

My Father's Big Hands

By Dennis Knight

I inherited from my father broad shoulders and a mop that showed signs of silver by the time I was thirty. Like my brothers, I consider these gifts to be proud of. We look a lot like him, but none of us come close to having Dad's massive hands. The Union Pacific Railroad ring that marked his retirement in 1971 had to be specially crafted to fit a size seventeen, yet the big stone seemed dwarfed on his finger. They were handsome and functional hands, just extra large.

He allowed that his mitts were handy for a boxer. He had done some prize fighting as a young man in Southern Colorado, and, while I often assumed his hands had grown so large by training, a little research counters that; they were that big when he finished growing. Nevertheless, I'm sure the strength he built squeezing red rubber balls and handgrips made them formidable clubs.

Although he didn't have a long career in the ring, maybe eighteen bouts, Dad was quietly proud of that phase of his life. Growing up, he was called by his given name of Emmett, but he became professionally known as the Fighting Mick, eventually even adopting the first name of Michael. He was Mike on the railroad and Mickey to our mother.

I remember many times as a young man sitting with Dad in his living room. I might be reading or just enjoying the quiet peace, when across the room Dad's big fingers would begin tapping out a tune. The strumming would continue for awhile, and it almost always meant he was about to break into or whistle a song. It might have been an Irish ditty or something from his Burl Ives repertoire, but I knew it was coming.

I often write humorously and unabashedly about my father, because he was by nature a funny character who could laugh at himself. However, as I write these thoughts, I picture any one of his beautiful grandchildren clasped gently in his arms under a big strong hand as he sings her a lullaby in quiet baritone. He loved them all, loved them equally, and recognized their uniqueness even as infants. He envisioned for them grand futures, and his dreams have been fulfilled again and again.

On May 4th, 1987, I called to tell Dad about the birth of my second son, Robert Emmett Knight. Dad was thrilled to learn of the name we had chosen, telling me that Robert Emmett was a great hero and a martyr of the Irish revolution. Our Robert Emmett was the seventeenth and last of his grandchildren to be born.

That night, just hours after hearing my news, Dad was stricken by the abdominal aortic aneurism that took his life. He was rushed immediately from Laramie to a hospital in Fort Collins with the facilities to treat him. He remained conscious for several weeks and we received permission to take the baby to see him. He nestled Robert against his chest for a long time with that big right hand as his lips moved quietly in what I believe was an Irish lullaby. It was an indelible moment in my life.

I have one more story to relate to you that my sister, Maureen told me this week. In his final days, Dad had lapsed into deep silence. Maureen was sitting at his side with her hand clasped in his. She spoke to him for awhile expecting no response until he squeezed lightly in answer, then tightly as she felt him pass his strength to her through the firm touch of that wonderful, big hand on hers. Today, she holds and touches her own six kids and many grandchildren at every opportunity, knowing she is in turn passing on to them the strength of her father and my father, Michael Emmett Knight who died on June 8, 1987.