

I had lots of “aunts by marriage.” My mother had eight brothers, all who married, giving me many aunts. My dad had five brothers, so there were five more aunts by marriage. But aunts who were blood relatives of mine were more scarce. My mother had no sisters, and my father had four sisters, but two of them died as young women, each leaving a little son who was raised by grandparents.

So, there were just two aunts that were blood relatives of mine who were alive while my siblings and I were growing up. Aunt Hilda and her husband lived in Pontiac, and closer to home, Aunt Constance and her family lived in Traverse City.

Because the homestead here was “home” to all of the Ericksons, the aunts were frequent visitors. Their mother was here in my early memories, but even after Grandma was gone, the “girls,” as my dad called them, were frequent visitors. Sometimes, they came alone and stayed a few days. We girls looked forward to that.

Aunt Hilda was the older of the two. She was a very good cook, and her specialties were—as I remember—lemon meringue pie and Parker House rolls. I believe she introduced these buttery dinner rolls to the family.

Aunt Hilda was always well dressed. I can’t remember that she ever wore a pair of slacks, though she may have, if the situation arose where it was necessary. She sewed, and often, her choice of apparel was a dress in a dark print. She seldom, as far as I knew, wore flat heeled shoes. Her footwear usually consisted of black pumps with a little heel. I remember trying on Aunt Hilda’s shoes when I was little, thinking that wearing shoes with heels must be a necessity when one grew up.

Hilda was older than my father, and Dad was forty-five when I was born, so I never knew his sisters as young women. They both taught in country one-room schools, and some of the letters that still exist in family archives tell a little about their experiences.

In February, 1913, Hilda wrote to her brother who was working in a sawmill some distance away: “Well, we girls (Hilda and Constance, plus the two sisters who died before I was born) all assembled under the paternal roof last Friday Eve. after a pleasant day’s sojourn in Reed City at Teachers’ Institute.”

And later in the same letter: “It is 4:30 and my girls are sweeping and acting foolish in which they are masters, all right.

“We are drilling Spelling words and 6:30 is my quitting time. Our next contest is here—Sherman #1 Sat. Eve. I suppose you heard of my worthy school winning the last contest.”

And, in the same letter, Hilda reports one of the rather usual winter incidents of her weekly trips back and forth to the school district where she taught: “Bro. John brought me back Sunday A.M. Only tipped over once. That was very good for the roads at present are certainly fierce. It has been very stormy for a couple of wks.” One of the brothers usually drove the girls back to their schools each week with a horse and cutter.

A highlight of Hilda’s visits during her later years—when I knew her—

was sitting at the table in the morning, listening to the conversation that often consisted mostly of reminiscences that she and my father recounted.

Constance was younger. She was the next child after my father in the large Erickson family. My dad could not say "Connie" and called her "Tottie." The name stuck, and during their growing up years, she was always referred to by that name or a shorter version, "Tot."

I remember Dad saying that Constance loved to fish, and as they raced for the creek, she would put "dibs" on the hole she liked best. There were an almost unlimited amount of small brook trout in those small creeks at the time, and they spend many Sunday mornings fishing.

Aunt Connie, as we called her, was very good to us girls. The dress I wore on my first day of kindergarten was one that Connie made. She had two boys and a daughter, but her daughter was older than we were, and I think she liked sewing for little girls. On another occasion, she gave our mother material for dresses for us. That cotton print became my favorite dress, and I wouldn't mind having it now! The material was bright red with a print of buttons all over it. I called it my "button dress." My mother made it from a pattern with a ruffle around the bottom, and I wanted to wear it all the time.

Constance taught my sister and me how to knit. She was an expert knitter and seamstress and always had a project underway. I think she made nearly all of her own clothes. I don't remember her wearing slacks, either, but she wore pedal pushers and culottes all summer long. Her clothes were stylish and youthful, and we joked late in her life that she was the only 80 plus woman we knew who could wear "young-person" clothing and look perfectly correct.

Those two aunts were important to us in our youth. And, in their later years, both my sister and I corresponded with them, enjoying keeping in touch with them for the rest of their lives. Extended family can make us very "background wealthy," as family history unfolds before us at every encounter with aunts and uncles. They fill the void that past can easily become.