

# My Grandmother's Diary

By Dennis Knight

*Entry of December 28, 1943. This book was a gift from Dennis Payton Knight to his Grandmother Mrs. Ida May Payton for her Christmas gift on Christmas Day of 1943 when Denny was 3 months and 21 days old. On our return trip from California we stopped off at Laramie and observed the Christmas season, arriving there on Thursday a.m. and leaving on Sunday p.m. for home after having a wonderful Christmas with Geraldine, Mickey, Jerry, Maureen and Denny.*

On the date of that, her first entry in the diary, Grandma was herself of the age of sixty-six years, three months and twelve days. She lived another nineteen years, passing away in 1962 at the age of 85. For most of us the memories of our grandmothers are treasured over the years, as are mine of Ida May Payton.

We have pictures in the Knight family of Grandma dressed in her Sunday best, but the image that always comes to my mind has her in a print dress and apron, her silver hair in a bun, her spectacled eyes sparkling, and always her smile which was at its best not only on Sunday but every day of the week. That visage has her bending slightly before me, instructing me for the first time in the art of tying my shoes. Her method of patiently talking me through the steps until I had succeeded was an achievement for both of us. It seems a trivial, baby step memory, yet it serves me as a profound and lifelong model in the mutual arts of teaching and learning.

All my memories of Grandma are fond, but those of the years beginning when I was about fourteen are more bittersweet. She had reached her eighties and was well into what we knew as her second childhood. It was a trying time, I know, for Mom and especially for Grandpa, who had to manage her diminishing capacity every day. It began with short term memory loss that became dangerous when she would lose track of a boiling pot or completely forget an electric iron in another room.

I spent the summer before my junior year in Loveland with my grandparents, ostensibly to help watch after Grandma and to free Grandpa to do some fishing. As it turned out, he didn't fully trust that I could handle her, or he just wanted to share the fun, because he would take us both along on his adventures through the countryside. The three of us would talk and laugh and enjoy each other's company while driving the county roads or up the narrow canyon of the Big Thompson River.

That summer she began to call me Geraldine, my mother's name. Sometimes, out of earshot, I would hear her speak to Grandpa about me as "our little man." She loved me to read storybooks to her and she had indeed regained the unmitigated joy of a child.

The medical and social understanding of dementia has seen a lot of progress and we have learned that it has many manifestations, but most commonly Alzheimer's disease. There are new treatments for sufferers and hope for their families.

I found it easy that summer to make some money by doing odd jobs for several of the elderly people in my grandparents' neighborhood. I would mow the lawn of a woman across the street, herself in an angry form of dementia. She had the ugly habit of locking her husband out of the house, leaving him only the shelter of their screened in back porch. I was a little afraid of collecting from her at the end of my work but she always paid me without locking me up.

It was a summer of rich experience for me that my teenage psyche could have understandably resented, but I never felt anything but a strong connection to my grandparents and their friends and neighbors. I have now joined the demography of seniors but it really doesn't feel new to me because I have always felt part of that world.

I didn't see my grandmother in 1958 as having a disease, but as having simply entered her second childhood, one from which I knew she would never emerge. Our love for her was not diminished by her circumstances nor was her capacity to love.