

## GOING DOWN HOME

In the early 1920's, my parents, with their young son, left Kentucky to move to Detroit, Michigan to find work. Dad's youngest brother, with whom their Mother lived, and his oldest brother, were already living there.

The move was good for Dad, who found employment in the automobile industry. They were able to buy a home in 1924. Things were going well and in 1929, I was born in the front bedroom of our home. That young son they brought with them from the south was now eight years old and when he saw me for the first time he said, "She doesn't have much personality".

Although Dad had family in Detroit, Mother's heart was still in Kentucky; her mother and brothers and their families all lived there. Every year, when we'd listen to the running of the Kentucky Derby on the radio, Mother would always cry when they played "My Old Kentucky Home".

When I was old enough to have memory of things, I remember Mother would start in about May telling us that once school was out, we'd be going "down home". Over the years that trip was accomplished in a number of ways. Dad would drive us, stay overnight and return the next day to work. These were the Great Depression years and he took little time away from his job. There was the year that Mother learned to drive so it took us forever to get there, or so it seemed to me. My brother was in the front seat next to her. She was an over-cautious driver at the wheel. Driving made her nervous and after that trip she gave up her license and never drove again.

The best way to travel to Cave City, I felt, was by train. I just loved watching the countryside and little towns go by. One thing I remember is how "sooty" we could get. If it was hot in the train car, we'd open a window and soot from the coal fired engine seemed to find its way inside.

"Down home" meant getting to Cave City, Kentucky; a small town on the old Dixie 31 West

highway. It was a tourist town, depending for its living on visitors coming to visit Mammoth Cave and other caves located in that area. It had a number of tourist homes, a small hotel and several motels and restaurants.

Getting to Cave City meant getting to Mama's little house; it sat right by the old Dixie Highway. Lots of traffic passed, including convoys of military vehicles coming from Fort Knox not too far away. As a little girl sitting on Mama's porch swing, I loved to wave to the soldiers. Sometimes I got waves back.

Mama's house had a porch across the front with that swing at one end and two front doors. That was because half the house was rented out and Mama had her half. I felt each visit was such a great adventure for me. No electricity, no running water, no indoor bathroom. Her front room was a combination sitting room and bedroom: two high antique double beds, a couple of rocking chairs, and a chest of drawers. There was a fireplace with a mantle clock, and I discovered Mama hid her snuff behind the clock. The biggest surprise was the chamber pots under the beds used if we needed to go to the bathroom during the night.

The path to the outhouse was a learning experience. When very young, I was so fearful of falling through the hole in the seat but as I grew older and was able to go there on my own, I enjoyed sitting there and looking at the things in the Sears Roebuck catalogue. When I was done looking, I tore out a page as that was there to be used as toilet paper.

Kerosene lamps and a kerosene stove gave the house a certain aroma which made the home a welcoming place to visit. Mama was so good to me and would order cookies that I loved; the kind pressed flat with indentation of a windmill on them and frosted in either pink or white icing. Often we'd have a meal across the street where one of mother's brothers and his family lived. My aunt made the

best fried chicken and mashed potatoes, but she served us and never sat down to eat with us, taking her meal in the kitchen after we were fed.

There were a number of caves in the area. A distant cousin of my father owned two in Hart County and we'd visit them, but then Mothers folks would always plan a picnic out at Mammoth Cave Park. There is a picture of my Mother and Dad on a bleacher with folks outside the entrance to the cave holding lanterns that would light the way inside. The picture was taken circa mid 1900's, while Mother and Dad were courting. That whole area was full of caves and some folks said they were probably all connected underground.

A man named Floyd Collins, a cave explorer, was trapped in Sand Cave, while looking for a closer connection to Mammoth Cave. A rock dropped and closed the passage. On the 14<sup>th</sup> day he died just 3 days before rescuers could get to him. The owner of the cave had his body encased in a glass coffin and put on display. The name of the cave was changed to Crystal Cave. When they took me to visit that cave and I saw that glass coffin it reminded me of a picture in one of my story books of a Princess in a glass coffin until the prince came and kissed her. That visit to see that coffin with him in it left quite an impression on my young mind. I thought it was good when the family had his body taken out and buried on the family farm. Later, the US government bought that cave and closed it.

Mama died a few days before I turned eleven. Trips down home after that were not every year. When World War II came; gas was rationed and troops filled the trains. We went back to visit mother's brothers and their families after the war. One brother bought Mama's house and moved in from the farm making the whole house theirs and adding a bathroom off the back porch. When we were in town we stayed with Mother's brother across the street, as he had a Tourist Home.

After I married, my husband and I would take the children down to get to know family and see that part of their heritage. Only cousins were left by then but we'd stay in a motel and eat at Mother Hubbard's or Jolly's restaurants; the kids loved that. When grandchildren came there were no relatives still living to meet so we'd rent a cabin at Mammoth Cave Park and visit the area caves.

There came a time when the only reason to go down to Cave City seemed to be to visit the cemetery. As years passed our oldest daughter was interested in genealogy and the two of us went back to Cave City and other towns in the area to read family tombstones for dates and full names. Now Interstate I- 75 skirts the towns with just a ramp off and signage into Cave City. We found the downtown mostly vacant and we stayed in a motel and ate near the freeway.

I had contacted the folks who now lived in Mama's home; a house now over 150 years old. I asked if we might visit and they warmly welcomed us to a delightful home inside, beautifully decorated with all advantages that Mama could never have dreamed of. Sadly they told us the motels we'd used with our children were hangouts for teens where drugs were ample. The town is economically depressed. People either work at one of the area caves, the tobacco warehouse or drive to Glasgow or one of the other towns to find employment. Farmers in the area continue to raise Burley tobacco but market for tobacco also has dropped.

I now watch the Kentucky Derby on TV and this year found myself teary when I listened to "My Old Kentucky Home". The memories of four generations and visits over the years have given me time for reflection of what going Down Home has meant in my life.

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