

FAMILY DIFFERENCES

Margaret Cauthen

In the summer of 1945, while working for Standard Oil Company of California, in Yosemite National Park, I met Jack Cauthen. In September I returned to Bakersfield to teach Fifth-grade. Jack went home to Visalia and found a job with Southern California Gas Company.

Jack had come to Bakersfield each weekend and in late October suggested I journey to Visalia. He said, "Ride the Trailways bus up Highway "99" to the road into Visalia, catch a taxi to 427 South Garden Street. My mother will be there to greet you. I'll be home soon after five pm."

I followed the instructions I had been given. The cab driver took me to the correct address. I rang the door bell and was startled when an elderly woman opened the door.

I said, "I'm looking for Jack Cauthen's mother."

In a low raspy voice she said, "I'm his mother. Come in."

I was about to learn how different two families can be. Here was a woman in her mid-seventies. My mother was forty-six. I didn't know how to converse with her, so I listened as she told me of the travails she had endured.

All at once I realized I had sat there twisting my pearl necklace until the strand had broken and fallen to the floor. Jack came through the door as I was on my hands and knees picking up the pearls. He brought me a bag in which to put the beads. He then said, "Give me some time to clean up and then we'll be on our way."

Soon he returned, kissed his mom goodbye and we were off for the evening. I would spend the night at his brother's house. I hadn't met these folks and didn't see them until morning when I arose and found my way to the kitchen. There another surprise confronted me as Mack and Crystal were the age of my parents. I was totally confused.

I came from a family in which there was one aunt, one uncle, one cousin and one set of grandparents. Another difference between the two families was no one had ever stayed, overnight in my parent's home. The Cauthens were a mystery to me.

Jack explained he had been born when his mother was forty-three and his dad was forty-eight. He had nieces and nephews in his age group. Now I found myself about to 'become aunt to four nieces and three nephews, some older than I was and others close to my age. There would be three sisters-in-law my mother's age. It became apparent I was going to be marrying into a

family very different from that in which I had been raised. Could I get all these new names straight in my mind?

For some reason my father discouraged contact with others. As I look back and try to find a reason, I come up with two possibilities. One, I believe he never recovered from his trench-fighting experiences in WWI. Second, he hoped we would leave the refinery town and better ourselves.

In the nine months Jack and I were engaged I found many more differences between our families. After the Civil War, the Cauthens moved from Alabama to Texas, then in 1919 George Cauthen and family, driving across the "old plank road", migrated to the Imperial Valley where he farmed his one hundred acres. No subject was taboo and of course being farmers, they discussed the farm animals and the breeding of_ such. In my family no one ever spoke of any part or function of the body.

My mother was so prim and proper she taught us the way to hang the laundry on the clotheslines, first line--bed sheets, second line--underwear, third line--towels. This way, people passing by wouldn't catch a glimpse of the unmentionables. Outer clothing was hung on line four or five.

Jack's family had suffered during the depression. The siblings, with their families, came home to live off the land and pool their few resources.

In contrast my family never missed a pay day. We three girls had our teeth straightened, were given piano lessons and the family took a vacation each summer.

What I was enjoying about the Cauthens was the obvious love that flowed between them. They supported one another, hoped for each member to have success, would have a word of encouragement when it was needed.

It seemed to me, no matter how hard I tried, I never achieved high enough to please my parents and playing tennis, only the missed shots were noticed. I yearned for a compliment that never came.

I wondered how I'd explain to my father that the Cauthens were democrats, read the Los Angeles Examiner and to top it off, they ate biscuits and gravy for breakfast.

We were sedate Presbyterians, staunch republicans and read only the Los Angeles Times, at that time a fine conservative newspaper.

I learned farmers not only work hard, but if the market isn't favorable to their product they can earn little money in a season. Weather was important to them.

Of course the sisters-in-law and Jack's mother were puzzled by my lack of knowledge of what they saw as necessary abilities of a wife. They all tsk, tsked when I had to say "no" when

asked if I knew how to kill and dress a chicken. Would I know how to help deliver the babies showing up in the barn? Did I know when and how to plant a vegetable garden?

Jack was special to his family. His two brothers and sister treated him as though he were their son. To his nieces and nephews he was a hero. I had to prove I deserved to be married to this man they all adored.

By 1955, all the nieces and nephews were married with babies. It was decided there should be a family reunion in Visalia. We descended upon Mooney's Grove with unbelievable amounts of food, folding chairs, change of clothes for kids and games to play. We had home-made ice cream, the envy of nearby picnickers.

By the end of the day the kids, ages eight and younger were all tired and the cute starched dresses were limp, the suits the boys were wearing were dirty and needing to be washed. The moms and dads, after chasing youngsters, keeping them out of the water, pushing them in the swings and settling little squabbles, were weary, but all agreed it had been an exciting day and we should plan to do it 'in the not too distant future.

Over the years the extended family gathered many times. The children of the nieces and nephews were getting married, which brought the relatives to the ceremony. Other times we came together for funerals of the three older siblings and their spouses. I never ceased being impressed to see how each person made an effort to attend every event.

By 1991, things had settled into a calm routine for most members of the clan. We had one more generation of young people who needed to experience an old-fashioned family reunion.

On May 25, 1991, fifty-four people of the Cauthen Family traveled to Mooney's Grove in Visalia, California. They came from San Diego, Los Angeles, Bakersfield, Fresno, Reedley, Madera, Salinas, Santa Clara, San Mateo, Sacramento, Oakdale and Reno, Nevada.

We tried to replicate what had taken place in the fifties, with chicken cooked on grills, two families making home-made ice cream, and others bringing home baked desserts. We all stayed in the Holiday Inn, with a big brunch the following morning.

By 1993 the original four siblings had all died. Two nieces and one nephew of my age group were gone. As our numbers dwindled, we still found reasons to gather. One family would be in charge making all the arrangements from choosing the location to reserving hotel

accommodations and making dinner reservations. Our last reunion, with a good turnout, was in 2007, for my son Jeff's 60th birthday. His two children, Emmy and John, did all the planning. It was a successful surprise birthday party at the Prado in Balboa Park.

I sat there with my mind going back to Visalia, 1955. Fifty-two years had passed. The reunions have always been places for remembering the good times, laughing at the funny stories

of times past. I wiped away a tear as I realized, of the seven nieces and nephews who had so puzzled me in 1945, only one niece was still living.

My family always called me Marg. That sounded too harsh to these gentle folks of whom I became part. To them, I've always been Marge. This describes them. They are soft spoken, gentle, kind, caring people who always welcome and feed those who come to their door. How fortunate I've been to have these- folks at my side for sixty-seven years.

I hear my husband calling, "Marg, come join me on the patio. The Master Painter has been at it again."

I sit down in my comfortable chair to view this vibrant piece of art covering the western sky. I feel, excitement coursing through my veins as I take in the ever-changing image before me. I want the intensity of the sunset to stay as it is, but nature has its own plan.

Soon the brightness is waning. Only muted hues remain. Just as the sunset changed I, too, change. I went from excitement when I first reached the patio, to a calmness filling my body as the sky darkens.