



Virginia R Benson

September 12, 1922 - November 3, 2020

Virginia Lee was born in a small farm community in the southwestern corner of rural Minnesota on September 12, 1922 to a rather head-strong 16-year old girl named Mahalia Allen. I've never been able to get the full story on this subject from Mom except to say that her father was another member of the community named Howard Anderson. While that is somewhat common these days unfortunately, in those days, I'm certain it mattered a great deal and if that were the case, I'm also certain it was the scandal of the year as Mahalia came from a prominent family in Amboy.

I only know that Mae, as she was known, wound up in the bustling town of Mankato where she worked as a sales clerk leaving her young daughter in the care of the family who owned the home where she boarded.

Now we'll cut to the story of another young couple, Joe and Ruth Etta Rose. They were also an interesting pair for that era. When they married in 1915 in the town of St. Cloud, Minnesota, Joe owned one of the first Harley Davidson motorcycles. After the brief ceremony and kisses to her family, Ruth put on a pair of trousers, hopped on the back of that cycle and off they went to introduce her to his family in Springfield, Illinois. As the early years ensued, Joe supported them by picking up odd jobs around the midwestern states. As a young man before he met Ruth, he drove cattle in Wyoming, worked on various ranches and farms and eventually mastered the art of plumbing. In short he was a handyman extraordinaire.

On one sunny afternoon, they were on their way to Sioux City, Iowa for a job

prospect when they stopped for a rest at the side of the road near an apple orchard . Ruth noticed that the trees were heavy with fruit and decided to pick a few for their lunch. She climbed one of the trees and as she was reaching for some bright red beauties, she came up an inch worm crawling toward her. Now she wasn't afraid of many things including snakes, spiders and bees, but worms were an entirely different matter and instead of backing away from it, she just let go of the limb and fell to the ground. The result was permanent injury and the horrible prognosis that children would not ever be possible. They were living with this fact when their lives miraculously intersected with Virginia.

It seems the family who was caring for her were friends of Joe and Ruth and they decided to stop by for a visit during a trip to LaSuer, Minn to open a plumbing shop.. Of course, they immediately fell in love with the lively little 8-month -old and eventually put the question to her young mother of whether or not they might be able to adopt her. An agreement was reached after much soul-searching on Mahalia's part and the promise that she would always be able to be in contact with her daughter as long as she didn't divulge the fact that she was her natural mother so as not to confuse the child. Well, it didn't make much sense to have Ruth holding the baby as they sped down the highway so Joe purchased a side car for the Harley and the young family made its way to LeSuer where they lived and prospered for a number of years. That is until the Great Depression set in.

As a side note, Mom just told me not too long ago that Mae had a change of heart a few days after the adoption took place and went to get her daughter back. When Joe got home from work and found Ruth crying and no baby, he went to talk to Mae and finally convinced her that Virginia was better off with him and his wife. I can only imagine the pain and anguish she must've gone through, but she ultimately made the right choice and in later years married a wonderful man and had two sons, my mother's half-brothers who she grew to know later in her life after this whole story came out.

When the Depression did set in, the plumbing shop in LeSuer was one of the

many casualties. Joe had to find a way to support his family and heard tell of the oil boom in central Kansas. He knew with his knowledge of pipes and other plumbing techniques, he would no doubt find work there, so the family headed south to the fields in Canton, Kansas. The company did indeed hire him and set them up in a two-room shack among other small homes provided to the families of the workers.

And so Virginia spent her early years in this community, attended school with the other children of the workers and seemed to be content. As Joe and Ruth prospered and the country came slowly out of the Depression, they decided to move into the closest big town, the county seat of McPherson. They looked around and finally settled on a lot on Charles Street, in an area commonly known as "the hill" because that's what it was....a large hill crested by a college owned and run by the Church of the Brethern. Joe proceeded to dig and cement in the foundation and then had the two-room shack, which the oil company gave him, moved into town. From there he started to gradually add two bedrooms, a kitchen and indoor bathroom and finally a good-sized screened in back porch that was used for meals during the warm months. Virginia enjoyed being a "town girl," finished grade school and when she was ready to start high school, Joe, who had been working for a plumbing company in town and side-lining as a janitor at the church affiliated with the college on the hill, decided he wanted to improve his lot and needed some more school and training. In order to do this he would have to go to Cleveland and then on to St. Louis. While this was to take place the decision was made for Virginia to go live with Ruth's mother and step-father back in Minnesota and attend high school in the small farm town of Truman.

She was a popular girl at Truman high...on the cheerleading squad, singing in the school choir and went roller skating in the town's indoor rink when ever she got the chance. She was good on the skates, actually danced to the music that was piped in. Word was that her natural father, Howard Anderson, would drop by the rink now and then just to watch her skate. Of course he

never approached her. She only heard of this some years later.

At one of the basketball games between Truman and another small town, she was in the girl's locker room when the other cheerleaders were tittering about one of the male cheerleaders from the other squad...Kermit Allen...Kermit this, Kermit that. He was a heart throb and all the girls were enamored of him. They peeked out of the locker room door as he was passing to the gym and my mother's curiosity got the best of her so she took a peek too. "He's not so hot," she said.

Well, apparently he won her over because it wasn't long before they were dating regularly . Being the red-blooded young man he was he kept pushing her to go a little further when they went parking in the country. She resisted and held him at bay. In this respect, she obviously wasn't as head-strong and reckless as her own natural mother had been. But the battle was getting more intense so she finally told him flat out, "This is not going to happen unless we're married."

In mid-July, a month after they both graduated from their respective high schools, he picked her up. She told her grandmother she was spending the night at his family's farm. He told his mother he was staying with a friend in Truman over night. They drove 200 miles to the town of Dennison, Iowa, found a Justice of the Peace and were married. He had just turned 18 on the 4th of July and she would be 19 the following September. Yes....they were babies.

When they got back to the farm and told his mother and step-father what they had done, to say everything hit the fan was an understatement. He had everything going for him, state president of the 4H, farm club, valedictorian of his graduating class with plans to attend St. Olaf College in Minneapolis in the fall, and now he had a wife as well. Joe and Ruth drove up from St. Louis and both families came together for a meeting on the farm with Kermit and Virginia. She was finally told the story that would forever change her. She was adopted, which she didn't know, her natural mother was the lady who never missed sending her a birthday or Christmas gift. And to add to it, she and

Kermit were third cousins. Their grandfathers were brothers.

That fall they took up residence in the married housing at St. Olaf and Kermit started classes while Virginia worked nearby. Half way through his sophomore year on Dec. 7, 1941 Pearl Harbor was attacked. His Uncle Rollo, who was only seven years older than he and a childhood playmate, went into the Army immediately. He was a valiant soldier and took field commissions to the rank of Captain. In 1942 Rollo was killed as he led his troops up a hill during the battle of New Georgia in the Pacific. Kermit was so distraught by this death that he decided to leave school and get into the fight. He joined the Army Air Corps and was sent to Waco, Texas after basic training and Officers Candidate School for flight school. Virginia followed him and lived off the base with a girlfriend. It was during one of those long three-day leaves that I came into the picture. During the last months of her pregnancy, Virginia went back to stay with her parents in Kansas while he finished school and received his wings. Two weeks after I was born, he was shipped to Guam, flew a P-51 Mustang and completed 32 missions by the end of the war.

The next stop for the young family was Knox College in Galesburg, IL where Kermit finished his bachelor's degree and started teaching drama and speech at Galesburg High School. Three years after he graduated he was offered a teaching position at Oak Park/River Forest High School in the English Dept. and we moved to Oak Park in 1954 and joined the parish of St. Christopher's Episcopal Church. Mom worked at Gregory's Dress Shop and Bond's Clothing in Oak Park during those first years. My dad decided to continue his education during the summers at Columbia University in New York. She went with him and worked in bookstores near the school and they shipped me either to the grandparents in Kansas or to the farm in Minnesota for the next five summers until he received his Masters in Speech and Theater. By that time Elmwood Park had completed their new high school at Fullerton and Thatcher Av. and he took the position as head of the speech and drama department.

By the time I was half way through my sophomore year at Elmwood Park High School, I could feel some tensions starting in the household. Finally one

morning during breakfast, Mom told me that she and my dad were going to part ways. She wasn't so much in favor of it, but he had met someone and asked for a divorce after 18 years of marriage. The split came, which put me square in the middle since I had him as my speech teacher in school. Mom and I moved back to Oak Park and I switched to Oak Park High for my senior year. At this point she was manager of ladies' sports ware at Bond's and was transferred to their store at Crawford and Madison Sts in the city.

One very stormy April afternoon before graduation I was pulled out of gym class and asked to go to my dean's office. When I got there she told me that Mom had been hit by a car on Madison St. near the store. She said my priest was coming to pick me up. I asked if my mother was dead and she said she didn't think so, but I needed to hurry. When we arrived at the hospital she was on a gurney in the hall waiting for surgery. Turns out she was running across the street to pick up some donuts for her staff. She had one foot on the median when the heavens opened up and a car caught her on her left side and threw her 30 feet. Her left forearm was shattered but the arm kept the car from hitting her in the pelvis which could've been much worse. She had two steel rods placed in the arm so the bones could reform around them. I can remember when she thought it was a feat to pick up a paper napkin and move it from one place to another. One of the doctors in rehab said, "You're going to have a lot of trouble with that arm, Mrs. Allen." To which she replied, "No I'm not!" She squeezed rubber balls and did various other exercises religiously and I venture to say that most of you here didn't even know she had an issue with her left arm, which has always had limited movement at her wrist.

On the day we left for Kansas State University the following September, my dad was married to his second wife. Mom weathered through it like she did everything else in her life that gave her a shove. She came home from Kansas alone, continued her rehab and eventually took a new job in the carpet department at the Sears store at North and Harlem. She was the only woman with 12 men in the dept. and had her hands full fighting for customers

and sometimes fending one or two of them off because she looked like an easy mark. In fact, my lifelong pal, Judy Peterson Britt who lived three houses down from us can attest to that. While I was away she would often come down the street to our apartment. There was one instance when she and her own mother had a difference of opinion and Judy asked my mother if she could stay for a few days, which was fine. That evening, one of the men in the carpet department asked Mom if she would like a ride home rather than taking the bus. She knew Judy would be there so she wasn't concerned about getting him out of the house. When they got to the apartment, however, there was a note in the table from Judy, "Made up with Mom and went home." My mother went in the other room, called Judy and said, "Get yourself back down here now!" She did. She came in, called Chicken Delight, and ordered a dinner to be delivered. She then settled herself down in an easy chair in front of the television in the bedroom and when the guy poked his head in and asked her how long she was staying she said, "Oh, I'm spending the night." He left.

I eventually came home from college, took a job in the city, and Mom and I once again became roommates. Let me say at this juncture that all during the time I lived with her in high school and after college, not once did she date any one, and it was not for lack of invitations. She didn't want a steady stream of gentlemen friends invading our environment. She wanted me to grow up without that concern. It wasn't until I was married and gone that she started keeping company with anyone. When she got tired of just selling carpet she enrolled at the Ray Vogue School of Interior Design, graduating as an interior decorator and became a member of ASID, (American Society of Interior Decorators). She also spent her time singing in the church choir, becoming a member of the Great Books Club in Oak Park, traveling with her friend, Marge Walker, who lived across the street from us, and eventually joining Oak Park River Forest Civic Chorus.

It was with that group during a concert tour of Europe that she met a tenor who happened to be on the same bus with her. They struck up quite a

friendship during that tour, and when she came home she called me. "I met someone," she said. I asked her who. She said, "His name is Ken Benson, and I think he's the one. There's only one problem,"

"Please don't tell me he's already married," I said.

"No he's single, but the problem is he's a year older than you, which makes him about 20 years younger than me."

I thought about that for a minute and said, "Well, Doris Day did it. Why not you?"

My husband, my friends and I all met him at the same time when she brought him to one of our favorite hang-outs on Madison St. in Forest Park, the Park Lounge. He had horn-rimmed glasses and wore striped pants and a plaid short. I pulled her aside and said, "You've got some work to do on him!"

Another one of our single friends, Karen, also took her aside and said "You've got a lot of nerve snatching up one of the few bachelors our age around here!"

The following summer we packed the family in a van and Mom's ford LTD and drove out to Waitsfield, Vermont where they were married in the woods by a beautiful double-tiered waterfall. And just before he walked her down the path, my husband, Bill, said to me with a big smile on his face, "It isn't everyone who gets to give his mother-in-law away."

We've had many wonderful times together since that day, other trips back east, cruises, fall weekends in Door County, visits to the Teton mountains in Wyoming where Mom and I camped with her parents for up to six weeks at a time in the summer when I was a pre-teen. Lots and lots of holidays.

I remember watching the two of them at the small make-shift altar in the woods of Vermont and wondering how things would be when Mom was in her 80's and maybe even 90's and he was in his 60's and 70's. Would the bloom still be on the rose? Or would he be sorry he had made the decision and the promise to love and cherish her through those times. Turns out there was absolutely no need to be concerned. He has been there for her in every way and every day. He's been her rock, her companion and her soul mate from the day he met her until the day she left us. Thank you, Kenny. Thank you for

taking care of her and for being her best friend. She's sitting up there with Joe and Ruth and your parents, Betty and Fred, and your sisters Karen and Judy and she's smiling down on you.

Tribute Wall

MC

“ I just saw this obituary, and she left us 3 years ago. Virginia was always kind to me. She loved her husband Ken, he loved her. He would always buy her jewelry, present it to her at dinner, they ate out every night. I was so jealous. Lol We worked together at Sears, carpeting department. I was raising 2 young men 15, 25 year with special needs. My carpet selling wasn't that good, Virginia would sometimes say to me, take this and feed your boys. Never asked me to give it back. Virginia Benson, Ruby Franklin and me, Mildred Capmbell. My daughter called us the 3 pretty women in the carpeting department. I know she's at peace now, my prayers and condolences goes out to Her daughter and Ken. God bless you. RIP Virginia



Mildred E campbell - May 01, 2023 at 09:23 PM

AB

I loved them both. Ken and Virginia. Had a lot of good times with them and they were both always very good to me. I worked at the Arbor Inn. A great place were everyone knew each other. When the Bulls played Ken n Virginia always sat in the bar to watch the game. Ken always wore his Bulls horns. We always got the biggest kick out of it.

Alexandra Becker - February 29, 2024 at 08:46 PM