

Cater Memoir

by Emilylyn

Forward

Some people count cracks in the sidewalk, others think about what's for supper, and some remember what they wore to a party in the third grade. And me? Oh, I have spent most of my life thinking about my family. Gift or Curse, but always there. As a child I would look at the blood veins in my arms and wonder which gene of which grandparent was there at that minute.

Later, at family reunions it was evident to me when a cousin wore the smile of an aunt, a daughter laughed the laugh of her mother, and a grandmother saw the world through the eyes of her great-grandfather. No one doubts that we inherit the color of our eyes, our body size, and our health to a great extent. What if we also inherit memories, dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to life? Genetic memory, perhaps--not only through the genes of our parents but also through the genes of great-grandparents who were gone before our birth?

If I could write a story about the lives of my grandparents, would I learn to appreciate the decisions made by them that affect my life even today? Would I gain insight and understanding to help me "see their faces" in my family today? Would a family story enable my great-grandchildren to recognize their loved ones who had died before their birth? After all, isn't history just shared stories preserved for the unborn?

Family stories--oral history, if you will, were the way my grandparents taught me to recognize their grandparents. It was after supper that we would sit on the darkened front porch of my grandparents' house in Hartwell, Georgia.

Even now I can hear the crickets, see the lightening bugs, and feel the motion of the porch swing as I nestled my head into Mama's lap. Granny would be shelling pecans that had fallen from the big tree in the back yard while she told us the story about the time her baby sister Esther climbed onto the red roof of their Papa's barn and had to be coaxed down by her older brothers and frightened mother. We children--my little brothers Dan and Ty, cousins Rosemary, James, Milton and June-- resisted the sandman as long as we could, but before falling asleep and being lifted up and carried into the bedroom for the night, I remember the stories always would drift somehow to Mother Cater.

If Mother Cater could have joined us at the supper table that summer evening I know I would have recognized her immediately. I know she would be wearing a spotlessly clean white dress, her hair would be piled high on her head, and she would smile the smile of her great-granddaughter Nell.

Mother Cater would say that she certainly hoped we were having stewed tomatoes and rice with the fried chicken and homemade biscuits. A wink and a nod from Mother Cater would indicate that she approved of the sweet cinnamon and sugar stickies made from her grandmother's recipe.

After washing and drying the supper dishes and wiping off the big kitchen table that dominated the center of the room, Mother Cater would have joined us on the front porch and "visited" in the deepest sense of the word. The following morning Mother Cater's granddaughter--my granny --would have scurried through the bedrooms making up the beds before Mother Cater had the opportunity to strip away the sheets she believed should be changed daily.

No, I never met Mother Cater--she died when my mother was a little girl. But, I knew Mother Cater, and I recognize her in my life today.

Today it is different. My children seldom experienced the immeasurable happiness and sense of belonging that comes from sitting on a front porch in the heat of August as their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins run their collective hands over the faces of loved ones both present and past. Why not, you ask?

Well, to begin with, we lived a thousand miles away from home, and in our neighborhood there were not many front porches on which to rock. Evenings were air-conditioned, meal time revolved around "scheduled activities" like work, committee meetings, Little League ballgames--and Watching Television. Television--that's how my boys spent an evening in August. Is it conceivable that one day my grown sons will remember the theme song for "The Brady Bunch" and not remember the story of how I met their father?

Impossible, I think now, but in reality I know that such forgetfulness is likely.

Television created a distraction from sharing family stories, but it was not the only culprit. None of the countless stories told by our grandparents were ever written down--those memories were carried away on the breezes that blew across the porch while infants and older children were rocked to sleep. As the memories of my own generation fade with age who will pass along to our great-grandchildren the stories of their forebearers?

Well, how about a book of family stories--a collection of memories that our grandchildren can hold in their hands, one that will enable them to recognize the faces of their forebearers and to hear their silent voices of love. A book that might prevent the threatened extinction of the collective and individual personalities of loved ones long since gone. A

book about a family that survived extraordinary times. A book about individual grandparents who might agree with me that it is not dying we fear so much, but the diminished self caused by passing years and collective forgetfulness.

Families and family stories are fragile things--like a spider's web. They are vulnerable and always dependent on our memory. I am haunted by the story told of a heavy weight boxer who lost his memory from an injury. Months later he returned to the boxing ring with a big sign that he held up between rounds asking, "Can anyone tell me who I am?" Without memory he had lost his identity. Without his memory there was no character.

Perhaps our book of family stories will ensure that our grandchildren will not have to wonder who they are. Perhaps each grandchild will recognize the spirits that form his or her identity, will identify with the shared genes of loved ones, and above all else, will remember that each and everyone matters.

What a wealth of memories have been gathered from various family members to create our story. Most everyone had a story to share and pass along. The faces of loved ones in our stories have become multidimensional because in different stories a loved one is remembered and reflected as a mother, sister, grandmother, brother, aunt, or a cousin.

Collections of information about individuals in our family lead to portraits of unique and inimitable personalities, each with a free-flowing style of expression. As individuals, each family member during his or her lifetime made choices, decided on courses of action, and lived their lives with the results of those choices. And so do we.

Our family is not where it is today because of a "process" over which there was no control. We are where we are today because of particular decisions made by particular loved ones in our collective past. From different backgrounds and with different customs, values, talents, decisions and personalities, each one of our grandparents had a hand in shaping our lives. Each of us got to where we are today as the result of one step, one decision, one act at the time. Nothing was inevitable.

The one common denominator shared by all members of every generation past and present is that of belonging to the same grand family. From the most oldest patriarch to the youngest infant, from the most prominent to the most obscure family member, from loved one remembered to those forgotten in time, we share a family membership full of love, traditions, and heritages.

So, who are we and from where did we come?

As Ben Robertson said in *Red Hills and Cotton*, "By the grace of God, my kinfolks and I are Carolinians" so I can assure you our roots are so intertwined with the roots of the history of South Carolina that it is impossible to separate one from the other.

You will see that our family is represented by just about every South Carolinian in our state history books. We are English, Scotch-Irish, and French Huguenots. We are Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Unitarians. We are merchants, politicians, rice planters, sea masters, doctors, slave owners, abolitionists, and cotton farmers. We have lived in London, New York, Charleston, Greenville, Beaufort, Pendleton, Goose Creek, Anderson, Union, Atlanta and Hartwell. We have been called Cater, Baker, Bohun, Miles, Postell, Fisher, Towning, Horsey, Blassingame, Benson and Brown. And all of us have been here a very long time.

Thomas Cater sunk his family roots into the soil of South Carolina in 1672. Through his branch of our family we were Lowcountry planters with a unique way of understanding the Revolution and appreciating the horror of the War between the States.

Edmund Bohun was our Chief Justice of South Carolina and through him and the Landgrave Edmund Bellinger and their granddaughter Mary Bohun we were given Susannah Baker, grandmother of Thomas Miles Cater.

Grandfather Richard Baker arrived in South Carolina before 1692, served in the Commons House of Assembly, built the historic Archdale Hall, and his marriage to Mary Bohun gave us in 1731 our grandmother Susannah Baker.

John Miles, an English immigrant, planted his family in South Carolina in the late 1660's and in 1773 his great-granddaughter Rachael Miles married the great-grandson of Thomas Cater. Through this branch of our family we were residents of South Carolina's Prince William Parish.

Jean Postell was a French Huguenot refugee who brought his wife Madeleine Pepin to Goose Creek, South Carolina before 1679. From John, Jr., the youngest of their four sons, we were given Captain Andrew Postell. His daughter Sarah McPherson Postell and our grandfather Thomas Cater were married in 1805 and that union produced Dr. Andrew Postell Cater of Beaufort and Pendleton, South Carolina.

John Blassingame, a Scotch-Irishman, settled in the Upcountry of South Carolina in the 1700's. Persecuted by the Whigs and survivor of the Battle of Kings Mountain in 1780, he married Obedience Westfield. Their son General John Blassingame was one of the first settlers of Greenville and his wife Elizabeth Easley gave us our grandmother Esther Blassingame. She married Enoch Berry Benson, and their daughter Martha Benson

eventually married Dr. Andrew Postell Cater.

Thomas Horsey was our English grandfather who settled in Charleston in the 1700 and became a prosperous tinsmith. Is it possible that his father was Gov. Samuel Horsey--appointed to be the first royal governor of South Carolina, but dying before he could take office? Through the Horsey family branch we were wholesale merchants in Charleston and New York before becoming refugees in Hartwell and Atlanta during Reconstruction. Thomas Jones Horsey and his wife Florentha Reed were the paternal grandparents of Emily Horsy (our "Mother Cater"). Mother Cater's maternal grandparents were Sarah Towning and Samuel Fisher.

The Fisher branch of our family is the one about which we know the least. A prominent and wealthy English family, I suspect they lived in South Carolina before the Revolution. American patriots, the first grandfather I can verify is Samuel Fisher, a shipmaster who called London, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston his home. His daughter Emily Fisher married Thomas M. Horsey, and that union gave us our Mother Cater (Emily Horsey Cater).

Our grandmother Sarah Towning was the sister of Richard Towning, a London distiller. A world-traveller, Richard Towning bought a farm on the southern end of Manhattan in New York, and at his death in 1843 the proceeds from the sale of that farm were inherited by his sister Sarah Towning (Mrs. Samuel Fisher) of Charleston. The Towning Farm of the 1800's is Greenwich Village today.

The Enoch Berry Bensons were an Upcountry branch of our family in South Carolina. Through them we were members of the Famers' Society of Pendleton in the 1800, we built and operated the longest-running textile mill in South Carolina, and we were pioneers in the commercial and residential development of Hartwell, Georgia. Enoch Berry Benson married Esther Blassingame and their daughter Martha Benson married Dr. Andrew Postell Cater in 1836. William Harrison Cater, son of Martha Benson and Dr. Andrew Postell Cater was the Confederate soldier who married Emily Horsey--our "Mother Cater".

Another Scotch-Irish grandfather was John Brown. Coming from Maryland in the late 1700's John Brown planted his roots in South Carolina in the Union District. A fiercely independent frontiersman who later prospered in Union and Pendleton and then moved on to become a founding father of Anderson, our grandfather John Brown gave us his grandson Albert Frederick Brown. Albert Frederick Brown married Emily Horsey Cater's daughter Maude Postell Cater, and that union gave me my grandmother Emmie Horsey Brown.

Another part of our story will focus on the family of Milton Christian Oglesby, the older man my grandmother Emmie Horsey Brown married when she was eighteen years old. Their union gave me my mother Evelyn Oglesby.

And yet another story unfolds with the family of Louis Childs, the man my mother married. The Childs name continues to be carried by my brothers Dan and Ty and their sons William, Matthew and Gregory.

I married Daniel Simpson Sanders and not only do I want my sons to remember the story of how I met their father, I want them to remember his grandparents' grandparents. Farmers in Hartwell and Elberton, Georgia on the Sanders side, and town folks in Cartersville, Georgia on the Simpson side, they taught me to love and appreciate the family stories that were told at family reunions, at picnics in the back yard, and at the supper table of my mother-in-law Mildred Simpson Sanders.

The telling will never be done. The more learned, the more to be learned. This story will be a narrative with no beginning, no middle, and no end. And while these parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and siblings belong to countless other relatives, that does not diminish their importance to me or my children and grandchildren.

So gather round the front porch, my beloved family, cradle your youngsters in your laps, feel the refreshing breeze as it cools the necks of we who wait, and let's remember how we became what we are today. "The past is not over; it is not even past", said John Steinback. Listen to the silence. Hear the voices of your loved ones. They are our claim in heaven. You and I may live to a ripe old age, but we will not stop loving those who died earlier. We who are left are not afraid to die because there is a little bit of ourselves already there. Hear their stories. They will speak for themselves. We all do.

"You never enjoy the world aright till you remember how lately you were made, and how wonderful it was when you came into it."

Thomas Trehearne