

Chapter 15.

She Was A Diamond In The Rough

My mother was a gem; her parents named her Gertrude Eleanor Martin, well aware that the initials were G.E.M. But, like a diamond in the rough, she took some polishing. Perhaps she was a tomboy by nature or perhaps she found her niche on her father's knee in reaction to Lydia, an older sister, who had feminine demeanor and long blond hair. Gertrude, in addition to having that swarthy, Germanic name, which she detested, had nondescript brown hair. She preferred the company of Gus and Ed, her two older brothers. The boys shouldered real homestead responsibilities while Lydia's job, at age four, was to look after her younger sister and assist their mother running a busy household. It must have been irksome for Lydia to keep up with that little tyke who was forever running outside to explore the jungle around their home. Lydia often found Gert tagging along after her father as he made his rounds as Superintendent of the Moravian Mission on the Miskito Coast of Nicaragua.

Gert was born on December 28, 1904 in Bluefields Nicaragua at the Moravian Mission. Life at the Mission was not easy. Her father, Theo, had to deal with disease, famine, hurricanes, a threatening government, meager supplies, and personnel problems. Children grew up quickly in such an environment. They learned to take responsibility at an early age. Lizzie and Theo took the responsibilities of parenthood seriously but they also took its delights to heart. There were morning prayers with singing and scripture and evening prayers each evening before bedtime. Lizzie was artistic and created projects for her two girls, showing them how to create an extraordinary home from ordinary resources. Theo, although usually serious, had a gleam in his eye which surfaced now and then when he created a clever prank to add zest and fun to life. The polishing of G.E.M. had begun.

It was a process of turning a tough little girl into a well cut diamond with a mischievous glint.

By 1907, the family, now numbering five with the addition of Pearl in 1906, left Nicaragua. Malaria and the rigors of the Miskito Coast had taken their toll on Theo's health. Their first stop was Herrnhut, Germany, headquarters of the Moravian Church and home of both Theo's and Lizzie's parents. It had been ten years since they had seen each other and the first (and last) time the grandchildren would meet their grandparents. After debriefing about Nicaragua with the church elders, the couple was assigned to a German-speaking church at Laketown, Minnesota where the climate should be better for his health. However, there would be time enroute to America for stops in Christiansfeld, Denmark to visit Theo's brother Frederick and in Tytherton, England to visit Lizzie's sisters. This would provide the Martin children a chance to meet their English cousins.

Lizzie was beside herself with excitement at the prospect of seeing her sisters and meeting their children. Theo looked forward to long discussions with his brother about conditions on the mission field and within the Moravian Church. While in Germany, the Martins had been able to get new clothes for their growing children. Lizzie wanted them to look their best for their arrival in England. But the boys needed haircuts before leaving Denmark for England.

In Christiansfeld, Theo and his brother Fred rounded up Gus and Ed for a trip to the barber shop. Gertrude, always ready to go out with her father, took her father's hand as they started down the street. Theo knew that Lizzie would welcome a chance to work with Lydia, free from the distractions of the inquisitive three-year-old. Lizzie was busily packing for the next leg of the trip and wrapping gifts for her sisters. Theo really didn't give much thought to such matters, but he loved his little 'gem' and liked her company.

professional was truly a luxury for the Martins and would have to last his boys for several months, at least until they got settled in Minnesota. While Gus and then Ed's locks tumbled to the floor, Gert sat patiently in a chair next to her father while he was totally engrossed in telling Fred about the time he crossed the isthmus from Bluefields to Managua to plead the case of the Moravian mission directly with government officials. A storm had blown up making the crossing of rivers and mountains more treacherous than it was in the best of weather. In addition, most Nicaraguans were suspicious of anyone helping the Miskito Indians and government officials were threatening to expel the Moravians.

When Ed dismounted the barber's chair, Gertrude took her turn and had her head shaved. It wasn't until she dismounted and again took her seat next to her father— and the barber approached him for payment— that Theo was brought back to the present. When he saw the shorn Gertrude, his heart must have sunk. How could he explain this to Lizzie? The barber shrugged his shoulders and insisted on payment for all three haircuts. The Danes were not all that friendly toward Germans and considered Moravians to be especially suspect.

It was with considerable consternation that Theo returned to Lizzie with three shaved heads instead of two. But Lizzie, while on the mission field, had been through much greater trauma than a simple haircut. The hair would repair itself and the humor of the situation could not be denied. She went ahead with the plans to take a family photograph but insisted that Theo take the somewhat bewildered Gertrude next to him.

Six years later Theo was diagnosed as having contracted tuberculosis. Pearl says that he contracted it in Minnesota from one of his parishioners. He was sent off to different sanatoriums. A friend in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, hearing of the Martin's situation, urged the Martins to buy a small farm in nearby Macungie. Gus and Ed were already in a boarding school at Nazareth Hall just east of Bethlehem. Lizzie went down

for the summer and, with the two boys, made the place ready for the whole family. Lydia was left behind to manage the household and again was placed in the role of older sister.

The Moravians believed in education and saw to it that the children of missionaries were provided with school opportunities. Gertrude was sent to boarding school at Linden Hall in Lititz, Pennsylvania when she was eleven. She was a very good student and very well behaved. She missed her family very much but had already learned to be tough and keep emotions in control. She received 4's in conduct (respect to teachers, kindness and courtesy, habits of order, observance of rules, diligence, punctuality, and general deportment), and an average of 91.3 in her classes (reading, writing, spelling, grammar, algebra, geography, history, elocution, sewing, physical culture, chorus, and nature study). The diamond was being polished!

While attending Moravian College for Women, Gertrude met the man of her dreams. She knew that this was the right man for her; it was love at first sight for both of them and they quickly found that they had a common social vision. After graduating from college and teaching school for one year, she and John planned to marry. Theo was not happy with her choice because John had dropped out of school in the seventh grade, was a Presbyterian, and a steelworker. But he finally gave his blessing to his strong-willed daughter and agreed to be one of five ministers who participated in the wedding.

Gertrude and John made a real team. There was no distinction between men. They were jointly committed to family, community, church, and workplace. John spent seventeen years in the steel mills during the turbulent times of the



*Gertrude Eleanor Martin Ramsay
Washington, DC, 1963*

Great Depression and although Gertrude did not work in the mills, she was active in helping John organize the workers and their wives to bargain for a fairer share of the fruits of their labors. John became the first president of the Bethlehem local union. Gertrude helped discuss strategies, write speeches, make mailings, and contact community leaders. John, on the other hand, gave a lot of attention to raising four children by taking them to the zoo, the World's Fair, out for Sunday dinner, and on other fun or educational trips.

When John lost his job with Bethlehem Steel because of his leadership in organizing the union, the United Steelworkers of American put him on their staff. This meant working in other communities where unions were being organized. When organizing Armco Steel in Ashland, Kentucky developed into a long campaign, the family moved to Ashland so that the "team" would be together. As John's skills in interpreting the needs and aspirations of working people to community leaders became more and more apparent, John was put on the national staff of the CIO. Columbus, Ohio, with its airport and central location was chosen as the next home base. Then came the Southern Drive and the family moved to Georgia. Finally John joined the national staff of the CIO with headquarters in Washington, DC. Gertrude and the family moved to all of these locations.

Gertrude was partner to all of these moves and was an active participant in each of the shifts in John's work. But in 1960, when John retired, Gertrude said that it was now her turn to decide where they would live. She chose Celo, North Carolina in a rural area where she could shed her role as hostess and once again become the tomboy. She was happiest when she hung up her dresses and donned jeans and a loose fitting shirt to get to work on the place. She made their retirement homestead a garden spot with glorious dahlias lining the road. She made her community a vibrant one with community youth projects and a grand 4th of July parade. She turned their home, which she dubbed Happiness Hill, into a place where the grandchildren wanted to spend their summers and other holidays. And John gladly participated as her partner.

