

Betty Jensen Branham  
(1928-2015)

A Personal Memoir of My Mother

William B. Jensen



The Epicurean Press  
Cincinnati  
2016



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“The life of a person is not what happened, but what they remember and how they remember it.”

Gabriel Garcia Márquez

# Table of Contents

Introduction	xx
1. Childhood and Adolescence	xx
2. First Marriage	xx
3. Children	xx
4. Animals	xx
5. Librarian	xx
6. Widowhood and Second Marriage	xx
7. Death	xx





# Introduction

**One** of my most bittersweet memories involves a Sunday in the spring of 1965 when I was finishing my second year of high school. After church that morning I was invited to dinner at the home of my friend Tom Schwartz and his family, which consisted of his two sisters, Katherine and Margaret, and his widowed mother, Thora. When the meal was finished, we all decided to go for a long leisurely drive on the back country roads surrounding Wausau – a Sunday ritual that we had fallen into over the previous few months. The weather that day was overcast with a continuous light drizzle, almost more like a mist than a true rainfall. Rather than being dark gray and gloomy, the cloud cover was suffused with a very pale yellowish light that somehow managed to intensify the greens of the passing fields and trees.

For reasons I don't understand, I have always called these occasional meteorological events "orange days," though I doubt there is anything remotely orange about them, but then again I am partially color blind and my view of the world's color palate does not always match that of my fellow human beings. I have always loved rainy days (as well as black and white movies), a preference shared by my brother and one that our mother always attributed to our having inherited from my father's side of the family the genes of a typical melancholy Dane. To my imagination such days always seem to impart to the world a sense of mystery and the promise of discovering things previously overlooked – possible dark secrets that somehow are unable to withstand the scrutiny of a bright sunny day.

Later that afternoon, when our drive was over, I was dropped off at my home – the circa 1916 bungalow by the Iron Works on the southwest side of Wausau that we always referred to as the "Tracy"

house after the last name of our elderly landlady. Rather than going directly into the house via the front door, I decided for some reason to walk around the house to the backyard. As I turned the corner of the house, I paused to contemplate the scene before me. Never had the foliage of the backyard looked so green and lush, nor the three mature white pines so tall and imposing, as they did in the strangely suffused light of that misty orange day. But what really arrested my attention was the unexpected sight of my mother. She wasn't in the house taking her usual Sunday nap as I had assumed, but – oblivious to both me and the light drizzle – was instead merrily weeding the small garden plot next to the alley where she cultivated mint to make tea for her children, catnip for the family cats, and a few baby onions and carrots for herself. I also gradually became aware that, as she weeded, she was quietly humming the melody to the song “Green Sleeves” to herself.

As I contemplated the scene before me, I was suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of profound sadness as the thought floated into my 17-year old mind – for such thoughts do occasionally occur even to mere 17-year olds – that one day all of this would cease to exist. We would no longer live in this house, would no longer enjoy this yard, the trees, and the garden. But far, far worse was the thought that some day even my mother would be no more. All that would then remain would be the memories, and I was momentarily seized by a frantic wish to freeze time in order to preserve this scene forever. All that saddened me that day has since come to pass. My mother would leave the Tracy house in 1976 and would pass away in 2015. As for the memories, they are what this small memoir is all about – my feeble attempt to fulfill that fleeting wish of so long ago and to freeze time by preserving my memories of my mother before they too have passed away.

But, in so doing, I must confess to three short-comings. The first of these is due to the fact that I am most comfortable writing about

events in my life in the first person. I know what I remember and what I felt about those memories and am uncomfortable imposing these views on others. Consequently, in what follows, I continually refer to *my* mother or to *my* grandfather, etc. even though they are equally the mother and grandfather of my brother and sister. I excuse this self indulgence by rationalizing to myself that my sibling's memories, and especially their emotional reactions, may well be different from my own, and that I have no business putting words in their mouths, though I have, of course, asked for their impressions of many of the events recorded here.

The second shortcoming involves my mother's commitment to the Mormon church in which I ceased to be active in my early 20s. Though I can still speak "Mormonese" if I have to, my assessments of her religious views are now those of an often critical outsider. Since many of my relatives, as well as her second husband, are still active members of the Mormon church, I apologize in advance if some of these assessments seem unsympathetic.

The third and final shortcoming involves the courtship and early marriage of my parents. Knowing what happened later, I find it very difficult to describe these in sympathetic terms, though I have tried to be objective and to let the period documents speak for themselves. In this regard I should emphasize that this is a proper biography and not simply a laudatory obituary. As such, it covers not just the happy events of my mother's life but the unhappy – sometimes very unhappy – events as well, since these were just as relevant, if not more so, to her life experience.

In closing, I fully realize that, by its very nature, this biography is of little interest to those outside of my immediate family. Our mother was in no way famous. She was neither a champion nor an opponent of womens' lib, and she achieved no "firsts" of any kind in the course of her life. She was simply our mother and, to the best of our knowledge, that was all she ever aspired to be. And that simple fact –

*My Mother*

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as far as myself, my siblings, and the rest of the extended family are concerned – is all that is required to justify what follows.

*Cincinnati, OH, 2016*