

BALANCING

10-28-2013 BY HARRY ZIRKELBACH

Balancing challenges everyone from the first to last step. Every moment between is the essence of life. Thoughtful handling of each initial challenge, mean more time for other adventures later.

In visiting their mother's Pittsburgh relatives in the mid 1930's, the two children learned there was a segment of their relations that seemed to defy a balanced life. And this involved their mother's beloved oldest sister, Mame. In every facet of her character, she was unique. Tall, skinny-frail, quiet, she looked much older than her early 40 years. Mame had no observable inclination to professionalism. This was a contrast with her two brothers and two sisters who were of robust build, outgoing, skilled, professional.

Mame and her two brothers and one sister lived a stones throw from each other, near where they were born, some seven miles east of the downtown Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, on land bordering the north side of the Allegheny River. They would seldom travelled any distance from home in their life.

Mame's sister, Mom, had moved 30 miles north along the Beaver River, was never visited by her siblings. Instead, because Mom's husband worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad, had a lifelong Pass to ride the rails without cost, her family was their visitor annually.

And that is where the two tots met their Aunt Mame, her husband and son, both named Richard. Of course they were unique too, but for this balancing, Mame is the centerpiece.

The fragile Mame belied her appearance. Inclined to be passive, she could become a whirlwind in motion. This could be in the kitchen where she would prepare a complex meal from the collected items of the icebox in the blink of an eye.

Or in her avocation, the numbers racket.

This was a gambling operation, winked at but illegal. Someone had determined that the winning number, between 000 and 999, would be random, taken from the total sales of the Stock market Monday through Friday, ignoring the last two numbers of the total, the 5,4,3 numbers were that days' winner. As an absolutely random figure, it appeared beyond manipulation, therefore honest.

The wager, one cent to \$1.00. The payoff 600 to one.
Various operators shared the other 40%.

Aunt Mame would leave her house after breakfast, visit her regular customers, collecting their pennies. Return home, accept wagers from those who came by her house. The about 2 PM, her wagers receipts and cash were given to her handler before the Market closed. Later that afternoon she was given the dollars for any winnings. Her payment was small, dependent on the total wager.

As might be expected, she became a whiz at balancing her bookkeeping.

Aunt Mame did this for years, knew most residents on her south side of the Allegheny River. She was never bothered by law enforcement nor was anything stolen from her .

It was thought that her brother, our Uncle Jim, the town Magistrate, provided her with some invincibility, balancing her family life day by day. as Uncle Richard was unemployed during those Depression years.