

Isabelle and Helen

Both of my grandmothers were millionaires' daughters. Both grandfathers predeceased my arrival and, to my knowledge, neither grandmother had ever cooked a meal. Among many fond childhood memories are ones of Lily, a sweet middle-aged Irish lady in light-blue uniform and starched white pinafore, who lived in the basement of Gram's house behind the Westchester Country Club, and of Charles and Wilhelmina, the elegant black couple who helped out with occasional family celebrations. I remember whenever Isabelle McBirney Stimson rang a tiny silver bell, a double Canadian Club on-the-rocks would arrive immediately thereafter. I recall the exotic warmth of her perfume, the soothing olive of her textured woolen suits, and the gentle whimsy of her wrinkled smile.

Gram's first child, my Uncle Henry, died in WWII. From my limited perspective as a pre-conscious kid in the mid-nineteen sixties, the surviving generations seated at her regular holiday table consisted of my mom and dad, Aunt Molly and Uncle Walter (who was chair of the board of trustees for the Museum of Modern Art in New York), Uncle Phil (emeritus chair for Infectious Diseases at Cornell Medical School), and his wife Aunt Elizabeth (a survivor of the U-Boat torpedoing of the HMS Sussex in WWI). Aunt Kathy was my mom's oldest childhood friend and her husband, Uncle Lairdy, was a highly respected oncologist at Sloan Kettering Cancer Institute. Aunt Dorothy was former president of Goucher College in Baltimore, and Uncle Hugh was chair of the Oriental Languages department at Yale. I never knew Gram's older sister, Annie Lawrie, but updates on her activities were often discussed collectively under her husband's surname as, "the Ryersons."

Back in Chicago, Gram's father had been the fortunate son of a founder of the National Lead Corporation. Captain of Yale's 1874 football team, he was his father's comptroller and co-founder of the Onwentsia Golf Club (host course for the twelfth U. S. Open). She had married into a family whose lineage included the founder of the Manhattan Congregational Church, the eighth president of Dartmouth College, the first president of the Paterson & Hudson Railroad, a director of the Associates of New Jersey, a justice on the Supreme Court of New Jersey, a founder of Princeton University, the 28th mayor of New York, an English privateer, and one of Peter Stuyvesant's lieutenants. Gram's own matrilineal antecedents included a neighbor of Ulysses S. Grant, one of Missouri's first Supreme Court justices, the second colonial governor of Massachusetts and a number of Virginia burgesses. Her grandmother's stepfather

had been elected to represent the newly-created slave state of Missouri as its first U. S. Congressman.

My earliest memory of my father's mother, Helen Dunbaugh Smith (who unironically insisted that she be called, "Grand-mère"), was when she pulled into the village of Chester Depot in a long black town car driven by her longstanding chauffeur Charles, and I got to sit on the big bench seat next to him while everyone else rode in the back. Later, as Grand-mère's health and disposition declined, dour Mrs. Miller became both traveling companion and caregiver during migrations from "the farm" in Florida to her rambling lodge at Winter Harbor, where she hosted her summering children and grandchildren. Despite Grand-mère's infirmities and shattered vanity, on more than one occasion I witnessed her uninhibited and infectious ability to share spontaneous experiences of truly ecstatic and childlike joy.

My dad's brother, Uncle Jack (actually, Louis Winfield Smith jr.) kept accounts for Morris Lapidus (the architect who designed Miami's Fountainbleu Hotel) and was married to Aunt Emmy Lou, a former Miss Miami Beach. Their sister, Aunt Sally Lou's husband, Uncle Duncan was lead architect and director for Louis Kahn (who designed the influential Bangladeshi Capital Complex at Dhaka and the Salk Institute at La Jolla). Cousins Edwin and Edmund were both tenured faculty at Hunter College and Marlboro College respectively, and cousin Frank was Deputy Attorney General with the Civil Rights Division of the U. S. Department of Justice. Their father, Grand-mère's younger brother, Uncle Frank, was a retired Army Colonel who served in Germany's post-war government before accepting an appointment as Assistant Professor of Marketing at the University of Miami.

During Grand-mère's salad days, her father had been president of a profitable line of passenger ships along the overnight route from Manhattan to Providence. Her older brother, Uncle Joe, operated the company until WWII, when its fleet was purchased for the war effort. Abraham Lincoln had successfully defended Grand-mère's grandfather against stolen property charges in Illinois, and her great-grandfather was the government's lead witness in the treason trial of Aaron Burr. Her maternal roots trace back to before 1636, when Dutch settler Willemse Adriaen Bennett purchased 693 acres in Brooklyn from members of the Lenape tribe.

Recounted with grandfilial piety in the year 2022
by the only grandson of both Isabelle and Helen

Isabelle McBirney Helen Dunbaugh

