

Grandma's Teapot

By Lynn Armitage



A very old silver teapot sits like a trinket on a table in my hallway, surrounded by pictures and other tchotchkes. Like many things that are old, it goes unnoticed. Not one person who has ever walked by that table has ever commented on the tarnished antique.

Nor, shame on me, have I ever made them aware of it.

What they don't know is that silver teapot is the only connection I have to my paternal grandmother, Mary King, an Oneida Native and the daughter of Adam King, an Indian warrior who fought in the Civil War as a conscript with the Oneidas of the 14th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry -- a life-endangering service for which he was paid a (ahem) handsome \$200 bounty by the U.S. government. When the war ended, Adam hobbled back to his farm, wounded, to discover it had been confiscated by a white man who somehow had dodged the war. My great-grandfather was later buried in a pauper's grave.

I know this important piece of my heritage because the story was told to me by my father, the grandson of Adam King -- not when I was a child, but much, much later in my life. Though my dad was a devoted father and brave

soldier himself, he was not the best family historian. My four siblings and I didn't really grow up with a clear understanding of our Native American ancestry. Perhaps it was the Air Force lifestyle. We kept moving from base to base, and country to country, never really planting firm roots, so being connected to the past wasn't much of a priority.

So the story goes that Grandma Mary, the Oneida, married a German man named Frank who she met and fell in love with while ministering to him as a nurse after he was wounded in World War I. When Frank announced to his family that he was planning to wed Mary, the Indian, his father kicked him out of the house and never spoke to him again.

My grandparents visited us about once every two years or so. I never felt close to them because they missed so much of my life. What I do remember about my grandma was that she wore these billowy, flowery dresses and made the most fantastic homemade strawberry jam and fried chicken. My father told me that people would travel for miles to the inn they owned in Delafield, Wis., just for a taste of my grandma's legendary fried chicken – it was that good!

In the only attempt ever made to hand down her Native heritage to her grandkids, my grandma once sat me on her expansive lap and taught me how to count to 10 in her Iroquoian tongue. I can still do that to this day.

I didn't learn until years after Grandma Mary died and sadly, took the recipe for that strawberry jam and killer fried chicken with her, that she had endured a very traumatic childhood. When she was about nine years old, strangers stormed into her home on the reservation, snatched her from her parents and forced her to attend a Christian boarding school for three years. My father said the school administrators cut her long Indian braids and beat her cruelly whenever she tried to speak in her Native tongue.

When Mary was finally returned to her parents two years later -- a white-washed and sparkling new American -- they gifted her with a beautiful silver teapot to help assuage her pain. A token of their own shame and feeling of utter helplessness against an evil genocide they were powerless to control.

I am my father's daughter, and I, too, have raised daughters who know very little about their Native heritage. I have my own lame excuses. My years as a single mother required me to focus intently on day-to-day life and worry over their future. When you are trying to rebuild your life, you have to plow forward, far, far away from the past.

But my eyes have been opened. It's not too late. Our family heritage is not lost entirely. There are still recipes to pass down, stories to tell and silver teapots waiting to pour out lessons from history.

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