

Whatever Happened to Great Aunts and Uncles?

Amongst all the extinctions of endangered species reported, the species that is least recognised is that of Great Uncles and Aunts. As a boy there were always a pack of them at all family functions but one hardly hears of the species now. Of the eight Great Aunts and five Great Uncles on my father's side, there was not a stereotype amongst them. They all very strong individuals who had lived interesting and fulfilling lives. Perhaps this was not surprising, as amongst my great-grand-parental generation we counted a theatre manager, railway engineer, monsignor, rabbi, bank manager and a Wesleyan preacher. One of the ancestors was also claimed to be the last man hung at Nottingham Gaol.

Amongst the Great Aunts there were some formidable women. Great Aunt Lollie had developed pernicious anaemia in the 1930's before Vitamin B12 was isolated and for many years had to consume a Pound of raw liver a day to prevent incapacity and death. She was a great joker and when another Great, Aunt Donna, complained that the Christmas Ham was cut a bit thinly, Lollie secretly cut up a pink rubber hot water bottle and substituted it in her sandwich. Donna being a polite lady spent a long time trying to masticate the sandwich before the joke emerged.

Donna was a redoubtable deaconess of the Wesleyan Church and had spent most of her life in East Africa. It was often said by her colleagues that if she had been there at the start of independence movements, they would never got started as she could terrify a rabbit at 100 paces just by looking at it. She had retired to a small town in the Yorkshire Wolds and single-handedly managed to reduce the public house visiting population by half, just by standing outside the Pubs and fixing those about to enter with her 'holy' gaze. It was rumored that the breweries had a contract out on her.

Great Aunt Minnie had moved up in the world as her builder husband established a small empire, and was the first in the family to own a telephone and spent many hours (as soon as she had anybody to talk to) telling all the relatives of her possessions. The most significant of these was her husband Jack who she had propelled from being a master bricklayer, laying 3000 bricks a day, to being a significant building tycoon and property owner. He was always very proud that all of the houses and shop that became the scene for Ronnie Barker's 'Open All Hours' series were built by him, but was never allowed to say this if Auntie Minnie was present as she thought them somewhat common.

Great Aunt Annie had betrayed her Yorkshire roots and run off with an Engine Driver (in those days they had the romantic attraction of present day airline pilots) who of

all unYorkshire things was a rabid Arsenal supporter! She also had to bear the odium of her daughter getting married to a German prisoner of war (they were allowed out on Saturday Nights to attend the local Dance) and were regarded by the local girls as a cut above the American Servicemen in the town. Never flustered by anything Aunt Annie was the great harmonizer of the family, never shocked by anything and always ready to help.

The Great Uncles were also an interesting bunch. Great Uncle Alf had been gassed at Ypres and despite being so exercise limited that he spent his subsequent life in a wheelchair, he became a headmaster in a really tough mining village and always had fascinating tales to tell of the pupils and their excuses for absence or ill-prepared work. These were mile deep mines with only 18 inch seams and, with frequent collapses, and it was not uncommon for pupils to return to school after an absence to report they had been away 'cos Dad was trapped'. On one horrific occasion when a pupil made this report, Uncle Alf had to decide whether to reveal that he knew that not only was Dad trapped, but also dead.

Great Uncle Walter fitted no mould known to us then. He had been a sickly child, mostly brought up and schooled by his mother (the theatre manager's wife) and had some independent means, although he worked as a tobacconist (is that allowed to be published now) in the family business. When he was called up for the Second World War he confounded army authorities by arriving at camp with a suitcase full of music and embroidery and upset them even more by becoming allergic to khaki (the dye that every army item of clothing was infused with). After months of being painted with coal tar, being immersed in Turkish Baths and prescribed special silk underwear the army finally gave in and he was excused uniform. In order to find a round hole for this square peg to fit into he was assigned as general dogsbody to ENSA, the army entertainment group. Here he could be found testing the Grand Piano in say Leeds Town Hall for the warm up for the proper pianist, shifting stage props and to the horror of a visiting Brigadier, taking out his embroidery when there was nothing to do. When he retired he and his housekeeper moved to a charming cottage by the sea where he had an invariable weekday routine of walking to the ferry and across to the town in the morning, playing the piano between 2 and 3 pm and then entertaining anybody to afternoon tea who called. Many did and the Ladies of the Village used to call and try and get the secrets of his embroidery technique. He entered selected embroidery competitions in the locality and always won, much to chagrin of the lady competitors. He was always perfectly turned out in brown suit, homberg hat and of course brown suede shoes even when walking on the beach to visit me and my children on holiday. I don't believe he was ever actively 'Gay' but fitted a pattern of asexual males that had been common in the UK for generations. He always aroused much mystery in the South Devon Village of his

retirement because on each Thursday he would go to draw his minuscule war pension (for khaki allergy) which the local gossips had inflated to being a large amount for secret services rendered during the war. He never disillusioned them.

My grandchildren certainly don't have the invaluable experiences I had of Great Uncles and Aunts, not only because of geographical separation but I don't think the species any longer exists. Being old but having their life experiences was a badge of honour for them and they were a valued and accepted part of the community. You were never short of people who would give you a wise answer to your questions, nor of somebody who could place in context, social and family history and give it value. I suspect that with the quest for 'eternal youth' fostered by our Americanised society it is so unfashionable to take on the traditional Grandparent, Great Aunt or Uncle persona that few actually take it on - much to society's disadvantage. It seems that being 'mates' with your grandchildren great nieces and nephews is what is required rather than the role of a wise but caring mentor that I remember of that generation.