



Five Generations

by Wilma Lewis

Age is not measured by years — it is a state of mind. And I was remembering that as I looked at a picture on my desk. It is a photograph of five generations of women, taken in 1903. All lived in the small town of Humeston, Iowa, within three blocks of each other. All sat together in the family pew in the little white church close by.

In those days it was quite fashionable to have family pictures taken by a good photographer, either singly or in groups. The five-generation photograph was decided on with October 5, 1903, selected as the date of the sitting. Each woman was dressed in her Sunday best, with her hair carefully combed.

At the far right was the youngest of the five generations — a golden-haired girl of seven, named Wilma Barker. Her hair was long and straight with a ribbon bow on the right side. Her low-necked dress had a Big Bertha collar of embroidered muslin and she wore a chain necklace of tiny hearts around her neck. Her head was tilted as though she was wondering what it was all about.

To the left of Wilma was her mother, Ollie Barker, age thirty. She had skin as soft and creamy as satin, gray eyes, and long black hair that she wore piled high on her head in a pompadour. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and I desperately wanted to be like her. But only our eyes and

mouths were alike, the rest was my dad. She taught a Sunday School class, sang in the choir, and worked in Ladies' Aid. Her cream-colored and black waist had a high neck and wide lapels. The front was black velvet, trimmed with heavy ecru lace.

To the left of Ollie was her mother, Asalee Stone, age fifty, with hair parted primly in the middle, and with the same gray eyes as my mother. Her dress was of ivory taffeta that rustled when she walked. The neck was high and the entire front was white, covered by homemade black Battenberg lace. Asalee raised six children — Ollie, Bertha, Sylvia, Floyd, Roy, and Jennie. Grandmother Stone was an ambitious woman who had learned to be a nurse. She traveled all around the county, assisting our old country doctor, riding in a buggy, and often through mud and snow. She cared for mothers and new babies and helped wherever she could. Mother stayed at home and cared for the family. In her spare time after supper, Grandmother Stone made patchwork quilts. She hoped to complete one for each child.

To the left of Asalee was Great-grandmother Taylor, age eighty. She wore her hair pulled back into a tight little knot in back, wore steel-rimmed glasses, and a very pleasant smile. Her family included Etta, Paulina, Clara, Asalee, and one son, Sylvester. Two of the children had married and moved away from Iowa — Paulina to California, and Clara to Kansas — while two

of the children had remained in Humeston after their marriage — Asalee and Sylvester. That left Etta, an old maid who kept house for her mother and Great-great-grandmother Steele.

Great-great-grandmother Steele's house was big and filled with treasures collected through the years. The living room was large with long lace curtains at the windows and dark red drapes always drawn against the sun. The carpet was a dark brown with huge pink cabbage roses in it. Tall-backed horsehair chairs were there and an old-fashioned horsehair couch. I remember I always kept sliding off the couch when I tried to sit on it. Etta would give me a big seashell to hold to my ear so that I could hear the sound of the sea. Paulina had sent it to her mother from California, so it was very special. In the exact center of this room was a big walnut table. On it was the big family Bible, containing a complete account of births and deaths throughout the years. Tucked away between the pages were articles about family and friends. It had an ornate brass clasp on the front. It was never read. There were smaller Bibles for that. The family Bible was held in reverence by the whole family group.

Etta kept the house immaculate and was a wonderful cook. She made the best old-fashioned molasses cookies. Mother would take me to visit the grandmothers and I would sit on Great-great-grandmother Steele's horsehair chair. Great-grandmother Taylor would spread a fine linen napkin on my knees, and Etta would bring me a plate, hand-painted and fragile as an eggshell. On it were placed two molasses cookies, and there were no second helpings. Great-grandmother Taylor believed that two cookies were enough for a little girl. She never knew that I could have eaten at least six. I loved those visits to the big house and could hardly wait for the next time I would be all dressed up for another.

All this beauty belonged to Great-great-grandmother Steele, age ninety-eight, and the

fifth lady in the photograph. Born in 1805, she was the only daughter among six sons. She walked tall and straight, and carried a gold-headed cane. Her dress was a dull black alpaca with no trim except for a tiny white collar of fine linen. Her hair was snow white and, as in the photograph, she always wore a little black lace cap tied under her chin. She loved me and I adored her. She frequently sat in her old rocking chair placed by the window in the big old-fashioned kitchen, and watched Etta baking cookies and getting meals for the three of them.

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Age is not a question of years — it is a state of mind. The five generations never thought of being old, they lived one day at a time, and never worried about tomorrow.

Great-great-grandmother Steele died at the age of ninety-nine and was still walking and wiping the dishes, then sitting gently rocking as she had done for so many years.

Great-grandmother Taylor died at the age of ninety-two and spent her time making lovely doilies out of plain string.

Grandmother Stone lived to be eighty-nine and made beautiful tatting. She fashioned her own designs, and could sell more than she could make. One year when they needed a wagon around the place, she had sold enough tatting to buy it. She said she was the only woman she knew who had ever tatted a wagon.

Ollie Barker lived to be eighty-seven, and spent her time crocheting gifts for her friends. Some were linen handkerchiefs with wide colored edges, some were hot dish mats all white with colored borders.

And what about the last member of the five generations of women in the photograph? And why do I remember so much about each woman? I am Wilma, that little girl with the long blonde hair. And now I am almost eighty-nine and I'm remembering all the yesterdays. □