammaw, I suppose that it was.

It was also during this period that Mammaw's great grandchildren began calling her "Little Mammaw." No doubt the adjective rankled her, but it was hard to distinguish who was being addressed in conversation. Virginia was also known as "Mammaw" to her grandchildren. So, Virginia, at 5'3", became "Big Mammaw." Flo, much to her chagrin, became "Little Mammaw."¹⁸

In December, 1978, Virginia was hospitalized for complications from diabetes. She was forced to quit her job as a waitress. Her doctor placed her on medical disability for twelve months. Financial support of the children from Andrew trickled to nothing. To gain financial help from the government, she needed to claim Anessa and Duane as dependants. That required legal custody of the children.

Out of work and out of money, Virginia went to Family Court in 1979 to gain guardianship over her grandchildren. Reviewing the evidence, the court agreed and Virginia was named sole managing conservator.¹⁹ Both parents were ordered to pay child support for their care.²⁰ In later years, both Virginia and Flo related that no support was ever received from the mother and only briefly from Andrew. Whatever burdens Virginia took on, Mammaw helped her to carry them.

Virginia received disability income for that year. Robbie, trained as a hospital orderly, worked at St. Paul Hospital for minimum wage. Flo, by then, was receiving Social Security. Again, Flo "made do." The three adults pooled their resources to provide a home for the needs of their growing family. While Virginia recovered at home from foot surgery, Mammaw cared for the children as well as for Virginia and Robbie.

It was challenging and often frustrating to have three adults and two children in a tiny two-bedroom house. But this was not a new experience for Mammaw; she "made do." In the following years, Virginia endured another hospitalization from diabetic complications. During those times, Mammaw became sole care-giver for three people.

Virginia, Robbie, and the kids made several attempts during the 1980s to move out of Mammaw's house. Various plans were tried without success until 1990. By then, Virginia's badly deteriorated health forced both women to make hard decisions.

Grandson, Robbie, moved into a low-rent apartment nearby. Mammaw gave him a love seat for his living area and a card table with folding chairs to serve as a dinette set.

¹⁸ At a family gathering, Duane, then age 11, stood beside his great-grandmother. He turned to face her short frame and gleefully announced, "Look, Little Mammaw! I'm as big as you are!" Hearing that, I burst out laughing because I recalled that, when I was his age, I had done the very same thing. Mammaw growled, "You all have done this! Every one of you kids, from Virginia on down! Every one of you has done this to me." Reflecting upon her annoyance, I thought how sad that she could not appreciate what a magical moment it was for us children. At last, we were as big as the most grown-up person we knew. It meant we were growing up too.

¹⁹ For a good overview of Texas State Child Custody laws, see <http://www.jerrymelton.com/custody.htm>.

²⁰ Virginia Fant v. Andrew J. Fant and Teresa St. Clair Fant, Case #79-1470, adjudicated on 24 Oct 1979. 256th District Court, Dallas County, Texas. Dallas County Clerk, Dallas County, Texas.

She would still occasionally cook for him and Robbie talked with his grandmother daily, but otherwise he lived independently from that time forward. Anessa and Duane, by then adolescents, were taken in by Mammaw's youngest son, James, for a few months. Ultimately, they returned to their father, Andrew.

In July 1990, Virginia suffered a heart attack. She underwent quintuple bypass surgery from which she never fully recovered. She remained in a cardiac ICU unit for the last six months of her life. Mammaw visited Virginia in the hospital almost daily during these months. City bus service had finally reached her remote neighborhood. If there was no one to drive her to the hospital, she would walk a half-mile to the bus stop.

It was painfully hard for Mammaw to slowly lose her daughter to complications of diabetes and heart disease. Virginia, she said, was her best friend. Despite all indications to the contrary, Mammaw continued to hope that Virginia would come home.²¹ She was certain that she could care for her there and that, at home, Virginia would get better. On January 5, 1991, Virginia died.²² Once more, Mammaw's home became a solitary place. She outlived all her siblings, her two husbands, and now her only daughter and best friend.

A week after the funeral, my sister and I drove to Mammaw's house. She had asked us to come. She was unable to face the task of packing up Virginia's belongings. Every dress, every trinket released a flood of memories and grief for her. Packing was a way of saying goodbye and letting go of someone you loved. She just could not make herself do it.

Removing clothes from hangers and personal items from dressers—as we held our mother's possessions in our own hands—we understood Mammaw's sorrow. It is a deeply visceral grief, *a sorrow that is perfectly known*. Mammaw sat quietly in the living room while we packed fragments of our mother's life into cardboard boxes.

We selected mementos to distribute among family, packing the rest for donation to charity. Before we left, we asked Mammaw if there was anything special that she wished to keep in memory of Virginia. She said, no. She needed nothing to help her remember the daughter she loved.

The three years following Virginia's death, Mammaw lived a rather quiet life on Whitehall Lane. The neighborhood was deteriorating. Crime was on the increase. She, herself, had confronted a man trying to break into her house late one night. She barely succeeded in forcing him back out the window through which he was trying to enter. James pleaded with his mother to move in with him. The neighborhood was no longer safe for an 80-year old woman, living alone. But she would not leave her home of forty years. Her memories were there. She could not leave them.

Shortly after Thanksgiving Day in 1993, she underwent emergency surgery for intestinal problems. The disease, the doctors found, was too advanced and she lived less than a week following surgery. On December 4, 1993, Flossie Bell Flanary Cole Van

²¹ Virginia was briefly released from the hospital for a week, but had to return when she began experiencing problems.

²² Virginia Fant, Death Certificate no. 02-00478 (1991). Dept. of Vital Records, Dallas, TX.

Horne passed into death and into memory.²³ She joined her ancestors, her husband, George, and daughter, Virginia. She was, after twenty-five years of widowhood, laid to rest next to George.

Several months after Mammaw's funeral, I received a box of items from Uncle James, who was Executor of her estate. The box contained a few books, memorabilia, and photos that Mammaw kept over the years. He thought that I might like to have them. Among the box contents were photographs that I had not seen before, pictures of my grandmother and mother over the years. In one photograph (the third one shown in this story), they stood together in the sunlight, their arms wrapped around the other's waist. Even with their eyes squinting into the sun, one could see that they were smiling and happy together, a prescient image of the closeness they would know in later years. On the reverse, written in my grandmother's familiar hand: *Virginia and me.*²⁴



Virginia and Flo, ca. 1950. Mother and daughter became best friends toward the end of their lives.

It has been difficult to summarize Mammaw's life and character into a single, final paragraph. It took a while to discover why, but now I think I know. When I first told family that I was writing a biography of her life, family members were compelled to share their own memories and the impact she left on their lives.

Some stories were about "wisdom" dispensed from the end of a fly swatter; some about her strict enforcement of nap time because, according to Mammaw, all "kids get tired and cranky" after lunch. Some spoke of her devotion to family; others spoke of how safe one felt in her presence upon waking, frightened, in a dark and silent room. She had that effect on those who knew her.

So, as long as "Mammaw" stories are told, she still lives. This story cannot be a final one. Memories and stories of Mammaw are the legacy she left to all her descendants. Through her stories, there is more to listen to, more to laugh about, more to learn from, more to live by.

She stood 4 foot 11 ¼ inches tall. To the unknowing, her small size was her most prominent feature causing some to overlook her true stature. Mammaw's small stature instilled in her a steely resolve to make the most of whatever life brought her way, however little it may have been. She was very good at "making do." She was a steely

²³Flossie Bell Van Horne, Death Certificate no. 02-09633 (1993). Dept. of Vital Records, Dallas, TX.

²⁴In the possession of the author.

woman whose love and strength was a comfort and relief to multiple generations of her family. And family, I believe, brought her the greatest joy.

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