

## **Mary Helen Elizabeth Wetrich Billick & Francis Billick Family History**

Mary Helen Elizabeth Wetrich (Helen) was born August 15, 1912, in a house in Wellman, Iowa, to Henry Wetrich (1880-1967) and Catherine Ryan Wetrich (1880-1962) with a doctor in attendance. She was the first of two children. (Vincent Henry Wetrich was born January 20, 1916.) Although she was to have been named Ellen Elizabeth after her two grandmothers, the doctor's wife had delivered a baby girl six weeks earlier whom they had named Helen. The doctor convinced Henry that Helen was a better name than Ellen, so that's the name they used. Since she was born on a holy day, they also added Mary to her name.

Henry's father, Gustav Weutherick, had come to the US from Switzerland when he was about 9 years old. He later married Elizabeth Niffenegger, of German descent. They were farmers in the Wellman, Iowa, area and had five children (Ida, Henry, Ernest, Clarence, and Cora, in order). Helen remembers that Ida married Frank Schwartz (also from Switzerland) and that he made wonderful sausages. Since the people around Wellman had a difficult time correctly pronouncing the family name, its spelling was changed to Wetrich.

Catherine's mother's parents, Ellen Nolan and John Ryan moved separately to the US from Ireland. After being married, they farmed in the Muscatine, Iowa area, perhaps near Columbus Junction. They had eight children (Jim, John, Winifred who died at 19, Catherine, Marie, Monica, Tom, and Joe, in order). John was not a successful farmer, so they moved to a house on Park Place in Cedar Rapids, Iowa while the four youngest still lived at home with them.

Henry and Catherine married in 1906. Catherine was Catholic when they married; Henry was Lutheran but became a Catholic in 1933. Shortly after they were married, Henry attended barber college in Omaha, and Catherine waited tables in a restaurant to make money for them. He then barbered for the rest of his life. When Helen was nine months old, they moved from Wellman to North English, Iowa. She said that their family did not have a car, but that they would occasionally go to Wellman for a Sunday dinner with the extended family and see her cousins. She's not sure how they got there; however, she recalls taking the train to Cedar Rapids to visit her mother's people. They spent most of the holidays with them and Helen recalls the many warm hugs and expressions of affection.

Helen remembers little about attending school in North English except for the uneasy feelings she experienced whenever her mother would get her excused from school to attend church on holy days and then take her later to school. Catholics were not readily accepted there, and she felt that her classmates looked at her as if she had some dread disease when she got to school late on holy days. The Wetrich family moved from North English when Helen was 12 (1924) so that she and Vincent could attend Catholic schools. They both entered St Patrick's School and continued through high school. That's where she met Francis Billick, a "wonderful" dancer. They both really enjoyed dancing.

She always spent a week or two in Cedar Rapids with Eileen each summer. Eileen also would come to their Iowa City house on Burlington Street to visit.

Helen recalls that Latin and geometry were her favorite subjects in school. She and Thelma Theobald began their life-long friendship when Thelma began attending St Patrick's High School her sophomore year. They graduated in 1930.

That year, her father put enough money in a bank account in her name for Helen to attend college. When the banks began to look shaky during that Depression year, Helen went to the bank to withdraw the money; however, the banker convinced her that it was safe and to leave it there. Unfortunately, he was wrong. She lost it all when the bank closed. Her father then paid for her college on an annual basis: \$48 for the entrance fee, and \$60 for each semester the next four years. During Helen's freshman year, her father also bought her a raccoon coat as a surprise. She majored in social service and minored in journalism.

Anti-Catholicism was also prevalent in the sorority system. That prevented her from joining the same sorority as a cousin since that sorority had already filled its set quota for the number of Catholics it would admit. Although that was the Chi Omega sorority, Helen said that it was not a peculiarity of that particular sorority since each sorority had its own set quota.

Helen married Francis Billick in April 1934, two weeks before graduating from college. They lived in an apartment over a garage at the end of an alley by St Patrick's. That summer and the next were particularly hot, and the winters were also particularly severe. In 1935, they moved into a big apartment with two bedrooms and a dining room in the 300 block of Johnson Street. Francine was also born that year in Mercy Hospital. The delivery fee was \$25, and the cost for mother and baby to remain in the hospital the following 10 days, as was then the custom, was an additional \$50. Francis had to wait until his father paid him before he had the money to pay these bills.

Francis Billick was the oldest of five children (Francis, Gertrude Ann, Kathleen 'Kay', Donna, and Ned) born to Harrison Billick and Alice Moylan Billick. Harrison worked for Wallace Lumber Company when Francis was born on January 12, 1913, in a house north of what became the Highlander Inn (later, the Radisson). Harrison worked as a trucker most of his life. When he was a child, his mother and father died of tuberculosis, so all the children were then sent to live with others. He had a brother who later became a farmer near West Branch. By all accounts, Harrison was well liked by almost everyone and was a wonderful person. Francis' mother, Alice Moylan, grew up on a farm and had brothers (Frank and Bud) and sisters (Gertrude--who died while a teenager--and another).

Francis worked for Racine's Tobacco Company (a local company), and then later for a national tobacco company. They moved into their first house on Washington Street. Theresa Joan Billick (Teri) was born to Francis and Helen, also in Mercy Hospital, on March 13, 1940. In 1941, their family moved to Atlantic, Iowa. On the day of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941), Helen and the girls were on a bus en route to Iowa City to spend the holidays. Francis enlisted in the Navy in 1942.

He trained in Norman, Oklahoma, and later served on destroyers in the Pacific Ocean. His home port was San Francisco. While he was in the Navy, Helen returned to Iowa City and lived with her parents while she waited for their house at 918 East Washington Street to become vacant. They lived there while he was away. Helen worked for Economy Advertising for several months, while pregnant with Linda. Linda was born January 25, 1943, also in Iowa City's Mercy Hospital. Helen then rented out rooms in

their house on Washington Street, worked for Dr. Ward a dentist, and combined it with the money from the Navy to support her family in Iowa City.

Francis was in and out of San Francisco's port often. At one of the dances, he met Esther, who also loved dancing. After he got out of the Navy, he stayed mostly in the San Francisco area. In 1948, he convinced Helen to join him at Alameda Naval Air Station where he was to undergo government-sponsored transition training. She took Linda with her, and they lived in base housing and Linda attended the base's kindergarten during the training. Francine and Teri were to join them later. They had stayed behind with their grandparents, Henry and Catherine, until their family's situation in California stabilized. Francine later moved to California to be with them as a high school freshman, but Helen and the girls returned to Iowa in 1950. Teri stayed in Iowa the entire time. This separation foreshadowed Helen's and Francis' divorce years later. Francis and Esther remained together in California.

Helen and her daughters moved in with her parents and she began working for a dentist, Dr. Bill Ward, for whom she had worked afternoons before going to California. A patient who worked in Student Health at the University of Iowa and whom Helen knew told Helen during a dental visit that Dr. Lorraine Frost, a Pediatrician, was having difficulty hanging onto assistants. She thought that Helen would be a perfect fit, so they met at the Hotel Jefferson after Helen finished work that day and walked to Dr. Frost's office. Dr. Frost hired Helen on the spot, and they then worked together for 24 years, until Dr. Frost retired in 1974. She then worked for the University of Iowa for seven years, retiring from work in 1981. A few years later, she moved to a retirement home, Windmill Pointe, in Coralville.

### Vignettes

Helen vividly remembers getting a doll from Santa Claus when she was 10. Her father also made her doll a crib and doll house, which were very special to her.

She remembers listening to their favorite radio programs in the evening, particularly Amos 'n' Andy, which came on at supper time. Other favorites included Fibber McGee & Molly and the Jack Benny Show.

The first radio she remembers was a crystal radio set that required the use of a headset. It belonged to their neighbor and good family friend, Paul Kelleher.

Helen was 12 years old before she lived in a house with electricity and plumbing.

Macular degeneration took away most of Helen's sight in December of 1984, at the age of 72.