

IT'S ALL ABOUT MABEL

The Life of Mabel May Sasser

Written by Mabel's great-grandson, Bradley McMasters



AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am Brad. Bradley Jay McMasters. I am the great-grandson of Mabel May Sasser. Her youngest daughter was my maternal grandmother, but Mabel was *Grandma*. She raised my mother and, in many ways, helped raise me. She gave me the safety, structure, and steadiness I did not always have at home. Until I was fifteen, I spent most school breaks, summers, and holidays with her.

Mabel shaped me in ways that stayed. She gave me a work ethic, manners, politeness, a love of history, flowers, cooking, and a reverence for the elderly. She is why I got haircuts, new jeans, and tennis shoes. She is why, even at fifty-seven, I still push my hands deep into my pockets while walking through stores so I will not touch and break anything. She is why I cannot take samples at Costco because it still feels too much like begging. Hers is the voice telling me to hold scissors downward, not to put too much water on potatoes when boiling them, and to “go hold the door for that lady, young man.”

She was stern. She had expectations. She didn't have the luxury of being soft with her children and grandchildren. But for many years, I was the youngest of her great grandbabies. When she finally sat down after her chores, I was the one who climbed onto her soft lap while my older brothers, six, eight, and ten years ahead of me, raced around the farm, climbed ladders to haylofts, caught crawdads, and crossed railroad tracks. I remember the feel of the soft skin beneath her arms, still the softest thing I have ever touched, and I remember kissing her dry, skinny lips.

I followed her through the kitchen while she made gravy, canned her vegetables, and watched pancakes for the bubbles that meant they were ready to flip. I may have been the only grandchild who spent long breaks and summers with her without other grandchildren or cousins around. I sat with her while she had her hair done in Rosalia, sorted clothing for the bazaar at the Oddfellows Lodge in Oakesdale, called on friends and family in Tekoa, and told old stories.

I loved my grandma. I still love her very much.

I have always been drawn to genealogy. My mother had very few memories of her traumatic childhood before Mabel adopted her at age eleven, and that absence intrigued me. There were questions my mother could not answer. Just days after my high school graduation in 1987, I drove to California to begin looking for some of those answers.

At eighteen, I walked through cemeteries alone. I visited Mabel's daughter, my great-aunt Evelyn, whom I already knew and loved from childhood. I stayed several days in her Lafayette home, letting her feed me and letting me swim in her pool while I asked about her childhood and about her sister, the grandmother I had never known. I also visited, and met for the first and only time, Aunt Florence in Lake County, my maternal grandfather's sister, whom my mother had not seen since she was eleven. Florence told stories from a perspective I had never heard, including the first unkind words I remember hearing about Mabel.

I was drawn to my Uncle Roy on my father's side and my Uncle Chris on my mother's side because, like me, they were the *kin keepers* of their generation. They held the knowledge of the past and carried stories others had forgotten. They are still the people I share new information, photographs, and

documents with. Even in their late seventies and early eighties, they are the ones who become most excited by each discovery.

My twenties were full of the usual motion of young adulthood: living in different cities, being with friends, and making my own memories. In my thirties, when life settled, I returned to genealogy and began asking questions of aging family members.

Just as many in my grandmother's and great-grandmother's generations were dying, and just as some who remained were losing the ability to answer old questions, the internet opened new doors. The LDS records became accessible. Then came Ancestry.com. In my forties, the research became serious. A large family tree began to reveal stories of immigration and migration I had never known: Prussians fleeing Russian-controlled Poland and Germany; Swiss Benedictine Catholics settling in rural American farming communities and building churches, monasteries, and convents; Armenians surviving genocide in Turkey and coming to America, where they embraced the new Jehovah's Witness faith; families tied to western expansion and Oklahoma land runs. Each branch created another rabbit hole.

During the COVID pandemic shutdown in 2020, Ancestry partnered with Newspapers.com, and the information became overwhelming. I decided to narrow my focus to Mabel and to reconstruct her life from 1896 until her death in 1984.

I had no idea that decision would become a multi-year commitment involving planes, trains, automobiles, a travel trailer, new relationships with people I had never met, and the discovery of very dark information. I visited Kansas, where Mabel was born, touched buildings she had likely entered, and walked properties where she had lived with her family. I followed the Oregon Trail, pulling my own travel trailer over parts of the route Mabel had crossed as a little girl in a covered wagon.

I went to Idaho and Washington, where Mabel played with cousins, met a boy she would marry decades later, watched Halley's Comet, and breathed smoke from the Great Fire of 1910. I followed her to Oklahoma, where she became a young woman, a wife, a mother, and then a young widow. I traveled to Southern California, where she became a working woman in the growing telephone industry and registered to vote immediately after women were granted that right.

I traced her years raising children as a single, widowed mother during the Great Depression, and her career as it carried her back to the Pacific Northwest. I followed her return to California to care for her ailing mother. I discovered in one year, Mabel buried her mother, married off her youngest child, became a grandmother, married Bill Norton, and moved to the farm where I would later form some of my best memories and that still visits me in dreams.

I visited more headstones than I could count and lovingly touched every standing house where I knew Mabel had lived. Along the way, I found myself taking a few side quests into subjects like westward expansion, carousels, patent medicines, women's suffrage, telephone operators, and other details that helped me better understand the world Mabel lived in. I did far more research than I expected, not because every detail belonged in the story, but because each one helped me get a clearer feel for the era. Let's just say, I got deeply, fully, and unapologetically pulled in.

The number of people who remember Mabel is dwindling. Even after I began this project, my Uncle Tim died. Tim was Mabel's grandson and adopted son, and my mother's younger brother. I still regret

not visiting him sooner, but I am grateful that, hours before he died, I was able to text with him and tell him that I, his sister, and his grandmother loved him very much.

By my count, only eleven direct descendants who knew or spent time with Mabel are still living: Sherrie Ann, Twain, Chris, Keith, Terri, Randy, David, Steven, Twain Jr., Brandy, Debbie, and I. That truth is part of why this research became a memoir.

I want the dozens of third-, fourth-, and fifth-great-grandchildren already living, and those still to come, to know Mabel. I want them to know that the perseverance and resilience of one extraordinary woman helped make their lives possible. I want them to understand why they may carry a pioneering spirit, value work, believe in voting and service, and care deeply for children and grandchildren.

It is Mabel. It is all about Mabel.



Mabel & Bradley Jay
Kooskia, ID
circa 1972