

Mrs McCaleb

02-13-2012 by Harry Zirkelbach

Her house was at 15 North Girard Street, Washington D.C. a block short of the Soldiers Home that Lincoln frequented, visited soldiers wounded in the ugly days of the Civil War.

Her row home was also a few blocks from Catholic University where six Veterans of WWII studied from a rented rooms on the second floor of her home. South from the Soldiers home on Capitol Street stood in splendid solitude, Washington's Union Station, the Supreme Court and Capital Buildings in another of the circles Pierre L'Enfant designated in laying the land for the nations Capitol.

On the second floor of Mrs McCaleb rented rooms, Catholic University students were happy to have clean linens weekly, privacy all the time for she never entered any space other than the first floor. Renters were aware that she was a widow, had one son, a Dermatologist MD,; he also became a fiend.

During WWII Mrs McCaleb had been enticed to become a cog in the Federal bureaucracy as a clerk in one of many Navy offices along the Washington Mall. She had never been employed earlier.

She delighted in telling her Washington D.C. War stories. In no time in these retellings was she the heroine, protecting democracy, but always a smiling reflection on the kindness, brilliance, humor of her young lawyer employers. For it became apparent they were all she claimed, even more.

Early in employment Mrs McCaleb inherited a mountain of unfilled documents that her lawyers would need at times for followup, other contracts, myriad reasons that she did not care about.

After simple filing instructions, Mrs McCaleb, was left alone to begin work. Within a month the mountain of papers had been removed, filled in one of many dozen of cabinets lining their office.

There had been hints of difficulties when Mrs McCaleb could not locate a file or two of lesser importance. Then the day came when a document of monumental importance was needed, could not be located.

Suddenly all work in the twenty personnel stopped. Those souls joined Mrs McCaleb in the search. Shortly, all but Mrs McCaleb recognized the problem. She was given a few dollars, asked to purchase sandwiches and refreshments, asked set them up a repast in the lunch room.

Mrs McCaleb was never asked to file anything again. One week of pandemonium was enough. In days and nights following, her lawyers learned she had no sense of order. Some days she seemed to have filed every document under “N”, for every document that day screamed “Navy”, Other days she favored “Bureau”, or “Ship” or “Roosevelt”.

She settled into answering the phone and performing chores for her boys. On occasion when bored she would decide to file a few papers, upon which there was a gentle cry for one or another of her boys, with something on the variation of this line “Now Mrs MaCaleb, you are too busy to be bothered with those papers. We’ll take care of those little details. You have more important things to do”

And we won the war. She stressed that, in telling us of her War boys.

We were her student boys. Equally charmed by her absentmindedness.

Another of her nemeses, the telephone When the phone rang, Mrs McCaleb would raise the phone to her ear. There was a fifty percent chance that she would be speaking into the mouthpiece, for she was equally apt to have the ends reversed. This would only become apparent to us on the second floor, when we would hear her shouting, ever louder, “You’ll have to speak up. I can’t hear you.” to some friend of ours or hers. And when lucky, we could hear the caller shouting over her shouting into the mouthpiece “Mrs McCaleb, its me Charley, I want to talk to Dan”.
Or some similar plea.

We College boys enjoyed playing jokes on one another,.
But we could never top Mrs McCaleb our unforgettable, delightful, Washington mother.



15 North Girard Street, Washington D.C.