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CUT YOUR OWN SWITCH

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This paper involves distrust, anger, death, class conflict, bravery, loyalty, and love. In short, it is a family story titled “Cut Your Own Switch.”

We all have grandparents as part of our history. Some have experienced all four of their grandparents and some may not have known any due to untimely end of life or physical separation. However, most would know of their grandparents, and that provides a window into history that includes their lives and the lifespan of their grandparents. In my case, I only knew one grandparent – my mother’s mother, Clara Hardy. This paper has been partially written for a long time, but Jim Friedman’s excellent paper on suffrage prompted me to expose you to Clara. For sake of simplicity, I will refer to her by her first name – something I never did as a child.

Since my family was a military family, my exposure to Clara came in relatively short periods of a year or two at a time separated by gaps due to relocation with my father’s duty assignments. However, even with limited contact, Clara was one of my major formative forces. I quickly realized that although there are some people who do not suffer fools gladly, Clara did not suffer many people gladly – particularly idle people. She had a very clear view of children – get to be 18 and be ready to be on your own. A comment from her curly haired, cute grandchild that he was bored, would quickly bring fun things to do such as scrub the kitchen floor or muck out the hen house. Cute got you no points in Clara’s house. During WWII, as with many, she kept a productive vegetable garden and a few chickens. She would send me to hen house before breakfast to gather eggs. Not just to reach under the hens and grab their eggs, but keep track of the egg production from each hen. She made it clear that, if a hen stopped delivering her share of eggs, that hen would soon be dinner. Next came the lesson about how to wring the neck of an unproductive hen by a quick twist of the wrist. I remember being told on one occasion to go out to the fenced yard and capture a specific hen for Sunday dinner. Since I had feed in my hand, the hen was fairly easy to catch – even for a 6 or 7 year old. However, it was the wrong hen, and the flock was then alerted to danger, making capture of the right hen impossible – I thought. Clara heard my tearful plea that I couldn’t catch the right hen, and looked me in the eye and said “then I guess we won’t have chicken for dinner tonight.” Failure of an assigned task was not an option, so I did manage, - at great risk to the dozen or so chickens – to get the right one. In my determination, I took it on myself to dispatch this hen personally, but lost grip on her neck in mid-swing and sent this screaming hen cartwheeling around the pen. When I did finish the job, I was covered in blood and feathers, but presented the carcass proudly. Clara simply nodded and told me to hang it from the porch rail. My mother took a dim view of my appearance when she returned, and she and Clara had a few words with Clara stating firmly that everything including Mikey can be washed.

Now I must report that my mother did not always look on Clara's handling of me with equanimity. She was not pleased to find me covered with chicken blood, or a muddy face from eating freshly dug turnips that had not been washed. However, confronted by my mother seeing her muddy son, Clara would simply say "everyone has to eat a peck of dirt before they die." (For those of a younger generation, there are four pecks in a bushel). Also, besides the productive hen lesson, Clara taught me how to drown unwanted kittens produced by the semi-feral cat that provided rodent service around the house. I will not burden this meeting with the kitten disposal technique, but can provide it privately. You can imagine how my mother felt about that lesson.

Clara was not reluctant to chasten recurrent malfeasance by her curly haired, cute grandson with a brisk cuff to the ear or other slightly painful nudges toward corrective action. However, I have vivid memory of misbehaving in the summer – likely talking back to my mother. The punishment has received recent bad publicity, but it was remarkably effective. She would get my attention by a strong hand on my shoulder and tell me to go cut a switch so she could whip my bare legs. Oh my – I would cry all the way to get scissors or a knife, cry to the bush, cry while contemplating the proper branch – too stout and it would really hurt, too wimpy and I would be sent back for another, cry while cutting the branch, and all the way back to her and perhaps my mother watching with approval. Clara would remind me of what major family crime I had committed, and use the branch or switch as it was known. To be clear, I don't remember ever having any serious pain inflicted on me – just a couple of quick whacks to finish the lesson. However, the life lesson is vitally important. Whatever crimes or misdemeanors you commit in life will likely be punished with personal retribution decided by you alone. Life directions are set by our own actions or reactions – for good or ill. Cutting your own switch is a metaphor that can play throughout a lifetime. More on that later.

Before leaving my personal experience with Clara, I searched my memory bank for any use of profanity by this very direct and strong individual. There were the occasional "damn," but she did not depend on use of profanity to express herself. However, there was one phrase she did use when she was frustrated with some incompetence such as the federal government. Although to this day I have no idea what it means, the visual image is lasting. "Jesus Christ on a bicycle." I still have this image of a bearded man with a white robe and sandals straddling a bike. Perhaps some of our more learned members can explain why this phrase has any meaning.

One of the reasons I liked and remember her so fondly is that she treated me – like everyone else – as someone who was expected to know what they were expected to know. My life as an elementary school kid was rather hard. I was always bigger than the kids in my grade, so was beaten up at every new school by the kids two grades older that were my size. Since I changed schools 14 times before college, there were lots of opportunities for split lips and sore ribs in my youth. I never told my parents or anyone else about these beatings, and gradually learned to defend myself even though all I wanted was somebody to be a friend. The times we stayed with Clara when Dad was away to a war or transferred, I think Clara could sense that my appearance coming home from school was not the result of touch football. She would never say

“poor Mikey” or “are you OK sweetie.” After eyeballing my condition she would say: “Tough day at school?” - followed by: “You will find a way.” Clara knew that life was tough, and my lessons from her were all about taking care of yourself, and the things that you could control.

One advantage of reaching a certain age and being a grandparent is a better understanding of your parents and grandparents, and what shaped their lives. As you might expect, Clara’s life before I knew her was not one pictured on Hallmark greeting cards. She was part of that generation that supported women’s suffrage through her lifestyle, but never had the income or time to do anything other than make a way for herself and her family. She transmitted a fierce determination to do her own thing, and had very little good to say about people of affluence – “the country club set” in her words. Her approach to life was, like many women without financial support, so direct that others around her were influenced and saw women’s roles in a different way.

Clara was born in 1880 to a large family in the vicinity of Traverse City, Michigan. She grew up believing she was part Native American from an aunt who named her Princess Little Feather. It is not surprising that family gatherings would have this aunt sharing her culture and likely giving all the kids a name reflecting her tribal history. I grew up thinking that this blonde kid was part Indian. Unfortunately, more recent genealogy verifies that the Menominee woman Clara knew was an aunt – but by marriage not lineage, a point likely not understood by children mesmerized by stories at the fireside. She married at 19 to a 35 year old game warden, and they had twin boys within the first year of marriage - Theron and Demas. There are conflicting family stories about this marriage, with the general impression that she was “taken advantage of” by this older man. In any event, the marriage lasted just long enough for the birth of their twins. Clara re-married within three years to a man who was my grandfather – a Dutchman named Savy Kessler who was the stationary engineer for saw mills. In that simpler time, there was no elaborate divorce decree that would include visitation for children. The twins stayed with either parent whenever it was convenient for all concerned. When her new family grew to three children, it was amicably agreed that the twin boys would stay mostly with their father with open access to both houses. My mother, Mona, was the middle child of the second marriage, and she worshipped her older twin brothers, Theron and Demas, as well as her own father. The twins would take their younger siblings on adventures in the woods, and do little things like make pancake breakfasts on Saturday just for the siblings. Savy Kessler’s job called for him to be in the upper peninsula of Michigan during winters where he kept the saw mill boiler and other equipment operating. Clara was an impatient woman and the life of moving between various forests in Michigan did not appeal to her. After the twins left for the Army at the end of WWI, she decided to change her venue. Much to the lifelong dismay of their three children, Clara divorced the beloved Savy and moved to the bright lights of Rockford, Illinois.

Contemplate the simple line “moved to Rockford, Illinois.” Clara was in her late-30’s, had three children ages 7-12, no obvious source of income, no relatives in Rockford, no alimony or child support, and she moved from the woodlands of Michigan to what was then the second largest city in Illinois. Rockford was a bustling city with the sprawling Camp Grant army post serving

as one of the largest military training locations in the US. The only clues we have about her motivation are many quotes about frustration with her previous lifestyle. She just wanted control of her life, and made this leap.

Clara located a two room flat above a Chinese restaurant and went job hunting. At first, she worked at the restaurant, and arranged for the family to take meals in the kitchen. Her steadiest employment was playing piano to accompany silent movies at the Orpheum Theater. For background for the younger members, movies were all silent until the first full length film “The Jazz Singer” opening in 1927. Before “talkies,” theater goers were entertained often by a piano player positioned in front of the screen who would support the movie action with appropriate music – soft, dreamy for love scenes and frenetic for chase scenes. Sometimes, a score was provided with the film, but often the piano player was left to interpret the scene with their own creativity. For matinees when she was at the theater, Clara would arrange for her kids to come home from school and have their dinner in the kitchen of the Chinese restaurant. In the evening, the kids would usually be seated in the front row of the theater where Clara could keep an eye on them while they did homework by the reflected light of the screen. Mother reported that she would do her homework during the dramatic scenes and then look up when Clara picked up the pace for a chase scene.

During the summer of this period, there was no air conditioning and theaters rarely operated a full schedule. Clara augmented their income by driving a taxi and ferrying school buses from a nearby factory to locations in the south. During these bus deliveries, the kids would pile into the bus, and see the country during the day usually on unpaved roads. At night, they would park alongside the road, often under a train trestle, build a fire outside the bus, and cook their dinner. On more than one occasion, hoboes riding the rails would join them and contribute what food they had collected to the pot. Clara was very protective of her children with the family sleeping in a locked bus, but encouraged her kids to get to know these “knights of the road.” After delivery of the bus to some town in Alabama, they would hitch a ride to a town big enough to have a bus or train station and head back to Rockford. I had a diverse childhood with a career military father, but nothing like what Clara provided for her children. The only real flaw I could find in quizzing my mother about this time was her residual anger toward Clara for divorcing her father.

Clara was a woman either way ahead of her time, or perhaps more typical of many women of her time breaking out of stifling roles assigned to them. This was a woman who moved away from her home base of family and friends, worked as silent movie piano player, drove a taxi, and ferried school buses more than 500 miles, while raising three children. Although not a suffragette, I have to believe that Clara, and many like her, set an image for women that changed many perceptions.

It is likely that one of the reasons for Clara’s move to Rockford was the presence of all the soldiers at Camp Grant. In fact, Clara did marry a Sergeant returning after WWI – her third husband. Peter Mahar, was a lifelong bachelor from Maine who had lived in the barracks for

most of his adult life. He served in the artillery in France during WWI, and returned with a predictable loss of hearing, but was smitten by this strong woman and her family. In many ways, Pete was a remarkable individual. Very even tempered, he loved being part of a family, absolutely adored Clara, and was content to let her run the house and his life. He was able to secure a house on Camp Grant as he did when he was reassigned to Scott Field, Illinois, when Camp Grant closed in 1923. Although he never acted like a father or later like a grandfather, he was loved by Clara's kids because he was so pleasant - more like a beloved uncle. Although we are ahead of our story, even though I saw Clara say harsh words to Pete on several occasions, he was disconsolate when the woman he called Princess died. So much so, that a room with curtains for walls was made for him in our basement since he could not bear to be alone.

Those three kids raised in various locations in northern Michigan, Rockford, Camp Grant, and Scott Field, all left home at or close to their 18th birthday. My mother went to Detroit where she took a job at the huge J. L. Hudson Department Store, and lived in a boarding house. She was able to buy her own Model A Ford, and enjoyed her freedom. In fact, I have a picture of her and two friends after they drove to Indianapolis to see the Indy 500 race in 1928 when she was 19. Her hard work and bright mind led to being promoted to Floor Manager in the Housewares Department, but she was very upset when the Great Depression caused major cutbacks across all job markets including J. L. Hudson. Although she was very unhappy at moving back home, she did move back with her mother and Pete at Scott Field. Mona wasn't idle and leveraged her retail experience to become the manager of the Post Exchange where she met my father. Apparently, she was struck by this good looking, athletic guy who walked into the PX one day, and was unconcerned that he was a Private and not even a citizen. They were married a year later and their only child came along a year after that. Dad always credited my mother for giving him the drive to get serious about his military career, and he retired as a Lt. Colonel the same year I graduated from college. There could be another paper about Dad's immigration to the U.S. and his military career, but that is for another day.

Now we circle back to the two twins from Clara's first marriage – Theron and Demas. The boys dropped out of high school and enlisted in the army to fight in WWI as soon as they were 18. They were assigned to a cavalry unit, but the war ended before they could get involved in that war. Both were separated from the Army after about a year as the military went through major downsizing. Being out of the military was just fine for Theron who was most at home in the woods of Michigan. I should clarify that they were not identical twins. Their disposition and body types were widely different. Theron grew to about 6'6," and had an easy going affable personality. Demas was average height – likely about 5'9" – with a very ambitious, aggressive demeanor much like his mother. Although the brothers were close friends, they really did not share many interests as they matured. Theron became a Game Warden in the Traverse City area, and was a popular figure in the community even mentioned for public office. Sadly, he suffered a shotgun blast in his back while he and an assistant were culling ducks in 1928. The wound was not directly fatal, but the pellets had punctured his intestines and he died of peritonitis after a week of suffering. There is a very touching letter from his father to Clara announcing Theron's death. Certainly, the two parents were not close after the divorce, but I find this opening to the

letter very tender; “Dearest Clara, It is with great sadness that I have to tell you that our son, Theron, died yesterday.” These words soften my image of Clara’s first husband, and I hope touched her as well.

After separation from the Army in 1919, Demas was able to re-join the Army, advanced to Corporal, and was slated for Officer Candidate School. However, being a bright and ambitious guy, he understood that the way to the top in the Army was West Point and not OCS. He took a preparatory course while on active duty and passed the West Point exam. Demas resigned from the Army and entered West Point in 1920. His West Point career was promising although never above the middle of his class academically. He was on the boxing team as a freshman, and then joined the polo team. This country boy from the woods of Michigan knew little about polo, but his time in the cavalry gave him the horsemanship needed for the rough riding of polo, and he was captain of the team as a senior. He graduated in 1924 and was able to start his lifelong career in the Army Air Corps in 1926.

An early assignment for Demas was at Mitchel Field in New York. Most Army posts still bore the heritage of the cavalry, and maintained stables and often polo teams. Demas played on the Mitchel Field polo team which brought him in contact with the affluent gentry of the east coast including family members. One such family member was an attractive young lady whose father was President and principal owner of the Smith and Wesson Arms Company. They were married in 1931 at a large wedding in Cape Cod with very important guests – from Washington and the military. One of the guests missing from the wedding was Demas mother, Clara. There are two different stories about why Clara wasn’t at the wedding. One is that Demas bride did not want this multi-married wife of a sergeant at her wedding, and did not invite her. The other is that Clara was invited, but chose not to go to a socialite affair with people she did not know or like. Either story is likely, but my bet is that it would have been too big a gaffe not to invite the mother of the groom. However, the invitation would arrive with no sense of enthusiasm. Lacking some more personal encouragement, Clara was not about to go all the way to the east coast and be made to feel not welcome. Also, I would have to guess that Clara’s best dress would have looked quite shabby at that gathering – and she knew it. Although my mother maintained a cordial correspondence with Demas, there is no indication that there was anything other than a rare postcard between Clara and Demas for the rest of their lives. Herewith is part of our lesson about cutting your own switch – if you make yourself in a self-made image, be aware that there can be a loneliness there.

By 1940, Demas had reached the rank of Major. His pre-war assignment was to act as military air observer for the War Department which required him to visit many countries and assess their capabilities for air warfare. When war broke out in Europe, he was assigned as liaison to the British in Libya in their air attacks on the Germans. In reality, his mission was to report back to War Department, and assess the capabilities of the RAF and their bombers. Demas enjoyed the action near the front and yearned for direct involvement. While there, he was under fire many times, and flew on 21 missions with the British. It is likely that he actually flew British

Lancasters on some bombing runs. His rather fluid assignment led him to be the Air Attaché for the American Embassy in Athens.

A typical Demas story emerges from his time in Athens after the Germans assumed control of the city. His car was bumped by a car belonging to the Italian Embassy. The Italian car included two enlisted men and a first lieutenant. In the discussion that followed this fender bender, the Italian officer crossed some line with Demas. Reports are not clear, but it could have been that Demas felt offended by a junior officer or the Italian officer actually slapped him. In any event, Demas decked the Italian with a swift punch to the jaw leaving him splayed in the dust of the intersection spitting teeth. The two Italian enlisted men proceeded to load their rifles – which Demas took as a hostile act. The first soldier received a bloody nose and was relieved of his rifle which Demas used to club the other Italian to submission. During this fracas, a crowd of Greeks were cheering on the fighting American since the Greeks and Italians have rarely been friends, and who doesn't like a good fight. Some weeks later, a very bored Greek judge was hearing the citations from this affair. The judge was eager to get these two fighters –each with diplomatic immunity – out of his courtroom. He ruled that no one was at fault, just shake hands and go back to work. At that, the Italian officer shouted that the American had taken advantage of him, and, had he been prepared, would have pummeled the Yank. Thus challenged, Demas stripped off his uniform jacket and challenged the Italian on the spot. The judge threw them both out of his court, and the Italian remembered an urgent appointment elsewhere.

Demas' time in Athens ended when he accompanied a fighting force in Albania. He was wounded by a hand grenade and later captured by the Germans. After six weeks as prisoner of war, the Germans did not know what to do with this alleged non-combatant, and traded him for a German prisoner. Before he returned to the U.S., the King of Greece awarded him the Order of George 1, Fourth Class. In the next few months, Demas traveled extensively in the Balkans to observe the start of the Russian part of the war. He was promoted to Lt. Colonel in 1941 and, after the U.S. entered the war in 1942, became Colonel. His reports in Washington were helpful in verifying the quality of the British as fighting allies, as well comparing the German and allied equipment. When the U.S. joined the war, it is likely that Demas had more battle action experience than anyone else in the U.S. military in the European Theater.

In November 1942, Demas was part of the Operation Torch task force heading to North Africa. He reported to Maj. General Lucien Truscott who had the responsibility to capture Port Lyautey and the airport near Casablanca. Demas was to take command of the airfield once the American troops had cleared the area. However, Truscott had a plan to convince the local French commander to accept the Americans as friends and not try to repel the landing. Note that there were other such efforts at higher level including landing Gen. Mark Clark by submarine before the invasion to try to convince the French leaders to be friendly. Truscott ended up sending a peace mission of two officers and a driver with a jeep as part of the first landing wave. Both were volunteers who spoke French and one was Demas. In his memoir, "Command Missions," Truscott remembered his reservations at letting Demas join this dangerous mission since his basic duty for the airfield was so vital. However, Demas was insistent as described by Truscott:

“His presence, background and peculiar fitness for the assignment led me to consent to his undertaking the mission.”

The plan to send these three Americans and their jeep in the middle of the first wave of an invasion seems more than risky – foolhardy is the word that comes to mind. They were shelled by both the French artillery and the American ships as well as strafed by French planes. In trying to avoid some of the confusion around the beach head, the jeep became mired in mud, but they persevered. When Truscott questioned the wisdom of continuing, he was encouraged by these two radio messages from Demas:”At mouth of river. Being shelled by enemy and our own Navy. Going to land at Green Beach.” Then later: “On Green Beach. (Jeep) stuck. Looking for one. Troops landed and moving inland. Proceeding on mission.”

They carried three rather large flags to try to identify themselves as peace emissaries – a French flag, an American flag, and a White flag. Demas sat in the front passenger seat holding the French and American flags with the other officer in the back with the white flag. They passed through several French units who either ignored them or gave them directions until they reached the outskirts of Port Lyautey. As they rounded a curve, a French machine gunner opened fire on them from about 30 yards, and Demas body took the full force of the bullets in his chest. He was dead when he hit the ground.

The two remaining Americans were captured, but would not leave Demas’ body. They were taken to the French commander, and succeeded in facilitating the French surrender after two days of frantic negotiations. Demas was buried at Port Lyautey and the airfield was named after him. Following the end of WWII, his remains were disinterred, cremated, and reported to have been scatted over Wiesbaden, Germany. The efforts of this peace team were recognized as having accelerated the French surrender with minimal loss of life.

The two officers were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor and the corporal the Silver Star. Demas widow and her 6 year old son received Demas’ Medal of Honor from President Roosevelt in a special White House ceremony in March 1943. Clara received the ominous telegram shortly after Demas died, and a letter signed by the President announcing the awarding of the Medal of Honor to her dead son. I recall a scene in her little home with Clara, my mother, and my aunt shortly after she was notified that her other twin son had been killed. It was the only time that I saw Clara cry, and I can remember a very hopeless feeling about what to do. Her blue star in the window symbolizing a family member in the military was replaced with a Gold Star. Obviously, there is no way to know what was in her heart at that moment, but the pain of the death of a son had to be amplified by the separation between them.

So, we have explored a sampling of this remarkable woman – at least remarkable and impactful for me. She died of cancer in 1947 at age 67 seemingly diminished by the death of her twin sons and the fatigue, if not the futility, of her life and life choices. But there is more to the story, since the impact of anyone often lasts long after the grave.

The story continues some 10 years later during my senior year at Princeton, when I discovered that it appeared that Demas son was also at Princeton - a class behind me. After simple sleuth work, I checked some details with my mother, and decided it would be great to close this long gap in family history. When I spoke to him on the campus full of eager news that we shared the same grandmother, his reaction surprised me. I quickly tried to explain that my mother could provide some family details of Demas' youth as well as the history of his father's mother. He stared right through me, turned on his heel and said "that is not possible." There is no question that he and I belonged to very different Princeton cultures. He came from great wealth and prepared for Princeton at a private boarding school in Switzerland. His friends were mostly from similar backgrounds and enjoyed displaying their financial privilege. I was a scholarship student who worked in the dining halls, came from a public high school, and was an engineering student. As an aside, the typical prep school grad showed little interest in a working field of study like engineering, and the majority of engineering students came from public high school backgrounds and bore a social mark to some. As he walked away, I was too stunned to offer anything other than a barely heard frustrated two syllable insult.

We did not see each other again until a News Years Princeton party in Washington more than a year after graduation. We were gathered at the home of one of my friends when my secret cousin and his new bride were just a few feet away. Thinking that this might be a better opportunity, I did a somewhat more detailed introduction of my message to this young couple. He did not respond to me except to turn to his bride and, in French, say "Cet homme est un imbecile," and then turn their back and walk away. Although I had very limited knowledge of the French language at that time, I did comprehend his meaning. Also, having been raised in a military environment, I did know how to curse in several languages. My response of "tete de merde" was loud enough that he heard. That was the last time we saw each other.

My understanding of our comical mis-communication has now matured, and I think I understand his reaction better. Putting aside his perceived rudeness, it seems likely that he had no knowledge of Clara at all. When his father died, he would have been about 5 years old. His dad's wartime assignments would have minimized father and son contact except as an infant. So any knowledge of his father's family would have come from his mother, who would not have much interest in dredging up stories of Clara. If he ever met his grandfather, the woman he knew as grandmother would have been the second wife to his grandfather. My secret cousin probably heard my comments as referring to this second wife, and made no sense to him. There is no need to try to reconnect at this point, and I have decided to let this little family mystery remain where it has been for decades - except as this conclusion of Clara's story.

The moral to this little tale is threefold. First, the basic lessons of self-determination have been valuable; second, little known people can share in creating major movements; and third, behavior that is unbending can be more than self limiting - it can be painful. In other words, be careful that you don't Cut Your Own Switch.