

Blue Bellies and Personality Plus: A Tribute to My Mom

By Nick Gier

My mother was a remarkable woman. “Lots of spunk” would be a good way to describe her. She was a fiery red-head, and she was just as feisty as Lucille Ball. She never came to blows with my Job-like father, but she did once empty a waste-paper basket on his head.

When my mom praised other people for having “personality plus,” she was also including herself. She always complained about why her vivacity did not “rub off” on her two sons, but she did not realize how difficult it was to develop any personality at all in her presence. Having spunk appears to be a zero-sum game: she had all of it and we had none.

My mother also complained about why I did not smile when I was playing my accordion in public. (The answer was simple: I was not enjoying myself.) When she caught me whistling while I was practicing one day, she made sure that my teacher learned of this at my next lesson. With a very intimidating “Mammy” Prentice and my mother standing over me, I could not produce even a whisper of a whistler. I was so relieved. I did not want to appear on the Lawrence Welk Show as the amazing whistling accordionist. For more on Mammy Prentice go to www.NickGier.com/accordions.pdf.

My mother had a quick wit and peppered her speech with colorful phrases. Now that I’m older and appreciate my deceased mom more than ever, I find myself repeating many of those phrases. Growing up I thought they were original with her, but I’ve learned that many of them were current in her day.

When I get an invitation, I cannot resist the temptation to say “I’ll be there with bells on, as my mom would always say.” At the sight of a beautiful sight or a nice piece of craftwork (usually her own), she would say “feast your eyes on this.” At an intersection she would declare “the coast is clear,” or an uninvited guest would “barge right in.”

There was one phrase that induces puzzled looks on everyone’s faces. When anyone had failed at a task (and that was often!), my mother would immediately advise: “You’ll just have to lick your (cow) calf over again.”

Her remarks could also cut to the quick. I remember coming home and showing my first publication to my parents. It was on the religious view of the Founding Fathers, and my father said something like “Good job, son”! My mother’s response was “I don’t care about those old farts”!

When my dad wanted to take his sons to an elk hunting camp in the Wallowas, my mom would always object. Her dear boys would be subjected to crude language and

rude behavior. The delicious irony, however, was that she was the dirty joke teller in the family. My dad would turn beet red when she told one of her stories. She would always retort that she learned them from him.

My mother's family were tight-fisted Scots-Irish from Missouri, and my brother and I never understood one of most her provocative statements. We didn't know if she was teasing or if she were serious when she exclaimed: "Did you know that people from Missouri have blue bellies?!"

We were startled and puzzled by this, but we were too afraid to ask about these strange stomachs. We certainly didn't want her to show us either, even though I later learned that Missouri was the "Show Me" state. I would now like to ask any agreeable Missourian to show me her belly.

Even after much internet search, I am none the wiser about my mom's amazing pronouncement. Because of their blue uniforms and their alleged penchant for cowardice, Union troops were known to crawl on blue bellies. Missourians, however, supported both sides in the war, so many of them would have gray stomachs instead.

My mom was certainly not comparing Missourians to blue-bellied lizards, nor would she have known that today some women who fail to reach orgasm complain of a "blue belly." I really regret that I never had the courage to ask her about this, that is, about Blue-Bellied Missourians.

My mother was a very enterprising woman. She helped her own mother run a boarding house in Evanston, Wyoming, and she always boasted about running her own hot dog stand in the city. She also bragged about the fact that she overruled her mother about not having a room for a handsome man who showed up in the middle of the night. She gave up her own room, slept on the couch, and married that man after a two-week courtship. (They both had to break off previous wedding engagements!)

As a train master on the Union Pacific Railroad, my father was gone for long periods of time. My brother and I would run away from this strange man when he came home. This broke my father's heart, so he gave up a good job with a pension.

My parents loaded everything they could not sell into a 1947 Mercury Coup, drove west on U. S. 30, and bought a dairy farm in Eagle Point, Oregon. I didn't like the place because the Tom turkeys would chase me, and my mother did not like farm life at all.

After 18 months, we moved to Medford and my mother managed a mobile home park while my dad was an accountant in the city. She raised chinchillas and tried to sell mobile homes. The market for chinchilla pelts fell dramatically and trailer sales were very slow. Sadly, all of my mother's business schemes were failures.

My mother was a creative craftswoman. She would make beautiful artificial corsages and sell them at local taverns. While my father drank at the bar, my teetotaling mother—all tartered up—would convince men (she didn't take "No" for an answer) to buy a corsage for their wives. She could easily make \$50 in a night.

My mother was featured in the local newspaper for her pheasant feather hats, and in her senior years she recycled and redecorated greeting cards. After reading one of my columns about speaking at a faculty meeting, she created a masterpiece. It is a driftwood collage with carefully chosen gnarled pieces, which actually look like craggy, old professors.

I like to say that I am a hybrid of my mother and father. In person I'm very much like my calm and gentle father, but my mom comes out in my political activities and my writing. It appears that I got a little of that spunk afterall.

Thank you, Mother, for giving me the special spirit (albeit sometimes impolitic) and the drive that have made me what I am. If there is anything funny in this column, it came straight from her.

Nick Gier of Moscow still has a soft spot in his heart for Oregon, but he has enjoyed the people and the beauty of a Paradise called Palouse since 1972.