

MY MOTHER NEVER WORKED By Bonnie Smith-Yackel

“Social Security Office.” (The voice answering the telephone sounds very self-assured.)

“I’m calling about ... I ... my mother just died ... I was told to call you and see about a ... death benefit check, I think they call it ...”

“I see. Was your mother on Social Security? How old was she?”

“Yes ... she was seventy eight ...”

“Do you know her number?”

“No ... I, ah ... don’t you have a record?”

“Certainly. I’ll look it up. Her name?”

“Smith. Martha Smith. Or maybe she used Martha Ruth Smith. ... Sometimes she used her maiden name ... Martha Jerabek Smith.”

“If you’d care to hold on, I’ll check our records – it’ll be a few minutes.”

“Yes ...”

Her love letters – to and from Daddy – were in an old box, tied with ribbons and stiff, rigid-with-age leather thongs: 1918 through 1920; hers written on stationery from the general store she had worked in full-time and managed, single-handed, after her graduation from high school in 1913; and his, at first, on YMCA or Soldiers and Sailors Club stationery dispensed to the fighting men of World War I. He wooed her thoroughly and persistently by mail, and though she reciprocated all his feelings for her, she dreaded marriage ...

“It’s so hard for me to decide when to have my wedding day – that’s all I’ve thought about these last two days. I have told you *dozens* of times that I won’t be afraid of married life, but when it comes down to setting the date and then picturing myself a married woman with half a dozen or more kids to look after, it just makes me sick. I am weeping right now – I hope that some day I can look back and say how foolish I was to dread it all.”

They married in February 1921, and began farming. Their first baby, a daughter, was born in January 1922, when my mother was 26 years old. The second baby, a son, was born in March 1923. They were renting farms; my father, besides working his own fields, also was a hired man for two other farmers. They had no capital initially, and had to gain it slowly, working from dawn until midnight every day. My town-bred mother learned to set hens and raise chickens, feed pigs, milk cows, plant and harvest a garden, and can every fruit and vegetable she could scrounge. She carried water nearly a quarter of a mile

from the well to fill her wash boilers in order to do her laundry on a scrub board. She learned to shuck grain, feed threshers, shuck and husk corn, feed corn pickers. In September 1925, the third baby came, and in June 1927, the fourth child – both daughters. In 1930, my parents had enough money to buy their own farm, and that March they moved all their livestock and belongings themselves, 55 miles over rutted, muddy roads.

In the summer of 1930 my mother and her two eldest children reclaimed a 40 – acre field from Canadian thistles, by chopping them all out with a hoe. In the other fields, when the oats and flax began to head out, the green and blue of the crops were hidden by the bright yellow of wild mustard. My mother walked the fields day after day, pulling each mustard plant. She raised a new flock of baby chicks – 500 – and she spaded up, planted, hoed, and harvested a half-acre garden.

During the next spring their hogs caught cholera and died. No cash that fall.

And in the next year the drought hit. My mother and father trudged from the well to the chickens, the well to the calf pasture, the well to the barn, and from the well to the garden. The sun came out hot and bright, endlessly, day after day. The crops shrivelled and died. They harvested half the corn, and ground the other half, stalks and all, and fed it to the cattle as fodder. With the price at four cents a bushel for the harvested crop, they couldn't afford to haul it into town. They burned it in the furnace for fuel that winter.

In 1934, in February, when the dust was still so thick in the Minnesota air that my parents couldn't always see from the house to the barn, their fifth child – a fourth daughter – was born. My father hunted rabbits daily, and my mother stewed them, fried them, canned them, and wished out loud that she could taste hamburger once more. In the fall the shotgun brought prairie chickens, ducks, pheasant, and grouse. My mother plucked each bird, carefully reserving the breast feathers for pillows.

In the winter she sewed night after night, endlessly, begging cast-off clothing from relatives, ripping apart coats, dresses, blouses, and trousers to remake them to fit her four daughters and son. Every morning and every evening she milked cows, fed pigs and calves, cared for chickens, picked eggs, cooked meals, washed dishes, scrubbed floors, and tended and loved her children. In the spring she planted a garden once more, dragging pails of water to nourish and sustain the vegetables for the family. In 1936 she lost a baby in her sixth month.

In 1937 her fifth daughter was born. She was 42 years old. In 1939 a second son, and in 1941 her eighth child – and third son.

But the war had come, and prosperity of a sort. The herd of cattle had grown to 30 head; she still milked morning and evening. Her garden was more than a half acre – the rains had come, and by now the Rural Electricity Administration and indoor plumbing. Still she sewed – dresses and jackets for the children, housedresses and aprons for herself, weekly patching of jeans, overalls, and denim shirts. Still she made pillows, using the

feathers she had plucked, and quilts every year – intricate patterns as well as patchwork, stitched as well as tied – all necessary bedding for her family. Every scrap of cloth too small to be used in quilts was carefully saved and painstakingly sewed together in strips to make rugs. She still went out in the fields to help with the haying whenever there was a threat of rain.

In 1959 my mother's last child graduated from high school. A year later the cows were sold. She still raised chickens and ducks, plucked feathers, made pillows, baked her own bread, and every year made a new quilt – now for a married child or for a grandchild. And her garden, that huge, undying symbol of sustenance, was as large and cared for as in all the years before. The canning, and now freezing, continued.

In 1969, on a June afternoon, mother and father started out for town so that she could buy sugar to make rhubarb jam for a daughter who lived in Texas. The car crashed into a ditch. She was paralyzed from the waist down.

In 1970 her husband, my father, died. My mother struggled to regain some competence and dignity and order in her life. At the rehabilitation institute, where they gave her physical therapy and trained her to live usefully in a wheelchair, the therapist told me: “She did fifteen pushups today – fifteen! She's almost seventy-five years old! I've never known a woman so strong!”

From her wheelchair she canned pickles, baked bread, ironed clothes, wrote dozens of letters weekly to her friends and her “half dozen or more kids,” and made three patchwork housecoats and one quilt. She made balls and balls of carpet rags – enough for five rugs. And kept all her love letters.

“I think I've found your mother's records – Martha Ruth Smith; married to Ben F Smith?”

“Yes, that's right.”

“Well, I see that she was getting a widow's pension...”

“Yes, that's right.”

“Well, your mother isn't entitled to our \$255 death benefit.”

“Not entitled! But why?”

The voice on the telephone explains patiently:

“Well, you see – your mother never worked.”