

Elizabeth Rubley As Remembered by Viola Mae Rubley

Written by Ellen Hayes

My grandmother (Viola Mae Rubley), though soft spoken and inclined more to listening than chatting, spoke warmly and enthusiastically about her grandmother (Elizabeth Rubley, wife of Charles Rubley). She clearly had fond memories of time with her, and learned many things in the kitchen with her. She was given to say that her grandmother was "the best cook in the world". That amuses me because I consider MY grandmother a marvelous cook: without a recipe as a guide she could create just about anything, from practically nothing. I remember enjoying being in HER kitchen watching her create things with an ease I never developed. Outside her kitchen window I could see an abundant garden full of vegetables and berries, with peach trees along side, and chicken coup behind. Having been from the Midwest, only in Alabama for short visits, this was a wonder to behold. With the kitchen as the heart of the home, vocabulary even used cooking terms: "He can't even fry an egg" was the measure of someone's worth. That is not to say she was given to be judgmental: I don't remember her saying an unkind word, ever. Southern charm prevailed with her.....something she may have learned from her own mother, Cora Lee Thomas Rubley, who was probably the sweetest soul I have ever known, despite a life of hardship.

My grandmother would have had her first opportunity to know Elizabeth (her grandmother) when she was about 5 years old. Adolph, with Cora Lee, had returned to Tennessee for a time to work the mines, where another sister, Louise, was born in Coalmont in 1908/1909. (my records vary). I would assume that Mae, and her younger sister Geraldine spent time in and around the kitchen with their mother and grandmother. However, her greater and more memorable time would probably have been during the period Charles Sr and Elizabeth were in Walker County Alabama. Though records are not clear at this point, it is thought they were in the area for around a year about 1916 or 1917.

Mae would have been about 13 years old, and certainly a helper in the kitchen. She said her grandmother loved to bake (bread especially) and that should would make her own yeast patties and put them out to dry for future use. She remembered what she thought was curious, "She used to put an egg in her pies". This led me to believe she in fact made a tarte, which would have been customary in the Alsace-Lorraine region from which she may have come. The family rumor was that Elizabeth had picked grapes as a child, and to escape the harsh work her mother hid her in a trunk and escaped to Switzerland. This also supports the notion she may have come from the grape-growing region of Alsace-Lorraine, but there is no proof of this, other than the family did seem to enjoy wine. I am told that wine was served at all holiday meals. (Beer was served at other times).

The Rubli (later Rubley) family loved music. Elizabeth loved to sing 'Deutch songs" (which would have meant German songs), and "Grandma and pa were really good dancers, you should of seen them square dance" is written on a note I have. She adds that everyone in the family played instruments: William, the Bass horn; Adolph, the French Harp; Emil, the Drums, and Lena both the Piano and Organ. The entire family (minus daughter Elizabeth and son Charles Jr who were in Arkansas) must have enjoyed some fun times together in Walker County.

My grandmother felt quite certain the family came from Bern Switzerland and that Charles Sr was the only brother who emigrated. Of course the family may have originally been from outside the Bern area, or this could have meant they were from the old canton of Bern which would have included areas that are now in other cantons, such as Aargau. It is also possible that additional relatives came at another time but did not know how to contact one another, though this seems unlikely since immigration patterns were rather well known and word spread quickly through extended families of origin.

By the age of 16 Mae was a school teacher , and by 17 (in 1920) she was married. Her grandfather Charlie died in 1919 after having returned to Tennessee. Not long after the death of her husband (perhaps 4 years) the story is that Elizabeth packed her trunk, slipped out one night, and boarded a train she thought might take her back to Switzerland. For many years her family did not know what had happened to her. They later learned she was found in Nashville needing shelter and was taken in by the LITTLE SISTERS OF THE POOR, a Catholic Charity, where she lived for about 10 years until her death in 1935. She is buried there. At the time of her death she was blind; her glasses and a few belongings were returned to one of her children.

My grandmother said Elizabeth was a proud woman, and very pretty. It seems she also had a vitality and stamina that made it possible for her to thrive, despite the many challenges, hardships, and surprises that must have come her way as she created a life in a new world, without the familiarity and comfort of the 'known' world she left behind.

We can be grateful for and appreciate her obvious strength and courage.