

Helen Shead

My Mother

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Her paternal ancestor was born in 1775, illegitimate grandson of a revolutionary. She always wanted to join the DAR but in those days could not. The illegitimate son's mother's husband fought in the Revolutionary War and was rewarded with land in Eastport Maine right on the border with Canada. When President Jefferson put an embargo on trade with England the former patriots of Eastport decided to go into smuggling. Papers were forged and ships' flags and names were changed and commerce went on under the table. The Sheads made a significant amount of money smuggling and during the War of 1812 Oliver Shead became a Colonel and a hero in that war.

After the wars the family continued to engage in smuggling across the border for generations working remotely with relatives in Savannah Georgia as well. (Savannah bordered Florida which previously was not part of the US). That is how Loring Wheel Shead ended up fighting for the Confederacy. He was visiting Savannah when the Civil War started and was given two choices - either fight for the Confederacy or go to prison. He choose to fight for the South and ended up in Cobb's Legion with Lee in Petersburg.

He came home to Maine and became a traveling photographer with a photographic wagon and old fashioned camera. He married my great-grandmother who was a widow of a Union officer of a Black unit who died of consumption acquired in Libby prison in Richmond, VA. She was part Native American. They had two sons one being my grandfather who worked as a conductor on trains out of Boston until his rich uncle from Maine, a smuggler, bought him his farm in North Grovnersdale, Connecticut. The farm cost \$10,000.

My mother was born 113 years ago - Helen Sophia Shead (she hated that middle name) in the year 1906. She went to high school aboard a train riding in the red caboose because of her father having been a conductor. She lived up to her fiery and rebellious ancestors' reputation by supporting women's right to vote. After women did get the right to vote she continued to support the cause by baking cakes on Election Day - it was a day of celebration.



She learned to drive a car and had a small roadster. The story of her racing a Massachusetts policeman to the state border and winning was repeated many times over the years. When she was in her twenties she and a few of her girl friends drove to Florida. It was a rather wild place then. She did not go to college because her father did not think women should be educated. So she became a secretary. She loved to travel and often said she had "itchy feet" meaning she did not like remaining in one place. She loved a wide variety of people - all kinds of people - the more exotic the better.

In her formative years she lived on her father's farm. She told stories of how cold it was in the winter. There was no running water in the house and no central heat. In the morning when she got up she would wash her face in her bedroom using a pitcher and bowl. She had to first break the ice to pour out the water. The farm had an outhouse - no indoor plumbing.

They also had a horse named Pete and he was contrary. My mother used to drive Pete while he pulled the hay rake. My grandfather would sit on the porch and keep an eye on the wayward horse but the land was hilly. And so when Old Pete and my mother were out of my grandfather's sight - behind the hill - old Pete would start racing and my mother would have to push the hay rake foot pedal hard and fast - just about as fast as she could - to spill out the hay behind the hayrack. But when she and Old Pete would get to the top of the hill where her father could see what was going on the old horse would slow to a walk, put his head down and look like he was a tired old plough horse.



My grandfather gave my mother her first rifle when she was twelve. She became a crack shot. Later when she was married to my father the two of them would have contests shooting tin cans covers hung from a line. Once she was doing so well against him he got miffed. He said "I bet you can't shoot the line holding the targets!" And so she took aim and on the first shot hit the string that held the targets. When she was a teenager my grandfather built a small club house for the local teenagers so they could have dances on weekends. Even though they lived on a rather remote farm they had a good social life.

My grandfather had 400 acres and 50 cows that he and his children milked at 4 am in the morning every morning. Lightning storms bothered my grandfather - I remember him saying "Always get up at night when storms come and make sure to

put your shoes on. Just in case". One night when they lived on the farm a thunderstorm came. About 50 of his cows took shelter under a large tree. The lightning struck that tree and killed his cows. So he was out of business. They sold the farm and moved to Northboro.

As a secretary my mother met my father at Heald Machine Company in Worcester where he was the head of research. He became world famous and she accompanied him overseas to Europe and Japan and elsewhere many times. She particularly loved to meet those Europeans who had hidden Jewish people in their homes during WWII. She often was the host of a number of engineers who would come to our house in Northboro. The Queen of England's mechanical engineer, Dr. Galloway, came to visit a number of times as did other foreign engineers. The first one came when I was about 6 years old...I remember he was a Black African from Nigeria and I asked him about lions and tigers and he told me they only lived in zoos like here and I was very disappointed. A woman engineer from Pakistan came to visit as did a Swiss who had saved many Jewish children by smuggling them through his country. He had his adopted Jewish son who lived in Australia with him. I asked the younger man "Why do you live so far away from Europe?" And he told me "I wanted to get as far away as I could".

She had three children, four grandchildren. She died in 1967 not quite 70 years old.

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