

Pearl A. Love

April 13, 1984

TRIBUTE TO AUNT ALICE

FAYE:

They dumped Pearl off the sled that 1939 winter night on the way up Stringtown. They were laughing about it in the kitchen later over whiskey mixed with 7-Up as they warmed themselves around the coal stove. The laughter held no malice or pride of mischievousness. Quite the contrary. The laughter, I suspect, was buffer to their quickening of fear for she might have been hurt as everyone shared in a festive mood surrounding the occasion of lifting her onto the sleigh as she insisted in her dare-devilish way that was the way she wanted to be transported to see the new baby. She laughed best and hardest when she was dumped.

They laughed because a large family's tragedies are sometimes too many and too overpowering for tears for very long. Grief, pity and anger at the fates gnaw incessantly at a family's foundation . . . to no avail. Shared laughter and a "chins-up" sort of attitude make bundling back on the sled and onward and upward on the windy steep road an easier, kinder way of life. Our Aunt Alice's way of life. . . All 90 years of it. And perhaps the steepest, hardest part of all was 1936 when she buried her husband, "Mr. Crombie", her daughter, Velma and learned that her daughter Pearl would never walk again.

I was the December, 1939 baby and it was at this point I entered her life as one of a whole lot of nieces and nephews. I happened along in Hiawatha, where Aunt Alice lived at the time, too. It was a coal mining camp running up and down a mountain with people with names like Tim and Annie, the Revas, the Buff Judds, Shefton and Roxie Gordon, the Drapers, the Parmleys, the Burdicks, the Simons, the Etzels, Mr. Story, the Japanese Budos, the Colosomos, Mr. Morgan, the Williams. Names as familiar as apple pie and some as exotic as the undreamed of lands across the sea who sent their men (with a language like an unfamiliar tune to our ears) to dig the coal from our mountains. Hiawatha pulsed with life. A mixture of people and cultures with an excitement all of its own. The red brick school was as fine as any school in the Country. There were frame houses for the miners and garages for those who owned a car. There were prizes for the lushest yards and most bountiful gardens. Who wouldn't remember the confectionary with ice cream and syrupy smells and there was an amusement hall with a bowling alley, pool tables, card rooms, lodge rooms and rooms for ladies to have their socials --- and a dance hall. Hiawatha even had a jail. As a matter of fact, a jail with a story all of its own. It seems an Italian by the name of Gigliotto built the rock jail in Hiawatha and was paid by the United States Fuel Company. He, in a fit of euphoria at finishing the project, entered the bar and offered to buy drinks for everyone. Two "Americans" loudly stated that they wouldn't drink with a blankity-blank Wop, with the end result being Mr. Gigliotto became the jail's first patron after promptly punching someone in the nose.

These were the days when all of Aunt Alice's "men" made their living digging the coal out of the mountains. They would push their felt hats jauntily back on their heads and laugh and make jokes and go to "Miller's" place by the mysterious "Okie" flat tops and delight us children with their unending source of treasure which they called a "punch board." New clocks, candy and all because one was grown up and wore a jaunty hat

and went to Miller's. I never did find out why my jaunty father became so mule-headed that he packed his sister, Alice, and wife, Marie, into his '36 Chevrolet and backed up the mountain all the way from Miller's, across the railroad tracks and home before he would stop the car to let them out. Some day, Aunt Alice may tell me why. Her husband, father and brothers . . . they were all men of the mines. Louis Ungermeyer said what I suspect they thought sometimes:

"CALIBAN IN THE COAL MINES

God, we don't like to complain.
We know that the mine is no lark.
But --- there's the pools from the rain;
But --- there's the cold and the dark.

God, You don't know what it is ---
You, in Your well-lighted sky,
Watching the meteors whizz;
Warm, with a sun always by.

God, if You had but the moon
Stuck in Your cap for a lamp,
Even You'd tire of it soon
Down in the dark and the damp.

Nothing but blackness above,
And nothing that moves but the cars
God, if You wish for our love,
Fling us a handful of stars!"

And our Aunt Alice was a pivotal character in the motion of the town. She was the telephone operator and I could go everyday and wave at her through the window of the mine office.

KAYE: Yeah . . . well, Faye has led you to believe that she was the only baby born in Hiawatha. I was born in Hiawatha too --- three months before Faye, in September. I had the good sense to beat the winter storms --- the snow, ice, cold winds, and sleds. I was born with the fall colors and cool breezes.

There were a lot of us now who were awfully important to Aunt Alice's life besides her own children. Grandsons, David and Billy Powell; nieces and nephews Clyde, Betty, Billy and Sally, Donna, Bud and Jim, Fon and Millie, Jack and Sara Lou, Arlean, Beverly Ann . . . just dozens of us. But special, I guess, was my cousin Bert, who had a few years before, when Uncle Dave was still there, moved himself in as being much happier there and dubbed himself Bert Crombie. And much to Auntie's consternation, with his slight lisp, had dubbed her "Aunt Ass", which he calls her to this very day. Jack was still a kid at home and Roy and Pearl had moved in and Roylene had joined the family and Aunt Alice began the nurturing of her first granddaughter . . . a lifelong love affair for each and every one of them to come. Roylene and Millie were busy little kids who ran away to France with their friend, Rita Clavelle, always making it home before the sun went down and people started worrying where kids might be. By now, "Little Alyce" and Howard had started a family of their own . . . Douglas, Jackie and Judy, at first, and then trailed along Gerald, Irene, Pat and Tommy.

Hiawatha boys wore pint-sized hats and fished and played ball and people's dogs came home with porcupine quills in their noses, looking embarrassed at being caught quite so red-handed. But Jack held the magic. He always loved animals. He had birds -- love birds in a cage and pigeons. I remember the pigeon coops in the back yard. The dog, Trixie --- mean --- with big teeth and a ferocious bark . . . and white rats. There were neighbor kids and nieces and nephews in and out and fresh bread baking and Aunt Alice always proper and tidy and industrious. The washing machines would be filled with scalding, hot water and the number two tubs with bluing added to the rinse water. Clothes were sorted in a wash-a-day pecking order with no deviation or shortcuts allowed. Everything was hurried out to be hung on the lines, perhaps to freeze before day's end, if proper vigilance was forgotten.

I remember Daddy (Vern) telling us it was late in the fall and Aunt Alice had made a big batch of pie. It was decided to take the pies and go for a ride and have a picnic. They loaded Pearl in the car, along with the picnic supplies and pies --- Dad said he could smell the pies all the way up to the top of Huntington (Skyline Drive) Canyon. While going up the canyon, they hit real heavy fog --- so foggy you could hardly see the road --- they kept going thinking that they would soon be above it but to no avail. They ended up eating on top of Skyline Drive --- in the fog and cold, but Dad can still remember the taste of those pies. (While he was telling me this story he said his mouth was watering because he could remember the taste so well.)

Aunt Alice was an excellent cook and always had something baking and delicious aromas coming from her kitchen.

But the Country's mood was unsettled by now. News of war. Threats of war and finally the reality of war with ration stamps for food and gasoline. And Aunt Alice's men went away. Roy to the Merchant Marines . . . Jack to the Army and her nephew Jack Leamaster in the Navy and brother-in-law Bob Ketterer in the Army. War news and mayonnaise on the shelves at the Price Trading Company filled our child minds . . . with chocolate every once in awhile. But in time, they all came home again.

We were lucky. And more new names began to appear on family trees. Pretty button nose Marty Rae was Roy and Pearl's new addition. There was Jeanne, Bobby Lee, Sandy, Dennis and Mikey --- Darrel and Stanley Van and Robert Whimpey . . . then later tags along Wayne and Lana Joe, Lynn and Terry Ann and Jack's family of women: Tammy, Debbie and Lisa. We've not mentioned everyone but each of us knew we were a special addition. And who has the latest count of just her great-grandchildren and great great-grandchildren. She would probably answer she isn't sure because she hasn't heard from Alyce's or Billy's family lately.

Aside from her position as the most grown-up of our grown-ups, she was a person in her own right in Hiawatha and busy and active during the war.

These are the recollections of Aunt Lindora Draper and we thank her for them:

"When we moved to Hiawatha in 1937, there was a central operation for the telephones and we'd ring the crank on the phone, get the operator, give the number . . . and then be asked how we were, while it was ringing. Alice operated one shift, Melba Babcock and Thelma Cook had the other shifts. Our number was 245.

We lived close to her for 41 years and never once did I ever find her with dirty clothes on. Looking as if she'd be on the bandwagon, even while doing household tasks.

An expression we've all heard her make is, "I need be a dozen persons." Reasons: Someone seemed to be needing her service somewhere. An illness, a new baby, a troubled family member or whatever. I doubt if she has any ideas for the miles traveled for these needs.

When Roylene was a tiny baby, Pearl, Roy and Roylene moved into her home. Never a complaint about her added duties.

If anyone other than Roy or Alice made coffee for Pearl it was 'skiddle' --- Both had that special way.

Roy had the greatest respect for her and always called her "Mrs. Crombie." To my sons she is "Aunt Alice" and to me she is "Crombie" and I don't know why.

As Martie Rae came along, her grandmother was second mother. She attended all the school functions, socials, etc., with Martie. Though when high school came, Martie would sometimes wear Grandma's clothes. (As the style specialist would say, "If you're the right size to wear the younger clothes wear them.") . . . and she always bought very good

Looking clothing. Martie's friends would refer to 'Crombie' as her Teenage-Grandmother because both looked so well in the clothes. Very stylish.

Remember when she hit the jackpot and won a sum of money?

Well, she bought herself a lovely coat with mink - - -

How elegant she looked. When I think, Ladies Auxilliary of the American Legion, I think Alice Crombie, who was a member because of her brother Fon, Margaret Nixon and Thelma Baldwin. They really kept the organization going in Hiawatha."

FAYE:

Well, here we have covered our lives to that point, Kaye. Because Aunt Alice has never seemed "old" to us, it is rather shocking to realize that by the time we became someone she knew, she had already lived 46 years. And now, we have all lived another 44. So there are a lot of blanks not filled in and I'm afraid we can't do them justice, but let's try. Let me begin by telling a story my Grandma Ungerman used to tell when I spent long afternoons with her which would bring tears of romantic, heroism to my young heart. It seems our grandfathers had an unhealthy habit of racing the buggies. At least, it seems an unfortunate past-time to me, as horses and I have long since agreed that we have no business occupying the face of the same earth. Something happened to our grandfather Leamaster's team and it was an out-of-control runaway. Our grandmother clutched her tiny baby, Alice, to her breast and fell to her knees at the head of the wagon . . . the wind blowing her black hair loose, making it fall around her stoic, handsome face and trail behind in a long wisp. What a beautiful portrait of mother and child it has always brought to my mind.

Or what about the time Grandfather took Aunt Alice, Uncle Fon and Aunt Hilda to the pasture. He had forgotten something and told them all he would be right back and the three tiny personages forlornly pondered the fate of Hansel and Gretel until he came again to fetch them. Or their shared scarlet fever when Grandfather was sheriff in Castle Dale and they had shared the meals with the jail patrons.

I suspect the first real showing of what an independent character she would always be came about when they moved from Castle Dale, where Aunt Alice was born, to Sunnyside, where my father, Del, was born. It seems she somehow managed to be on her own to sign up for school. Having grown quite weary of the name "Alice", she signed herself in under an alias she thought more elegant, Leona Leamaster, and pulled it off quite well until Grandfather had occasion to call on school one day and shatter her fancies. I suspect, though, she might have answered to Alice all right after that, but I'll bet she thought of herself as she darn well pleased.

KAYE: To help fill in some missing parts, Aunt Dora has shared her remembrances:

"Alice remembers in Castle Dale, Dad being the sheriff and Mother cooking for the prisoners and a larger boy picking on Fon. Alice, to protect Fon, threatened to tell Dad to arrest the bully. (The Bully died in Portland awhile back --- Alice read in the obituaries.)

When she was 10 years old, they moved to Sunnyside. They lived in a tent for a short while. Their oven was a dug-out or fireplace in a hill behind the tent. (I imagine something like the coke ovens.) Grandpa Jonathan and Grandma Caroline moved to Sunnyside too and Grandpa and Dad cut timber for the mine on Range Creek. Alice would sleep with Grandma Caroline while Grandpa was on the mountain.

Alice was 16 when the family left Sunnyside and went to West Hiawatha. She remembers camping near Wellington "Mounds" --- she says its a railroad stop somewhere near Cat Canyon in a wagon (and Mother was driving, I think), then they had to live in a tent again and Dad and older boys worked in timber again. Alice went to work for H.C. Lewis, who was the mine superintendent, as a maid or housekeeper. He was Dave's brother-in-law.

She recalls meeting Dave when he and other baseball players saw her pass . . . and he sang a song . . . and she threatened to go home and tell Dad on him. She was working when I was born, and married Dave September 2, 1911, when she was 17 years old. (I was born February 23, 1911.)

Dave went to Boise, Idaho where he was a carpenter. She went to Idaho on a train. Stopped overnight in Nampa, Idaho --- then on to Boise. Dave caught a freight train out of Boise and went to Wyoming coal mines. Alice went back to West Hiawatha.

She recalls Mother and herself walking from West Hiawatha to Hiawatha carrying her belongings to get on the train to go to Wyoming. I think it was three miles or about that. The family had moved into a house by this time in West Hiawatha. (My thoughts tell me it was about the time Dad broke his hip --- I could be wrong.)

Another thing she mentioned was going through Salina Canyon and Dad telling her "Do you remember the night we camped here and you cried all night with an earache and I had to smoke all night and blow smoke into your ear to make it feel better?"

She was about a year old and they were traveling to Mapleton from Castle Dale through Salina Canyon to visit Grandma Whiting. She said the landmark was the "Old Woman." The famous landmark which fell down a few years ago."

And in Aunt Alice's own words:

SHORT HISTORY OF ALICE COMBIE

by Alice Combie

"Born, to John and Millie Leamaster, April 13, 1894, Castle Dale, Utah. Baptized May, 1903 in Cottonwood River.

I remember living with Grandma and Grandpa. He was taking a load of hay. I was sitting on the top of the load, holding a basket of eggs, to the store. As we crossed a ditch, the hay tipped over, and covered me. Grandpa was frantic. He finally dug me out, covered with eggs and mud and water. The only thing that bothered me, was that my new dress was spoiled.

I started school in a building that one time was a saloon. I was always ashamed to have to go. A lovely woman, Louise Kofford, was my teacher.

Father was County Sheriff for several years. Mother had to cook the meals for the prisoners. We children always ran and hid when Dad brought them in for meals.

When I was eight years old, Dad, Mother and five children, all had small-pox. We were all too sick to do anything to help each other. Grandpa Leamaster had already had the disease, so he did all that he could to make us comfortable.

When I was ten years old, we moved up to Sunnyside, Utah, where we lived for six years. Then we moved to Hiawatha, Utah, a new mining camp, where we lived in a tent for awhile. At that time, there weren't any houses built. As soon as there were some built, we were lucky enough to get one.

The next year, I met a nice guy from Wyoming and married September 2, 1911. Moved to Boise, Idaho in January of 1912, stayed there for five months. Then moved to Sublet, Wyoming. Was there for several years.

In the meantime, I had four children. Velma, born November 1st, 1912; Pearl, February 15th, 1915; David, July 8th, 1919 and Alyce, December 10th, 1921. Moved to Frontier, Wyoming, where Jack was born May 15th, 1925.

After that we moved to Blazon, Wyoming, then to Diamondville, Wyoming, where we lost David, after a long illness. In 1930, we left Wyoming and came back to Utah. We lived in Salt Lake City and Ogden for awhile. Dave was working for the gas company. They were bringing in the natural gas at that time. After that, we went back to Hiawatha, where he passed away February 26th, 1936.

I worked in the company store for awhile, then in the telephone office for thirteen years. After they closed the telephone office, I went to Las Vegas, Nevada and worked for my sister in their motel. I think that I was there for about twenty years.

On April 6, 1979, we were hit by a car as we stepped off the bus. She was killed and I was in the hospital and a nursing home until July. After that, I stayed in Las Vegas with my granddaughter, Debra Pope, until May of the next year.

I am now living in Portland, Oregon with my son and his lovely wife."

KAYE:

After Uncle Ernie died in the 1950s, Aunt Alice spent more and more time with Aunt Hilda. Their trailer at Ernie's Motel became a nesting spot for the family. Food, drink and good company, hot biscuits and apple pie. The two sisters shared a lot of years and helped each other. The trailer became headquarters for Bud and Jim and their families and Bert and Millie and Faye were still near Aunt Alice as they had been as kids in Hiawatha. To be sure, our Aunt Alice is always proper and to her fingertips a lady, but her advice to Faye when she had two babies in a year might surprise you just a little. "Faye, doctor told me that if I didn't want any more babies, I would have to keep more than my fingers crossed."

All of the good times and memories would take much too long to go into here, but she and Hilda made Las Vegas home and a happy place.

FAYE:

Aunt Alice is the eldest child of a large family and she became early on a "giver" in life. Her mission, it seems, has been a caretaker of life . . . helping it get started, making the journey more meaningful and easy and the end more bearable and comfortable because she is there. Each brother and sister and friend and child would have a story to tell of her assistance in time of need. Sometimes it seems she was born with a wisdom and passion as old and comforting as the true meaning of life and she has shared her gift most generously and graciously. Quiet, funny, stoic and comforting, she always sees what needs to be done and pitches in and does it.

As she grew into her teenage years, she pitched in to help the family. Henry Lewis, the mine superintendent's wife's name was Pearl and she hired Aunt Alice to help out. Now it seems that Pearl had a brother named Dave Crombie who came to visit and there blossomed love between the young girl and the roving coal mining man. They married and they went away to Wyoming to follow the mines and their life together.

They lived in Diamondsville, Frontier, and Kemmerer among other places. I rode through the area with Aunt Alice and Aunt Clara and Uncle Bob and Clyde on a jolly holiday last year. It was her first time back after oh, so many years. In her youthful, enthusiastic way she recalled how Mr. Crombie always fixed the car, but she always drove. She remembered the store had moved from one corner to the other and the road had run differently. We all lifted our eyes and tried to imagine the hard, grueling life of over half a century ago for a young wife bearing her children and helping her man of the mines. These were the times when Velma, Alyce, David, Jack and Pearl were born. And you know, when I speak of bearing children in Wyoming and Hiawatha, we're talking about an active participant in a lot of births. I mean, when my brothers and sister and I were born, there were no lacey cards saying

"Dear Aunt Alice,

. . . Guess What?

. . . It's a Baby!"

She had turned us upside down and given us our first whack.

In fact, I understand when Millie was born, the doctor stretched out to take a snooze and left it to Aunt Alice until the last second at that.

That day, as we drove through Wyoming, we glanced only briefly in the direction of the little cemetery where Aunt Alice had left her child, David, so many years before. We spoke little and had a catch in our throats that would not go away for a very long time. Our hearts filled with love for this great lady who means so very much to us.

KAYE:

Well, Bert Leamaster Crombie. You are about to get your bluff pulled. A whole lot of people heard you tell "Aunt Ass" a couple of years back that when she got to be 100, you would give her a hundred dollar bill. Better get your money where your mouth is. By the way, when we asked her sometime where what her secret of longevity is, she said in her own unassuming way, "It's simply because I just didn't die" . . . and that is, Aunt Alice. Good, common sense with a twist of the wry humor!

So, Aunt Alice, may all of us who are here today and those of us who are not say to you, --- WE ALL LOVE YOU. --- Thank you for being you and for giving each one of us so very much of you.

Happy Birthday!