

Escaping Newcastle:

Norah O'Hagan, Vaudeville, and the Limits of Class
and Gender in Edwardian Britain

By

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Introduction

In 1926, at the age of eleven, Norah O'Hagan left home to fulfill every child's dream. She joined the circus.

My mother, Norah, was born in Newcastle, England, in 1915, and was the oldest surviving daughter among four children (one of whom died in 1916). She had known more than her share of hardship and loss by 1926. Norah's father was a coal miner and had been through myriad strikes and lockouts. She lost her mother at the age of seven, was placed in an orphanage for two years with her younger siblings and then lived in a blended family. The fact that she left home in 1926, accompanied only by strangers, had always seemed odd to me. Even more bewildering; Norah was tiny, barely larger than a good sized doll. Why would someone so small and defenseless go off alone into an unknown environment? I often wondered about the significance, if any, of her leaving at the age of eleven. What was so special about that age? Why not ten or twelve, or better yet, why not wait until she left school at fourteen? During a casual conversation with one of my history professors, I realized that my mother was eleven in 1926. The penny dropped. The timing was not coincidental. There *had* to be more of a reason for letting her leave home in that pivotal year with only a theatrical agent to watch over her.

Did my grandfather let Norah go because he realized, by 1926, that there was no future for her in Newcastle other than that as a miner's wife with all the drudgery and backbreaking labor that occupation entailed? Did the chance of a life in vaudeville offer a way out? What kind of courage was required to let her go? What did that say about the social and economic environment in Britain in the 1920s? Was my grandfather so worn out – emotionally, financially, and mentally – that the experience of his family enduring the deprivation or consequence of one more miners' strike too much for him and he decided to let her go to work in what was certainly a "dream job" for a youngster?

Britain's General Strike took place in 1926. That strike was momentous because miners, railway workers, dockworkers and other workers struck in solidarity for nine days.¹ Their demands included better working conditions and salaries, safer

¹ Many workers who struck in solidarity were victimized after they settled the strike in only nine days. Many strikers were blacklisted, and could not return to work. August, Andrew. *The British Working Class - 1832-1940*. Edinburgh Gate, (United Kingdom: Pearson Education Limited, 2007). p 199.

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environmental conditions, a more rational organization of the mining industry and a fairer distribution of profits nationally.

The General Strike only lasted for nine days because the sympathizing unions settled quickly. Miners in the north east of Britain, and especially in County Durham encompassing Newcastle, however, held out for seven more grueling, tragic months, rather than settle for an ultimately degrading and humiliating settlement of longer hours and wages set at pre-1914 levels. Many miners and many of those whose livelihoods depended on trade with miners lost almost everything they had – their savings, their homes, their businesses – as a result. The miners' union was crippled for decades gaining meaningful power only after World War II.

This essay explores the life of one lower class girl – Norah O'Hagan – from the economically deprived mining community of Newcastle, England. Under normal circumstances, Norah's gender, social and economic class dictated that her life trajectory would follow a pre-ordained and unremarkable path: birth into an impoverished mining family and home, minimal schooling, perhaps limited work experience, an early and physically grueling marriage, motherhood, and an unremarkable and perhaps early death. Nevertheless, Norah's unusual physical attributes and family circumstances created a different storyline.

Physically, she was tiny; too small to go into domestic service and too frail to withstand the rigor of farm work, or the almost serf-like conditions involved with marriage to a miner. She was too tiny to even reach above a shop counter. Norah was, however, deeply intelligent and curious. And, above all, she was incredibly courageous.

Without the avenue of escape provided by vaudeville Norah would certainly have been mired in an uncertain and precarious existence. *Vaudeville literally saved her*. By an incredible stroke of happenstance – call it serendipity – she was recruited into a traveling vaudeville company of *midgets* and toured all over England and came to the United States for a short time. Norah eventually left that group in 1934, joined a renowned aerial act, toured Europe extensively, then the United States, and Mexico, before returning to the United States.

History is often accompanied by sociological analysis and no less so in this instance. No examination of Norah's departure can be complete without an historical and

sociological analysis of national as well as seemingly trivial local events, and the way Norah's gender affected her educational, social and economic prospects in that time and place. Historians have written extensively about the social, political and economic roots of discontent leading up to the strike and subsequent lockout in 1926 and its aftereffects; as well as the causes and ramifications of the miners' strikes or lockouts of 1919 and 1921.

In *The 1926 Miner's Lockout Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield*, Hester Barron studies the roles of community and the experiences of the Durham miners and their families during the 1926 general strike. Barron identifies the manner in which individuals and families within Durham County addressed the difficulties and demands endured during the nine days' of the strike. In addition, Barron examines the ongoing extended difficulties experienced by miners, their families, and the Durham county communities during the almost seven months while the miners held out for a more equitable settlement of their issues.

Beynon and Austin examine the social conditions and relationships in the north-eastern country of England between miners and their "betters" in *Masters and servants: class and patronage in the making of a labour organisation: the Durham miners and the English political tradition*. The book discusses the origins and importance of the Durham System that started in the 18th century, its roots and impact in mining communities and negotiations, and the origins of unionization efforts and union agitation of the 19th century. Legislative accomplishments are explored and examined in reference to the beginnings and development of unionization efforts, among them the importance to miners of the abolishment of the "bonding" system, and the importance of the election of checkweighmen to verify weights of cut coal.²

Pit Women, Coal Communities in Northern England in the Early Twentieth Century, by Griselda Carr, is a sociologist's study of the lives of miners' wives. These women literally kept their families fed, clean, washed the clothes, kept their homes clean, all with no modern amenities – no running hot or cold water, no washing machines, no modern stoves. They had no electricity. Carr's portrait is one of unrelieved drudgery for women

² Huy Beynon, and Terry Austin, *Masters and servants: class and patronage in the making of a labour organisation: the Durham miners and the English political tradition*. (Concord, MA. Paul and Company, 1994), pp 51-73, p 29, p 40.

within the mining community with few, if any, opportunities for self-expression, work outside the home or self-advancement.

In *Leisure and Recreation in a Victorian Mining Community, The Social Economy of Leisure in North-East England, 1820-1914*, Alan Metcalf traces the development of the concept of leisure in north east England between 1820-1914. Metcalf emphasizes the absolute control that colliery owners and agents exercised over miners, as well as women's total lack of agency. Metcalf paints an appalling picture of the hovels miners lived in (hovels for which they were expected to be profoundly grateful). He examines the miners' struggles for some limited degrees of self-agency and speaks to the drudgery women expended to keep their homes and their families clean and well cared for, given their resources. Metcalf notes that gender demarcation was rampant; women in 1914 were still largely excluded from leisure activities, other than participation in self-help, **sewing**, or limited education sessions.

In *Nine Days That Shook Britain, The 1926 General Strike*, Patrick Renshaw describes the importance of coal to the British economy, and the reason that Durham suffered export ramifications so acutely, making the Durham miners so intransigent about settling the strike on incredibly humiliating and desperate terms. Renshaw describes why British politicians were so determined on retuning the British pound from sterling to the gold standard. This currency reestablishment had a devastating impact on unemployment for the mining community. His analysis of the dangers of mining, the level of reward to the miner in comparison to those dangers, and the relationship of the miners to the colliery owners and industry leaders is enlightening.

These, and other sources, tell a harrowing tale of lives lived only 90 years ago, but distant, it seems, to almost 200 years past, given all the differences in our modern existence by comparison. Other sources I have used in this essay tell of the evolution of leisure within Britain, the nature of vaudeville and show business through the decades of the early and mid 20th centuries, as well as primary sources which document my mother's experiences as she worked in theatre and nightclub environments. I lived it one step removed. My mother told me of her vaudeville and theatre experiences and of her hardships growing up and how incredibly lucky she was to have escaped an impoverished

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existence by a fluke of chance; having been given permission to “go away with the circus.”

My mother is dead now; gone nigh unto twenty years. When I was younger – eight or nine years old – my ravishingly beautiful aunt would visit from New York City in the summer. She and my mother would sit together and talk of England. I would sit and listen to their stories of Granddad; how funny he was, how hard he worked, how desperately poor they were, how their mother had died when they were *so* young and how they were in an orphanage for two years. They would talk about their brother, their travels, their step-sister Nell, and her husband, Arthur. They would speak about relatives still in England. They would talk about how my mother came back to Newcastle and took her sister, Peggy, with her in 1934, about their manager Pop, and his wife, Mütchen, and their act, “The Flying Herzogs”, and how much they had enjoyed traveling and working in show business.

Late at night sometimes, after I had gone to bed, I would wake up and come downstairs and they would be sitting at the kitchen table in the dim light, talking very seriously, crying quietly, heads bowed, arms over each other’s shoulders. Their conversations, then, would be quite different – more intimate, closer, quieter and sadder in tone, more intense. It was as if they were veterans of their own private battles and somehow had survived to relive them – battles no one else could understand. They would be talking about my Granddad during his last illness, or about their beloved brother Barney, who died in 1942 when his ship was torpedoed and he was killed on the HMS Edinburgh. He would be forever twenty five years old to them – never ageing. He would be forever funny, handsome, jaunty, intelligent, a *deeply* loved and loving brother, disappointed in his lost opportunities and his few small failures and disillusioned by his lot in life, but proud of being a coal miner’s son from Newcastle, and always *so* proud of his sisters in America and his father back in Britain.

In bits and snatches I learned of the tragedies in their lives. How I wish, now, that I had asked more questions, probed more deeply, been more curious, listened more carefully, been more able to put two and two together. I can only try, now, to imagine

what my grandparent's and my uncle's and my mother's early lives were like. Now, knowing the hardship and deprivations and cruel injustices visited upon them...maybe it is just too overwhelming for me. All I can do, currently, is read, investigate, analyze, and try to put myself in their places and hope that somehow *they* might see that their lives and a tiny bit of their existence goes on. By telling their story and my mother's singular tale, maybe they could come back to life again in some small way, that maybe their daily existence and their working class joys and sorrows might have immense meaning and some degree of interest to someone far removed decades in the future...so, please come with me and share their story.

History of Durham Coalfield, Newcastle, England

Before delving into Norah's story in more detail and in order to understand it more fully, a brief background on the history of the northern Durham coalfield would be helpful. Without understanding this history, it is difficult to understand the seeming intransigence of the Durham miners' mentality and their unwillingness to readily accept a grossly inequitable and unjust settlement of their strike demands. The roots of resistance against imposed and arbitrary dictates affecting their livelihood and their quality of life runs deeper than coal within the veins of miners and their families and has done so for generations, as this short history demonstrates.

The great northern coalfield of Britain – the Durham coalfield – is bounded on the north by Scotland (itself rich in coal mining deposits) and on the east by the cold North Sea, with rich coal seams running below the seabed. It is a high, windswept, coastal area, populated by tough hardworking people.³ In the late 18th and early 19th centuries it was controlled by aristocrats and was strictly hierarchical (in this instance, the third Lord Londonderry and other peers of the Realm). The “basis of the old order was the ownership of the land.”⁴ The Church of England was heavily involved in administration and control, as well, this political institution united church and state in the person of the

³ Personal observation, 1974

⁴ Huy Beynon, and Terry Austin, *Masters and servants: class and patronage in the making of a labour organisation: the Durham miners and the English political tradition*. (Concord, MA. Paul and Company, 1994), p 12.

“Prince Bishop, under whose umbrella a peculiarly powerful landowning class was established.”⁵

The overwhelming common denominator of any English coalfield was this simple fact: the man who worked in the mine never *owned* the mine. In Britain and the United States, the person who owned the land owned the mineral rights. Thus, a person who owned or inherited a piece of property with coal in it could sink a shaft, procure miners, and work the property and reap profits. Landowners such as Lord Londonderry soon discovered that it was easier to contract with coal companies to sink shafts on their properties, engage colliery agents and miners to work their mines, and collect royalties, often without ever visiting the mines, which is exactly what many landowners did.

Establishing Villages to Ensure a Steady Supply of Labor

Once the landowner sank a pit in a particular area, procured a colliery company and agent to manage it, and found miners ready to work it, the landowner or company would build a village close by to house the miners’ families. This was not an altruistic gesture; coalfield pits were usually sunk in isolated areas, transportation facilities were practically non-existent and the landowner or contracting colliery agent would usually build some sort of housing or small village – however meager – nearby to ensure a steady supply of labor. Beynon and Austin describe such a village created between 1837 and 1841. Lord Londonderry constructed a town beside a pit in Kibblesworth - it had no amenities; no stores, church, trees, streets to speak of....it was just hovels beside a coal pit.

⁵ Ibid.

Beynon and Austin describe other representative colliery villages:

In a few colliery villages there is a feeble attempt at surface drainage, the liquid refuse in these channels being very frequently stagnant; but in not one pit row out of the scores I have seen ...is there a single foot of underground drainage to carry away domestic slops.....they are the only houses in which these people can possibly live.⁶

When a Coal Commission was inquiring into Lord Londonderry's practices at one of his mines in 1842, his colliery agent, Buddle, wrote:

What we have to guard against is any obvious legislature interference in the established customs of our particular race of pitmen. The stock can only be kept up by breeding – it never could be reinvented from an adult population...but if our meddling, morbid, humanity mongers get it infused into their heads that it is cruel and unnatural slavery to work in the dark and to be imprisoned twelve hours a day in the pit, a screw in the system will be let loose.⁷

The fact that Buddle wrote his commentary in response to a Coal Commission inquiry in 1842 indicates the level of public concern at that time over working conditions in mines. Reports of abominable working conditions for women and children in various industries such as mills, factories, workshops and mines led Victorian legislators to investigate these facilities for abuses. In 1842, the Mines and Collieries Bill was passed, which prohibited women and girls and boys under the age of 10 from working underground.⁸

Another way of ensuring a steady and readily accessible supply of miners for the pits was using a “bonding” system (with the full knowledge and consent of the landowners). This was a system in which the miners contracted with the landowner or his representative by “bonding” himself to the landowner for a year to work in the mine. The bonding process usually ran from a stated period within the year to the same period the next year and carried significant penalties should the miner break the terms of the contract. This process carried no hazard for the employer. The process was startlingly similar to ante-bellum slavery in the United States with similar justifications voiced in its behalf. This bonding process led to the Durham System.

⁶ Huy Beynon, and Terry Austin, *Masters and servants.*, p 22.

⁷ Ibid, pp 27-28.

⁸ Living Heritage Reforming society in the 19th century, <http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/coalmines/> [date accessed, 12/01/2015].

The Durham System

The Durham System consisted of a paternalistic pattern of top down control, characterized by tightly controlled and regulated conduct by both parties. Characteristics of the Durham System included an overall lack of freedom in personal choices for the miner and his family, ensured by the provision for housing and coal for cooperative miners. The landowner or colliery agent wielded punishment and exclusion for non-conformity for independent individuals, and provided some limited degree of education, as well as some degree of entertainment on company declared holidays. They had expectations of religious conformity (no Methodism), they enacted a policy of “tied” housing, they had rigid expectations of behavior from subordinates, they strictly forbade union activity, and they absolutely rejected ideas of Chartism and unionism and any ideas of agitation.⁹ They were, in all respects, paternalistic in outlook and behavior.¹⁰ Some of these characteristics survived into the early 20th century in coal mining communities.

Beginnings of Union Activity

Rumblings of union activity began in the 1820s and continued on into the 1840s.¹¹ There was, of course, a strong backlash against union activism during all of the 19th century from landowners and colliery agents, but by the 1860s the Miners National Union (which had taken hold elsewhere in Britain) started to take hold in the northeast of Britain.¹² A Sunderland (Durham County) colliery - the Monkwearmouth Colliery - notified its miners that their wages would be substantially reduced. The miners struck. After two weeks on strike, the colliery agent tried to bribe selected workers back to work. His tactic backfired badly. Four of the strikers were brought before the magistrates and over three hundred of their fellow miners marched into the courtroom, single file, carrying their lamps and copies of their colliery rules and resigned their positions in

⁹ Tied housing was the practice of allocating the son in a miner’s family for employment in the mine. The father would work in the mine, and as soon as the son was of age, he would immediately follow his father into the mine. This policy could apply to all sons. If a miner had no sons, but only daughters, his name could be taken off a waiting list if housing was short, or he could be turned out if he was no longer employable, and another miner’s name substituted. This practice continued into the 20th century. Carr, *Pit women: coal communities in Northern England in the early twentieth century*. (London, England: Merlin Press Ltd., 2001), p 47. Remainder of paternalism characteristics in this section, Huy Beynon and Terry Austin, *Masters and servants.*, pp 24-27.

¹⁰ Huy Beynon and Terry Austin, *Masters and servants.*, p 25.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p 34.

¹² *Ibid*, p 40.

solidarity. The end result was that all the strikers were found guilty, of course, but the public was outraged and legislation was introduced and passed: by 1872 bonded labor was made illegal in all Durham pits.¹³

Increased union agitation in the mid-19th century resulted in stronger miners' unions as well as the beginnings of significant legislation strengthening unions, curtailing abuses, and safeguarding workplaces, in spite of opposition from mine owners. This essay is not the place for a detailed description of all the legislation and accomplishments that were achieved, but many were significant and rendered many of the characteristics of the Durham System moot. Among them was the right of miners to elect their own checkweighmen to supervise the honesty of payment by the weight of coal cut.¹⁴ Prior to this, the mine owners had weighed the amount of coal produced, often shorting the miners' wages. Renshaw emphasizes the importance of the fact that the miners could elect their own representatives and that this illustrated the developing power of their unions at the time (1842).¹⁵ Legislation had been ongoing to improve working conditions in the mines and with each succeeding effort unions grew stronger.

By the 1870s an important coalition was formed – the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and this was virtually unchanged a century later.¹⁶ This was the coalition of miners, railway workers and dockworkers, and this coalition represented the combined union force that went out on strike in 1919, 1921, and 1926. Another very important union that was formed in 1888 was the Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB). This union eventually became the strongest miners union in Britain and became the pivotal union when bargaining and negotiating in subsequent strike and lockout actions during the following decades.¹⁷

Twentieth Century Goals

As important as all these achievements were, two important goals were still elusive at the beginning of the 20th century. One was the goal of a minimum wage and the other was the implementation of the eight hour day.

¹³ Beynon, and Terry Austin, *Masters and servants.*, p 45-46.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p 40.

¹⁵ Patrick Renshaw, *Nine Days That Shook Britain, The 1926 General Strike.* (Garden City, N.Y. Anchor Press, 1976), pp 13-15.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp 15-16.

Wages were still controlled by prices according to a sliding scale. This meant that there could be no floor to wages if prices tumbled. Unions outside the Durham coalfield wanted to abolish the sliding scale and introduce an eight hour day. Durham and Northumberland miners opposed abolishing the sliding scale and the eight hour day for reasons unique to their specific coalfields: Eventually, however, in 1908, the Eight-Hour Act was passed, and the northern unions joined the MFGB union.¹⁸

Miners all over Britain had different payment schemes determined by the district in which they worked, from each other, from pit to pit, from job to job. There were long and protracted strikes from 1910 until 1912, especially in South Wales. Finally the Minimum Wage act was passed in 1912, but the MFGB stipulated that no agreements were to be made past 1915.¹⁹

Renshaw states that the Minimum Wage Act put a floor on wages at the *district* level, not at the national level, so there was still much to do to achieve a national minimum wage. Still, it was better than seeing prices spiral downward in response to erratic export prices controlling wages.²⁰

Renshaw writes of the evolution of the Labour Representation Committee of 1900 into the political Labour Party with the support of railway unions, engineering and shoemaking union laborers in spite of legal and political difficulties.²¹ The MFGB joined forces in 1900 with sympathetic interests; working people, trade unionists and socialists, “united by the goal of changing the British Parliament to represent the interests of everybody.” The Labour Representation Committee Renshaw speaks of had no political representation, but was loosely allied with Liberal Governments of the day, supporting appropriate legislation. It wasn’t until 1924, however, that the Labour Party was able to gain significant representation in the British Government, and again, in 1929. Political disagreements limited reforms in 1924, although some significant legislation was passed, and economic upheaval and crisis affected significant policy measures 1929.²² Unions were becoming more politically active and significant.

¹⁸ Patrick Renshaw, *Nine Days That Shook Britain*, p 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p 20.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p 21.

²¹ *Ibid*, pp 21-22.

²² History of the Labour Party: Introduction: <http://www.labour.org.uk/pages/history-of-the-labour-party> [date accessed 11/22/2015].

In 1910, the dockers and transport workers unions combined to form the National Transport Workers Federation and in 1913 several of the railwaymen's unions formed the National Union of Railwaymen.²³ In 1914, an informal organization of 1½ million miners, railwaymen, and transport workers agreed to help each other. That same year, the Government took control of the railways, and while they were at it, they took control of coal mining as well, purely as a war effort.²⁴

In 1913, productivity was up, wages seemed stable, and the miners' union was strong. It seemed like a good time to get married.

William O'Hagan Family - Newcastle, England

My grandfather, William O'Hagan, was born in 1888 in Glasgow, Scotland. Glasgow is located within the Lanarkshire coalfield of Scotland.²⁵ I don't know if he came from a family of miners; I do know, however, that he had several brothers and sisters and that he was living in the Newcastle, County Durham area by the decade of the early 1910s since one, and quite possibly, two, of his sisters had gone into service in one of the "great" houses in the Newcastle area by then.²⁶ Physically, he was very short; the one picture I have of him in his mid-twenties shows him about 5'2" – certainly not much above that. There is no one in my family of great stature; I think my grandfather's generation was afflicted by poor nutrition and varying degrees of stunted growth.

This problem became apparent when the British Armed forces conducted the Second Anglo Boer War (1899-1902). The British War department found that its recruits were badly undernourished and unfit for military service. The Army Medical Corps found that 40% of the men called up for duty were physically unfit to fight.²⁷ Many had rickets and other nutritional deficiencies. My grandfather was never in the armed services but his physical condition was indicative of the generational nutritional shortcomings of that time. He certainly was strong enough to work in the mines, however. He was very

²³ Patrick Renshaw, *Nine Days That Shook Britain*, p 25.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p 27.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p 9.

²⁶ Great Aunt Mary Ann O'Hagan and Great Aunt Theresa O'Hagan. Interview, Joan Silveus, October 20, 2015,

²⁷ History Buffs, History, Knowledge, & Education Articles, <http://www.historybuffs.co.za/south-africa/the-boer-war/> [date accessed 11/22/2015].

intelligent, very witty and had a wonderful sense of humor. I think this last attribute was remarkable because his life, eventually, was burdened with so much sorrow.

My grandfather met and married my grandmother, Margaret Ann Barkas, sometime around or before 1913. I don't know too much about her; she lived in a workhouse or poorhouse for part of her life and did not have much of a family. When I was just a teenager I saw one photograph of her; a portrait. It must have been taken on a special occasion...perhaps the day she was married? She had beautiful thick dark hair swept up in the Gibson style so popular back then, and huge, kind brown eyes. She was dressed in a fashionable white shirtwaist with a high collar and some sort of brooch at her neck. She was looking directly at the camera with an enigmatic Mona Lisa smile. My mother looked exactly like her except that while my mother's face was terribly thin, my grandmother's face in this photograph was almost round. The whole photograph conveyed kindness and gentleness. Like my grandfather, she was also very small. She was very much alone in the world; her only brother had migrated to Canada, so upon their marriage my grandfather's family became her family.

Housing

What kind of housing was provided for a miner and his wife in 1913? Griselda Carr describes a colliery housing development around Tyneside (right near Newcastle) in this passage:

In Ashington the Coal Company developments up to 1914 consisted of long parallel rows of in all 2,500 houses, 'brick boxes with slate lids' as a local paper called them. These rows were far enough apart for a set of rails to run down their whole length so that horses could draw tubs for the delivery of concessionary coal and other tubs for the collection of refuse and night soil from the midden privies.²⁸

In spite of the defects in housing, Carr writes, "some wives, while having to contend with all the defects, were, in fact, glad to have their own independent premises; a miner was sometimes regarded as a very eligible husband because a house (of a sort) and free coal went with his job."²⁹

²⁸ Griselda Carr, *Pit women: coal communities in Northern England in the early twentieth century*. (London, England: Merlin Press Ltd., 2001), p 47.

²⁹ Griselda Carr, *Pit Women*, p 49.

A typical house had three small rooms. There was a small fireplace, a stove in the main room which could serve as a living room as well as a kitchen, two bedrooms, a lean-to scullery, an earth closet out back (often shared by several families), a tin tub to bathe in (kept out back or on a back wall) and that was it.³⁰ If it was a one-up and one-down, it was just that, a room up and one down, and often if it was a back-to-back, it meant a house that was adjoining another at the back.³¹ If it was a back-to-back, that meant that the earth-closet would be located in a back lane, or down at the end of the street, or sometimes in the middle of the street, all the time shared by several families and of course, with no expectations of privacy.³²

Sanitation

There was little or no sanitation and these homes were breeding grounds for diseases and infections such as whooping cough, diphtheria, scarlet fever, measles, and pneumonia – all caused by the presence of open middens right outside the doors. Early 19th century and sometimes very early 20th century villages had open middens for ashes and domestic refuse often shared by several households and which were not cleaned out thoroughly or often. In rainy weather these middens often overflowed onto the roads, with stinking pools to mingle with the “night-soil” areas. Infections spread like wildfire.³³ Water for cooking, cleaning, and washing all had to be carried from communal pipes, and heated on the stove.³⁴ Miners’ families thought themselves lucky to have such homes, however, since the demand often outstripped the supply and they were provided as part of the miner’s pay. And, in comparison to slum dwellings in the cities of London or Liverpool they were marginally better.

A Married Woman’s Life in the 1910s

My grandparent’s typical starting married life might not have been too bad in those days. In 1913, Britain had produced a record tonnage of coal; a third of which had gone for export and Durham, being a “steam” export coal center, benefited to some extent from

³⁰ Ibid, p 53.

³¹ Ibid, p 51.

³² Ibid, p 54.

³³ Ibid, p 53.

³⁴ Alan Metcalf, *Leisure and Recreation in a Victorian Mining Community. The Social Economy of Leisure in North-East England, 1820-1914.* (New York, New York. Rutledge, 2006), p 13.

such a situation.³⁵ Everyone thought this situation would continue. Prices everywhere were going up, however, and other industries and other workers were catching up to the miners' relative good fortune.³⁶ Still, things were not too bad for a young couple in 1913 or 1914. In those days, once a woman married a miner, she stayed at home and didn't work outside the home. So it was with my grandmother. There were no "dual income" families as is so common today. Metcalf states:

Married women were not allowed to work and thus were forced to remain within the confines of their homes. The 'home' was the focus of their lives and in the home they frequently ruled supreme. However, it is important to emphasize that there was never any mistaking their place in society – they were inferior and subordinate to men.

In fact, if a young girl was unfortunate enough to be the only girl in a family of males she became 'nothing but a slave at work' to help her mother'. The whole focus of a woman's life consisted of the two or three rooms that accompanied her 'home'.³⁷

The Duties of a Miner's Wife

Even without children, a miner's wife's life was hard work. She would haul innumerable buckets of water from the communal tap, boil the water, prepare meals, scrub and clean the house, wash clothes daily (by hand), shop and bake at least once a week, polish the stove and irons on the fireplace, scrub floors, wash sheets and bedding and try to make the home as clean and attractive as she could. Washing a husband's work clothes was not as simple as it sounded; a special technique had to be used. This consisted of putting the filthy, wet mining clothes in a tub filled with boiling hot water, and pounding them with a stick with a mallet on the end, then putting the clothes into another tub to rinse, then into another tub to wash. Her never ending duties of cleaning, baking, washing, carrying and heating water, bearing and caring for children was overwhelmingly time consuming and difficult.

O'Hagan Children – Difficult Pregnancies and Births

My grandparents had their first child, a little girl named Mary Ann, in 1914. In 1915, my mother, Norah, was born (six weeks premature). Little Mary Anne died of pneumonia

³⁵ Patrick Renshaw, *Nine Days That Shook Britain*, p 33.

³⁶ Griselda Carr, *Pit Women*, p 34.

³⁷ Metcalf, *Leisure and Recreation*, p 18, and quotes Billy Wilson in taped interview with Billy Wilson, Cramlington on 6 July, 1976.

sometime in 1916.³⁸ In 1917, they had a little boy, named Bernard (my uncle Barney; I am his namesake). In 1920, my grandmother had her final child, Margaret (my aunt Peggy).³⁹ With every child, the workload increased.

My grandmother delivered her children at the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle. It seems unusual for her to have delivered her children at the hospital because at that time most miners' wives usually delivered their babies at home with the assistance of a midwife or a knowledgeable neighbor.⁴⁰ My grandmother may have had some frailties during all her pregnancies or my grandfather may have put some monies aside for her to go to the hospital to deliver her children. In any case, the constant workload and caring for children must have sapped her strength tremendously.⁴¹ My mother told me how her mother fainted while bringing her home from the hospital as she was *walking* home in the dead of winter on a cold January night in 1915, and how my mother had rolled into the gutter of the street. They had some difficulty rousing my grandmother and then locating the tiny whimpering little baby girl, Norah, bundled up in blankets.

The years between 1920 and 1922 were pivotal and heartbreaking for my grandparents in other ways, as well. My grandmother started to show symptoms of breast cancer. It cannot have been easy, losing a baby, caring for two young children, and another baby, caring for her husband, keeping up a house, and suffering from and getting sicker from cancer.

³⁸ "By the 1930s it had become clear that the excess mortality among miners' children occurred, for most causes, both those associated with premature births and developmental defects...and for a whole range of infections and lung diseases.Most of excess mortality among these children was associated with environmental factors such as smoke pollution from the pit and domestic chimneys..." Griselda Carr, *Pit Women, Coal Communities in Northern England in the Early Twentieth Century*, (Merlin Press Ltd. London, 2001), p 69.

³⁹ My grandparents gave some very large names to some very small babies; my mother was named Norah Ellen Victoria, my uncle was Bernard Rankin, and my aunt was Margaret Eno. I asked my aunt the derivation of the name "Eno" and she said it was the E wing on the North side of the hospital, but I never knew if she was joking. Like everyone else in the O'Hagan family, she had a tremendous sense of humor. If it was true it must have been a large hospital, indeed. Perhaps a distinguished name was a compensation for impoverished circumstances. Author's personal observation.

⁴⁰ Griselda Carr, *Pit Women*, p 76.

⁴¹ "The very small number of women from pit villages who went to hospital for their confinements did so only in medical emergencies. Almost always confined at home for a week or so, the very great majority usually got some help in the house from relatives or neighbors." Griselda Carr, *Pit Women*, p 76.

My Grandfather's Worsening Economic Conditions in 1921

In the winter of 1920-1921, exports of coal plummeted. Unemployment rose rapidly. Durham was especially hard hit because it was, primarily, an export market for coal. The British Government had subsidized the coal industry acceding to miners' wage demands immediately prior and after WWI; that policy was no more. The Prime Minister, Lloyd George handed back the industry to the owners in March of 1921. No longer subsidized, the owners did what they always did to preserve profits – they announced drastic wage cuts.⁴² There had been some talk of nationalizing profits to help subsidize the less competitive mines, to no avail. The ongoing discontent over the payment of royalties to landowners even when a mine showed a loss still rankled union miners, but that remained policy, fair or not.⁴³ By the summer of 1921 the number of unemployed in Britain doubled to two *million*.⁴⁴ The owners of the mines posted notices of drastic wage cuts (some as much as 49%) on April 1, 1921. It was no April fool's joke.

The miners asked for a national wage settlement and a national pool for profits to help out struggling mines. In response, the mine owners locked the miners out. A coordination of unions – the Triple Alliance (miners, railwaymen, and dockworkers) – then threatened a work stoppage. Lloyd George invoked the 1920 Emergency Powers Act which forbade such concerted action, and which brought military assets to bear to distribute essential supplies and enable transport.⁴⁵ Despite the fact that public opinion was solidly behind the miners once the actual wage reductions became known, the Prime Minister couched the concept of nationalization of mines and the consequences of any coordinated strike in apocalyptic terms of constitutional repercussions, terms that would be echoed to great effect in 1926.⁴⁶

⁴² Renshaw, *Nine Days That Shook Britain*, pp 56-57.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p 61.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p 57. Renshaw states the unemployed at two million. This author calculated the approximate total of available workers at sixteen to seventeen million by using the Government employment insurance figures of 60% registered of the entire workforce. The unemployment figure in 1921 was approximately 12% of those registered under the national insurance program, or 2 million according to Renshaw. That would equal 6% = 1 million. $100/6 = 16.6666$, rounded to 17 million. Source: McCloskey, Deirdre N.Floud, Roderick, eds. *The Economic History Of Britain Since 1700*. (Cambridge, England:Cambridge University Press, 1980), p 360.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p 64.

⁴⁶ Renshaw, *Nine Days That Shook Britain*, p 67.

Behind the scenes, there was no way, politically, that the mines would be nationalized, and Lloyd George was adamant that wages would, in the end, have to come down.⁴⁷ There were flurries of negotiations; the negotiators on the Government's side tried to mitigate some of the drastic wage cuts but didn't like the idea of a national pool of any sort. The miners' representatives met alone at first and the whole proposed settlement was rejected by one vote on the miners' side. Then the railwaymen and dockworkers unions backed out. Renshaw states "the triple alliance...was quite clearly finished." The day of the collapse – April 15, 1921 – became known as Black Friday.⁴⁸ I do not know if my grandfather was employed at the time or locked out, but either way, any involvement in the union must have been frustrating and his existence must have been bounded by care and worry on all sides; job, union, and most of all, family. The miners felt betrayed and very bitter and were resolved to never let it happen again.

My Grandmother's Death

After a year and a half of suffering, my grandmother died in 1922. It is amazing that the home could be maintained at all during my grandmother's last illness. She left a grief-stricken husband, and three small children. The last memory my mother had of her mother was this – she was playing in the dirt in the front yard, wearing a yellow dress, while her mother was carried out on a door. She ran to her mum, asking where she was going and her mother said, "Don't worry, pet, I'll be back soon." She never saw her mother again.

Placement in the Orphanage

Miners' families, by necessity, had a rigidly hierarchical family structure; a wife was absolutely indispensable to maintain a home while the husband worked in the mine. So it was in my grandfather's case. It was absolutely impossible for him to work in the mines with three small children at home, unattended, with no one to cook, clean, or keep up with household duties. Normally, when such a loss occurred, a widowed father would parcel out the children to other family members for care. There certainly was no shortage of willing aunts and uncles on my grandfather's side of the family. Keeping the children

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp 67-68.

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp 71-74.

together in one location, however, instead of parceling them out among various aunts and uncles probably made it easier when the time came to reclaim them when he would be in a position to do so.

My grandfather put all three children (Norah – nicknamed Nellie – Barney and Peggy) into a Catholic orphanage. My mother’s first searing memory of the orphanage was of her meal the night she came in. The nuns, more concerned with discipline and scheduling, insisted that she eat the already prepared meal of a soup called Scotch broth* that was being served. My traumatized mother, already cursed with a touchy digestive system, couldn’t tolerate it. They proceeded to *force feed* it to her; it immediately came back up and thus began a war with the nuns that lasted for the duration of my mother’s stay. The nuns immediately separated the siblings; my five year old uncle Barney went to the boy’s wing, my two year old aunt Peggy went to the babies’ nursery, and my now hungry and further traumatized and embittered mother was sent to the girl’s wing. My mother never could tolerate Scotch broth, literally, to her dying day.

Norah’s other lasting impression of the orphanage was an abiding distaste for anything Catholic; the dogma, the hierarchy, the rituals, the rules, the clergy. The nuns may have “won” the dietary battle, and several other battles during her stay in the orphanage, but they certainly lost the war. Norah and her siblings remained in the orphanage for two years, until my grandfather remarried in 1924. My mother came home to a stepmother and a new household. She was nine, her brother was seven, and my aunt was four.

Remarriage

The remarriage was very much a marriage of convenience. The new wife (Isabella Maguire) was a widow. In a mining village, where housing was in short supply and was given as a part of payment for wages, a widow was vulnerable and was a prime target for eviction if she had no husband or son working in the mines.

* Scotch broth is a soup made of shreds of carrots, beef, turnips, onion, pearl barley, peppercorn, and celery. Prepared in large quantities and simmered for long periods of time, it becomes glutinous and unpalatable, much as oatmeal becomes sticky and too glutinous to eat.

Beynon and Austin state that:

The position of the miner's widow, without a [working] son living at home and working at the pit, was the most vulnerable. For women with a grown up family, the death of a husband most often involved moving in with a son or daughter.⁴⁹

My grandfather had found a lady with whom he was compatible and they found that they could combine households, share expenses and responsibilities, and lessen the burdens of daily living for everyone concerned.

The new stepmother brought two children into the marriage and their ages were significant. One was a boy (Joe), about three years older than my mother, and the other was a girl, Nell, either the same age as my mother or a year older. My mother now lost her nickname, Nellie, and was now called Norah. She didn't mind, as she liked her new stepsister very much. The leaving age of school for children was fourteen at that time, so the new stepbrother could go to work in the mines soon to fulfill the requirement for tied housing. Nell, once she left school, could work outside the home as a shop girl, hire out as a domestic, or help in the home. The household now consisted of two adults and five children.

Economy in the Doldrums

In the mid-1920s, the nagging problem of unemployment was not going away. The general consensus that Britain was not "paying its way in the world" and it was that fact that was causing the ongoing unemployment. According to 1920s thinking, if Britain exported more, then that could reduce the unemployment problem. If prices were lowered then exports could be raised and the easiest way to lower prices was to cut wages.⁵⁰

By 1925, however, the time seemed right to placate powerful financial British interests by restoring the British pound to the American dollar's relationship to the gold standard. This sacrificed the interests of the industrial sector (including mining) to the interests of the financial sector and the most immediate victim of this policy would be the lower class working man (or woman). Miners were especially and drastically hard hit by this policy.

⁴⁹ Huy Beynon and Austin Terry. *Masters and servants*: pp 175-176.

⁵⁰ Renshaw, *Nine Days That Shook Britain*, p 77.

With Leaders Like This Who Needs Enemies?

Pressured by officials from the Treasury and the Bank of England and also because the 1920 Act prohibiting the export of gold was soon to lapse, Churchill decided to return the nation's financial basis to the gold standard. All the "experts" wanted to return the value of the pound (based on a "sterling" value) to the per-war parity of \$4.86, very close to the exchange rate of \$4.40, almost pegged to the American dollar. British pride dictated that the difference between the figures (.46) was negligible and that the \$4.86 figure was absolutely vital and really only represented a 4 1/2% difference. This mindset, really, was based on vanity and not much else.

A lone voice in the wilderness, the noted economist J.M. Keynes, argued that the difference should be nearer to 10% against Britain and that the British pound was overvalued by that percentage. The reason British exports fared so badly was that they were *too* expensive on the world market. In fact, even domestic products were *overvalued* by at least 10%. There was no way out of this dilemma. Keynes argued that one of two things would happen if Churchill persisted in his parity scheme – exports would fall further and the consequent balance-of-payments deficit would be filled 1) by shipments of gold *from* Britain - which would imperil the maintenance of parity [*how much gold Britain had on hand*] or 2) wages must be forced down, either by the pressure of unemployment or by direct Government action.⁵¹

Britain would not let gold leave the country. That left the alternative of forcing wages down by increasing unemployment or dictating wages by Government action. Dictating wages was unthinkable. The only alternative was to let unemployment rise to take care of the problem. This is exactly what the Government and Churchill did. Pegging the pound to the artificially defined value of the gold standard at the American dollar's value (\$4.46) tied the British valuation irrevocably to the American valuation. It also resulted in thousands more unemployed British citizens since British exports now were prohibitively overvalued. The reversion to pre-war parity created a new and more serious crisis in the mining industry since miners, especially Durham miners, were the most vulnerable to fluctuations in export prices.

⁵¹ Renshaw, *Nine Days That Shook Britain*, pp 98-103.

The Samuel Commission and Report

By 1925, the overvaluation problem had wreaked havoc, once again, on the export market and once again, the coal industry was in trouble. Predictably, the coal mine owners had several options, but of course, they chose to cut wages. In addition, they used this crisis as an opportunity to abolish national minimum wages, and insisted on maintaining standard profits no matter how low the wages fell. This time there would be no limit set on wage reductions, national minimum percentages would be abandoned, while profits would be guaranteed for owners. The owners were talking about increasing the hours worked, as well. On June 30, 1925, the owners posted lockout notices.⁵²

In September of 1925, Sir Herbert Samuel chaired a commission charged with examining the coal industry and its myriad facets. Topics such as nationalization of coal royalties, wage levels, wage cuts, and reorganization of the coal industry were discussed and the discussions resulted in a memorandum that defined the situation from the different points of view of the coal mine owners, the Government, and the miners' perspectives.⁵³ It addressed points about wage cuts, reorganization, a pay board and basic minimums of pay standards and hours.⁵⁴ The memorandum observed, "any material fall in wages will...bring real wages at the present cost of living, ***below pre-war [1914] level*** for a large proportion of the miners."⁵⁵ In the House of Commons in 1925, Labour MPs supported Samuel's argument when they commented that "a wage cut would at least be easier to reverse than lengthened hours when prosperous times returned."⁵⁶ The Samuel Commission recommended multiple steps and changes that would take years to implement, but also said that in the "immediate future the way forward was not to extend hours or to continue the subsidy which was 'indefensible' and 'should never be repeated', but to reduce the minimum wages of the miners. These policies embarrassed the British

⁵² Renshaw, *Nine Days That Shook Britain*, p 108.

⁵³ Keith Laybourn, *General Strike Day By Day*, (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1993), p 36.

⁵⁴ Renshaw, *Nine Days That Shook Britain*, p 231.

⁵⁵ *Parl Papers, 1926*, xiv (1), Report of the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry (1925), I, Report, 229. quoted by Hester Barron, *The 1926 Miners' Lockout. Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield*, (Oxford University Press, 2010), p 91.

⁵⁶ *HPD(C)* 197, cc 803, 1196, 1254, 198, c 1730; Royal Commission on the Coal Industry, I, 175. Quoted by Hester Barron, *The 1926 Miners' Lockout. Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield*, (Oxford University Press, 2010), p 91.

Government, offended the miners and aggrieved the mine owners.”⁵⁷ In short, there was nothing that the mine owners, the Government, or the miners could agree on in the report.

Prime Minister Baldwin Lights the Match

The new Prime Minister Baldwin was unsympathetic to the miners’ position on pay reductions or hourly increases. He complained about the mysteries of calculations of miners’ wage calculations. He stated that “the complexity of the calculations was beyond his capabilities.”⁵⁸ Negotiations among the MFGB, the mine owners, and the Government continued, but what really put the miners’ over the edge was Prime Minister Baldwin’s comment when wage cuts were mentioned, “Yes. *All the workers in this country* have got to take reductions in wages to help put industry on its feet.”⁵⁹ The coal mine owners would not budge, the miners would have to sacrifice even more and Government would not interfere, nor get involved in any meaningful way.

The whole coal mining crisis and the General Strike of 1926, then, was predicated on the following factors: the rapid rise in unemployment caused by the British Government’s foolish decision to return to the gold standard and the coal mine owners’ attempt to force drastic sacrifices onto the coal miners’ workforce and their attempts to roll back already hard-won legal and union benefits from the mining workforce. In addition, the coal mine owners’ attempts to guarantee profits at coal miners’ expense, their intransigence in accepting any recommendations of the Samuel report, and the coal miners’ long standing mistrust and hatred of the coal mine owners’ motives and attitudes were important factors in hardening positions on both sides. Finally, the British Government had no sympathy with the coal miners’ plight of reduced wages or increased hours, which forced miners into a corner.

Miners Go Out – Other Unions Strike in Solidarity

Baldwin’s comment solidified the miners’ union and the Trade Union Congress’ opinion. Faced with such concerted opposition, and realizing that the Government forces were really not ready to take on the TUC coalition, Prime Minister Baldwin announced

⁵⁷ *Report on the Royal Coal Commission on the Coal Industry (1925), Report*, HMSO, Cmd 2600, 1926, pp 235-7. Quoted by Laybourn, *General Strike Day by Day*, p 37.

⁵⁸ Hester Barron, *The 1926 Miners’ Lockout. Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield*, (Oxford University Press, 2010), p 89.

⁵⁹ Renshaw, *Nine Days That Shook Britain*, p 114.

that he would grant a subsidy while a commission looked into the merits of both parties' positions.⁶⁰

The Commission wrote a memorandum which found that nationalization of the coal mines should replace the old royalty structure, and suggested public ownership of coal but *not the coal mines*. Other reforms were recommended, all of which would take time and none of which were acceptable to all parties.

The subsidy was the crucial point; the Government did not want to continue it under any circumstance and in fact, recommended that steep pay cuts should be implemented while industrial reorganization occurred. The coal miners and miners could not come to any agreement on issues of owner profit and wage reductions. Therein was the crux of the problem; that and nationalization of profit or any kind of reorganization scheme. A strike action was called, nation wide, on May 3, 1926 at midnight. Three and one half million "first line" workers came out.⁶¹ Many regions learned that as of May 1, all pits had stopped work.⁶² It looked as if the strike would gain momentum, not decelerate. The last thing the Government wanted was an expanded strike involving more industries and more workers.

Government Reaction

Churchill had been adamantly opposed to any strike action or any movement towards negotiation with the miners. He regarded a strike as:

a "threat to the Constitution" that must be resisted 'rigidly, resolutely, inflexibly and to the end,' and reaffirmed the adherence of the Government to the demand for unconditional surrender as a prelude to the re-opening of the negotiations.⁶³

He was fully prepared to call out troops to use against strikers. The Government had organized its forces to respond to the threat of a concerted strike effort, the TUC had not really organized or planned its activities well, should the Government respond aggressively. While the Government feared anarchy in the streets from rioting unionists, the strikers and union leaders feared violence from the Government. None of these fears was justified. Churchill and Baldwin made ingenious use of the nascent BBC and other

⁶⁰ Renshaw, *Nine Days That Shook Britain*, p 116.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p 305.

⁶² *Ibid*, p 179.

⁶³ D.H. Robertson, "A Narrative of the General Strike of 1926", *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 36, no 143 (Sep. 1926), 384.

communication vehicles to convince the British public that the strike was a threat to the State itself.⁶⁴ When the strike was portrayed in these terms, it seemed that the strikers were striking at the heart and well-being of Britain.

Tentative Settlement in Accordance With the Samuel Agreement

On Tuesday, May 11, a meeting of the General Council of the TUC was convened to discuss the Samuel memorandum as a basis for a settlement, as unsatisfactory as that memorandum was. The pivotal question considered was this: "*If the strike were called off, would the owners withdraw their lockout notices and allow the colliers to resume work at the old rates and hours on the basis of the Samuel memorandum?*"⁶⁵ The union leaders asked and were repeatedly assured that the answer was "yes." The Samuel memorandum offered some "wiggle" room for negotiation once good times returned. Based on this assurance, the unions were inclined to settle on these terms, unsatisfactory as they were.

The next morning, during a meeting of the General Council of the TUC and mining representatives with the Prime Minister, none of the circumstances agreed upon the night before were brought up or even mentioned. Just the presence of the TUC and mining officials at the meeting was regarded as an agreement to end the strike and it was announced, publicly, that the strike was settled. This represented a wholesale capitulation. In violation of the Samuel memorandum and the understanding agreed upon previously, lockout notices would remain intact, and mine owners could dictate any rates they chose. Once again, the miners had been betrayed. The MFGB was now penniless and powerless.⁶⁶ The new standard for wages was the pre-war wage scale paid in 1914...a step back in wages to just before World War I, twelve years prior.⁶⁷ Striking workers drifted back to work; many were victimized and not rehired...but not in County Durham. Many Durham miners continued their strike for seven more long agonizing months before economic realities forced them back into the pits.

⁶⁴ Renshaw, *Nine Days That Shook Britain*, pp 170-171.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p 234.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p 242.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p 248.

Repercussions in the O'Hagan Household

In summary, around 1913 my grandfather had met and married his love, Margaret Barkas, and had set up housekeeping with her. They had had four children, and had buried their oldest daughter. He had lost his wife to cancer after less than ten years of marriage. He had endured lockouts or strikes –1921 and 1926 – only to see his wages and working conditions deteriorate to pre-war levels. He had been separated from his children for two years, had remarried and was getting on well with his second wife, but perhaps things were not quite what he had envisioned with his second household. It was 1926 and there had been another disastrous lockout and strike, even more strident and more militant than before. He was absolutely stymied at every turn. What else could he do? There were, literally, no options for a poor working miner, and even fewer for his daughter.

His oldest daughter, Norah, was smart, curious, courageous, but he was concerned about her future – she was definitely not strong enough for the demands of a miner's family life, nor strong enough to work on a farm, go into domestic service or work in a shop. One thing my grandfather had always told my mother was that he would do *anything* he could to keep her from marrying a miner. He felt that the overwork, the deprivation, the hardship and all the stress and uncertainty had killed his first wife, and he knew such a life might very well kill my mother. She did not have the temperament or the physical ability to withstand such a grueling existence. Perhaps the circumstances of my mother's birth had something to do with his attitude; they had lost a little girl shortly after my mother had been born, and my mother's frailty, combined with the comfort she brought to them may have made her special in his eyes. All these factors and a great deal of emotion must have weighed into my grandfather's decision to let her go with John Lester's Midget circus in 1926.

Little Norah Makes a New Friend When Lester Comes to Town

Norah noticed the dog first. *How could she not?* It was the size of a small pony. She was accustomed to the whippets that waited patiently outside the pubs waiting for their owners to finish their pints and head back home to their tiny homes. Then there were the rat terriers people kept around the neighborhood; useful dogs for ferreting out vermin.

But, neither of these smaller breeds were *anything* remotely like the majestic creature she saw barely fifteen feet in front of her. It even had its own seat in the car – a special seat in the back where the trunk should be. But, there it was; sitting tall and proud, like a king (or, perhaps, a queen). The creature had a beautifully sculpted head with large, liquid brown eyes set atop a fine snout, large jaws, and un-cropped ears. Its massive neck descended into muscular shoulders, a cavernous chest, long front legs, a strong back, and a long, thin, curving tail. Medium sized paws completed its anatomy. It was white with large black patches placed all over its body; it was, indeed, the most *beautiful* animal my mother had ever set eyes on – at least the most beautiful animal she had ever seen in the limited confines of Newcastle, England. It was as big as she was. It was a harlequin Great Dane.

The dog owned two humans, *almost* as impressive, who were sitting in the car. They, too, were tall. The expensively dressed man unfolded himself from behind the steering wheel of the automobile, went around and opened the passenger door and helped the fashionably dressed lady out. They came over and stopped next to my mother, asked her if her father lived at the house and if he was in. She answered affirmatively, and they asked if they could speak with him. She went running in and got my grandfather, who proceeded to greet them and usher them into the house.

Leaving Home

My mother never knew what transpired during the conversation, but eventually, she was brought in to talk with everyone. Being a well mannered child, Norah answered questions intelligently and forthrightly and comported herself well. She never told me whether she was asked to perform anything physical such as run in circles or do jumping jacks or anything of that nature. My grandfather then introduced the two adults to my mother as Mr. John Lester and his assistant and stated that they were there to recruit her for their vaudeville troupe. My grandfather asked for a moment alone with my mother and explained again, that he would do *anything* he could to keep her from marrying a miner, and he felt that this was a viable alternative for her to pursue. She told me, long after, that she never felt pressured or betrayed, and actually felt rather excited at the prospect of joining a vaudeville troupe.

So, she packed her few articles of clothing, kissed everyone who mattered goodbye, and left in the car with John Lester and his assistant. They gave her the choice of riding in the front with them or in the rumble seat with the dog; she, fascinated by the dog more than the people, rode in the rumble seat with the dog (whose name, she learned, was Juno) and they became fast friends on the trip. There were assurances that she could come home eventually if things didn't work out or if she was unhappy. It was about seven or eight months before my mother saw her family again. It seems to me that the troupe must have been playing a venue within a closer distance in the North Country; certainly not London or the south of England.

Tearing Up Roots

Hester Barron, writing in "*The 1926 Miners' Lockout, Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield*", describes a general objection on the part of villagers to young people leaving a mining village to go far away, partly because so much of their past is buried in the graveyard and also because their parents don't know when they will see that child again.⁶⁸ Sometimes, rarely, such individuals who had gone away returned, able to "show off" their good fortune. Such stories, she continues, "had the potential to be powerful, particularly during a seven-month lockout. It may be that there was a generational gap in attitudes, with parents reluctant to see children leave the area...but whose children themselves were less concerned about staying."⁶⁹ I suspect that assumption was not true in this instance. My grandfather certainly didn't want to see my mother go; he would much rather have kept his family intact but I think he was eager to see her get away to a better future. Interestingly enough, Norah returned to Newcastle in 1969, accompanied by her sister Peggy. She was given an audience with the Lord Mayor, the key to the city, and an article in the Newcastle newspaper.⁷⁰ Nothing was mentioned about the impoverished circumstances of her early life, the hardship, the General Strike, or her father's desperation.

⁶⁸ *MFGB, Annual Volume of Proceedings for 1926 (1927)*, 453. James Robson (1860-1934) had worked in the Durham coalfield since the age of 10. He was President of the DMA 1917-34 and Treasurer of the MFGB 1918-21, quoted by Hester Barron, *The 1926 Miners' Lockout. Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield*, (Oxford University Press, 2010), p 50.

⁶⁹ Hester Barron, *The 1926 Miners' Lockout*, p 51.

⁷⁰ Newspaper article, "*They were the girls on the flying trapeze. Herzogs look at Gateshead again*", Gateshead Post, November 21st, 1969.

It Pays to Advertise

How had John Lester found my mother? He certainly hadn't been driving along the street one day and noticed a tiny young girl sitting on the step and decided to recruit her for his midget circus. My mother never told me. Wearing my detective hat, it occurred to me that he must have advertised in *some* manner; perhaps in a paper or by word of mouth or by recruitment at local fairs or by a combination of all three. I found an advertisement in the *London Times*, dated April 23, 1928:

Boys and Girls wanted for Stage: free training with food, clothing, and all expenses while learning; must be 14 or older, and four feet or under. Also Midgets of any age accepted. Apply daily. 11 to 1 p.m. or all particulars by post to John Lester's Agency, 26, Charing Cross -road, W.C.2.⁷¹

Admittedly, the date is 1928, but John Lester was building his midget circus gradually and he may have advertised in local papers or in some other local venue prior to 1928.

Dangerous Folly or Calculated Risk?

It seems incomprehensible to someone today that a parent would just let a child go off with a complete stranger, especially given the fact that there was no easily accessible way to check on references, do background checks, or do a follow-up investigation. During 1913 and 1914 white slavery had become a real issue. In America, at least, the "slave trade" in white women came under increased scrutiny as a result of newly empowered civic commissions and grand juries occupied with finding evidence of prostitution and organized vice. Lurid Broadway stage plays in New York, *The Fight* and *The Lure*, dramatized the issue, almost too graphically. A common trap for young women, it seemed, was the fact that:

Amusement parks furnished arenas where female patrons [or performers*] constantly found themselves on display and open to unsolicited attention. Attachments easily formed amid the casual interaction of young people at such sites seemed only to play into procurers' hands.⁷²

⁷¹ *London Times* [London, England] 24 Apr. 1928: 3. *The Times Digital Archive*. Web. [Date accessed 17 Oct. 2015].

* Author's addition.

⁷² Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls - Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2000), pp 44-47.

This concern was not solely an American concern; slavery rings were considered an international menace, as well. The element of risk was certainly there.

My grandfather was very careful. He knew that circuses were wildly popular and becoming more acceptable and becoming more numerous. The decade of the 1920s experienced an exponential growth of circuses in Britain. Between 1921 and 1945, the number of circuses in Britain quadrupled.⁷³ The concept that the circus was an 18th century British invention and emblematic of the national character found its most enthusiastic proponent in the person of Bertram Mills, a circus owner and entrepreneur who created a spectacular circus at Olympia in London, in 1925. Mills' marketing of the circus characterized the medium as "masculine", "virile", "imperial" – all distinctly British traits.⁷⁴ The circus was popularized as "part of an expressly 'English' cultural heritage and a visible example of democracy" in that lower classes could participate.⁷⁵ Ticket prices ranged from as little as a penny to as much as a guinea.⁷⁶ All these factors combined to increase the popularity of the circus. My grandfather probably answered an advertisement, checked some references, did his homework and realized that John Lester's Midget Circus represented a wonderful opportunity for my mother.

Lester's Rules

My mother told me that Lester had very strict rules about relationships within the troupe and about letter correspondences or about any friendships outside the "family – the tribe" of the organization. Letters to and from correspondents had to be sent through a specific postal address and distributed by a designated person within the troupe and there were strict rules about relationships outside the Lester "community."

It was permissible to talk to other performers when they were working at other venues – Lester was not a slave-master, after all, but it was not permissible to have "serious relationships" of a romantic nature. He was running a business and he was making a serious investment in time, maintenance, and training when he signed any individual on, so he wanted to make sure that they would stay with the group. And he wanted everyone

⁷³ Sandra Trudgen Dawson, "Selling the circus: Englishness, circus fans and democracy in Britain, 1920-45" in *Leisure And Cultural Conflict In Twentieth-century Britain*, Brett Bebbler, eds. (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press ; 2012), p 86.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p 87.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, pp 84-85

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p 90.

to be safe. To violate any of those rules was a sure ticket back home. I am sure that he made these policies crystal clear to my grandfather and my mother.

The Making of an Impresario

John Lester was something of an oddity in the lower tier of show business in the interwar years of England. He was born in America just after the Civil War ended and traveled with the Barnum and Bailey circus for awhile. He married, had two sons, and his whole family had traveled as a musical and aerial act, playing in many venues, traveling to several continents. He came to England in 1915 with his family and toured as “The Four Aerial Lesters.”⁷⁷ They were nothing if not adaptable and inventive and soon John Lester branched out into other areas of show business, including developing country western musical talent and creating a circus of talented midget performers known variously as John Lester’s Midget Circus, the “Royal Midget Circus” and other titles.

What was so *compelling* about midgets? The noted Israeli professor of Sociology and Anthropology (and a circus expert), Yoram S. Carmeli, notes that:

The early 19th century fairground has its roots in the middle-ages. “Freaks” and dwarves could be seen here for hundreds of years. For the 16th century Christian the freak was considered a prodigy – a sign (monstrum) of God’s will.... While the wonder of dwarves brought some of them to kings’ courts as jesters, some others could be seen in fairs which combined entertainment and economy for hundreds of years.⁷⁸

Dwarves and midgets, then, were considered “entertaining” at least in carnival-goers eyes. While Lester specialized in midgets, not dwarves,⁷⁹ he certainly capitalized on the early mid-20th century fascination of the public with individuals possessing “physical oddities.” He planned his Midget Circus in 1925, when he went to New York for the purposes of learning about staging, lighting and publicity. He returned to England and set up an office and credentials as a variety theatrical agent in London, and acted as an agent for his two sons, fronting a country western touring band.

⁷⁷ Harry Lester Obituary, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-harry-lester-1459221.html> [date accessed 10/17/2015].

⁷⁸ Y. S. Carmeli.. “From Curiosity to Prop - A Note on the Changing Significances of Dwarves Presentations in Britain”, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol 26 issue 1 (2010): 70.

⁷⁹ According to Webster’s Dictionary a dwarf is a person of abnormally small stature owing to a pathological condition, especially one suffering from cretinism or some other disease that produces disproportion or deformation of features and limbs. A midget is an extremely small person having normal physical proportions.

Starting a Circus from Scratch

Developing a circus was no small endeavor and required detailed planning. There were some prerequisites to a circus in those days: horses were an essential element, as were clowns. In circus nomenclature, there were “hard” circuses and “tent” circuses. “Hard” circuses were circuses that were physically located in one spot; a standard hall or building with a center ring.⁸⁰ Tent circuses were circuses that traveled from one location to another; often they would stay in one town for just one night or maybe two, and then be on their way to another engagement. In the case of traveling circuses, especially, you needed artists to perform, crews (riggers) to set up equipment, personnel to take care of animals, travel to the next town as front men, operational men to handle administrative details and act as financial agents. Tent circuses evolved over time as a more practical solution to the problem of reaching more customers. Remarkably, John Lester was able to create a midget circus that encompassed *both* types of circus models.

Traveling the Circuit

By 1927 Lester had engaged a clown named Doodles and had assembled a cast of thirty midgets, billed as “Lester’s Midgets.” At this time, Lester’s was a “tent” circus primarily; they played in many towns, traveling from venue to venue, even into Scotland and eventually, to the United States. They would travel by railway to a town, the riggers would go to the local field or fair site and set up the tents and my mother would get to ride Bebe, the elephant, into town as the exotic “Chiquita the Mexican Thrill Girl” or some other similarly named personality.⁸¹ (Lester made her take a bath in water tinted with walnut juice to turn her skin brown; she said it took weeks to get the stain off her skin.)⁸² She could ride into town at the head of the circus parade, dressed in an exotic costume, her jet black hair streaming down her back, legs tucked behind Bebe’s ears, arms outstretched, as the Midget Indian Princess, as Lester’s announcer bellowed through his microphone about the time and place of the show.⁸³

⁸⁰ Duncan Wall.. *The Ordinary Acrobat. A Journey Into the Wondrous World of the Circus, Past and Present.* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Random House, Inc., 2013), p 182.

⁸¹ Business card in author’s possession.

⁸² Memoir of Norah O’Hagan Toomey, 1975.

⁸³ Yoram Carmeli. "Circus Play, Circus Talk, and the Nostalgia for a Total Order." *Journal Of Popular Culture* 35, no. 3 (Winter01 2001): 160.

Expanding Her Repertoire

Norah was very adept at training and very talented; within a year she was an accomplished tumbler and acrobat, she could tap-dance quite well, she could ride horseback (even to the level of performing Roman riding in which she rode two horses standing with one foot on the back of each horse). John Lester's Midget Circus emulated larger, well known circuses such as the Bostock, Ginnett and Mills circuses which featured acrobatic horseback riding although the animals used were not huge horses but larger ponies.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, she became quite a skilled equestrian at all sorts of trick riding. Norah became most accomplished at trapeze work. This did not go unnoticed; she worked at fairs where there were other acts handled by other managers and circuses playing.

Norah made several valuable contacts within the circus world, not only from Lester's Midget Circus. She started to develop a reputation as a good all-around talented athlete, well trained as an aerialist, an accomplished acrobat, and an excellent horseback performer. She was a natural at anything requiring physical or kinetic ability. She was very good with the animals. Perhaps just as importantly (or more so), Norah got along well with all her co-workers – especially the women. Her brother, Barney, came to work with Lester's group as a rigger and animal worker after he had finished school. He did well there and having her brother around eased any pangs of loneliness for home. She never was mistreated, she always had good clothes to wear, had challenging work, and was never asked to do anything immoral. Poignantly, my mother told me she never had a full glass of milk to drink until she was eleven years old and joined John Lester's vaudeville troupe.

First Trip to America

The troupe soon increased in number to fifty midgets and fifteen ponies (and, of course, Bebe, the elephant). In 1929, John Lester brought his Midget Circus to the United States on the Queen Mary. Norah came over with the troupe, fully intending to perform. On the crossing, however, she fell and broke her arm playing shuffleboard, rendering her useless. She never told me Lester's reaction to the unexpected accident, she did, however,

⁸⁴ Sandra Trudgen Dawson, "*Selling the circus*," p 88.

tell me that she was in the states “illegally” with no passport because she was still underage (only fourteen at the time) so perhaps his attitude was “the less said about it, the better.”

Norah’s lasting memory of this trip was one of extravagance and waste; she told me how shocked she was to see the ship’s stewards throwing perfectly good food – hams, turkeys, all sorts of food supplies – overboard in the harbor, rather than bringing the food into the country, even though it was 1929 and the Great Depression was just starting in the United States. Upon returning to England, John Lester got a contract to play the Blackpool Tower Circus for several years. Blackpool and more importantly, its resort and entertainment possibilities represented a goldmine for him. As many other circuses were discovering at the time, Lester realized the value of having a fixed locale for his “tented circus, especially for the winter season.”⁸⁵

The History of Blackpool as a Resort

Blackpool is located on the northwest coast of England, facing the Irish Sea. It is a seaside resort of some note; originally popular with the Lancashire country gentry since the mid 1830s as a fashionable destination for its sea-water cures. “Farmers, clergy, professional men, and other locals found the beaches of Blackpool to be within easy reach” where they could emulate the “habits of their social betters.”⁸⁶ They found Blackpool more affordable in terms of disposable time and income. Railroad service accelerated the visitor traffic and during the 19th century Blackpool increasingly served as a resort location sought after by a middle and working class holiday clientele, seeking to maximize their resources according to the time and income they had available for pleasure.

Efforts to tame the old ways of holiday making (drunken brutality and bull-baiting, for instance) were becoming more widespread by the 1840s and by the middle of the 19th century many Lancashire employers, Sunday Schools and Temperance societies recognized the value of excursions to the seaside as a counter weight to the temptations

⁸⁵ Sandra Trudgen Dawson, “*Selling the circus*,” p 88.

⁸⁶ John K. Walton. *The Blackpool Landlady: A Social History*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978) p 14.

of the fair.⁸⁷ Employers began to recognize the value of leisure and limited holidays in relation to increased productivity.⁸⁸ All this awareness meant increased traffic to seaside resorts; most especially Blackpool for the working class clientele. It became known as a working class resort.

Blackpool had special characteristics which, while not as striking in locale, made it better suited to working class visitors. Walton notes that the coastline lacked scenic grandeur; there was no bay, and no high or picturesque cliffs.⁸⁹ Commercially run mass entertainment run by enterprising and astoundingly creative vendors soon surpassed sea bathing as holiday entertainment.

Even though the resort was affordable to working class and middle class patrons and the restorative property of recreation was widely accepted it was still expensive to take a holiday at any resort. Paying for such a luxury often meant putting aside money every week. Different schemes were devised to pay for such expenditures. Walton writes of the concept of specialized holiday clubs, in which participants set aside monies directly for the purpose. Pubs sometimes served the same function.⁹⁰

Leisure as a Right, Not a Privilege

Sandra Dawson, in “*Holiday Camps in twentieth-century Britain; Packaging Pleasure*”, speaks of the plight of the Turner family, who had never experienced a “holiday away from home.” “They could not afford to go on a holiday and unpaid holidays threw their entire budget out of gear.”⁹¹ The Turner family’s experience, and millions like them, were the impetus for the Holidays With Pay campaign; a campaign to establish legislation to recognize holidays as a right and to enact legislation to extend that right to all citizens of Great Britain. The campaign was an effort to define leisure as a right, not a privilege, and the Holidays With Pay Act was finally passed in 1938, after decades of strenuous campaigning.⁹² The creation of Butlin’s and Warner’s all encompassing vacation camps met the demand of newly empowered families who now

⁸⁷ Walton. *The Blackpool Landlady*, p 34.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p 36.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, pp 42-43.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p 38.

⁹¹ Sandra Trudgen Dawson. *Holiday camps in twentieth-century Britain. Packaging Pleasure.* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1988), p 10.

⁹² Sandra Trudgen Dawson. *Holiday camps in twentieth-century Britain*, pp 15 and 32.

found that they could vacation at resorts and not worry about unexpected charges. But such legislation and camps were far in the future as far as Lester's sojourn in Blackpool was concerned.

The Blackpool Landlady

Prior to the establishment of the Butlin and Warner camps, however, even if a family *could* afford a vacation, it was not often much of a vacation for the wife, who still had to pack, unpack, shop and cook for the family while on vacation. This is where the genius of the Blackpool Landlady came into play. A family could arrange to stay at a lodging house, bring their own food, and the landlady would cook the meal. Based on the services rendered, such as hot water for tea, the provision of additional items such as pudding, or even having clothes washed, it was up to the client and his or her preferences as to the total amount of the bill.⁹³ The more a landlady provided, the more she could charge. She could even get her husband to help. Indeed, John Walton notes that the Blackpool landlady became a staple of English caricature with her tendency to "shoehorn" tenants into her facilities to extract the maximum amount of profit and to bury obscure charges in the bill (such as charges for the use of a cruet) to pad the bill.⁹⁴

By the turn of the century, then, Blackpool had become a premier working-class resort, with entertainment companies making extensive use of the piers, the promenades, the various gardens and concert halls and most prominent of all, the replica of the Eiffel tower, the enormous Blackpool Tower. John Lester now had a multi-year contract to display his Midget Circus at the Blackpool Tower and he was going to make the most of it.

Why Was the Blackpool Tower So Special?

The Blackpool Tower had a ring and a circus, hence it was a "hard" circus and Lester built a Midget Town complete with a post office and other amenities and marketed it to visitors as a "normal" town where midgets lived as normal people at the top of the tower, only in tiny, cramped quarters.

⁹³ John K. Walton. *The Blackpool Landlady*, p 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p 2.

In addition, by 1920, circuses had faced opposition from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). The organization lobbied for legislation to limit the use of animals in circus acts and eventually, by 1925, Parliament had passed the Performing Animals (Regulation) Act, which required inspection of trainers and animals to ensure that the animals were treated humanely.⁹⁵ Lester decided to use his “little people” more than his animals in his shows; although he would still have a “circus” aspect to his attractions, he devised a way of attracting customers without focusing on animals as much. Perhaps this was a way to deflect criticism from the RSPCA.

Lester was starting to make films of the “little people” (actually billing one of the films as “*Little ‘uns – A Blackpool Sidelight – 1931*”) going on carnival rides and enjoying themselves on a playground, doing “normal” things.⁹⁶ They were dressed in street clothes, acting as normal people. These films became very popular with the public. My mother failed to see the talent or the attraction in the whole concept. The tumbling, acrobatic, and circus elements were secondary in this venue. There was no skill, no expertise, no aptitude involved in these endeavors. Working with animals, horseback riding, tricks, aerial accomplishments, none of the dancing or hard-won gymnastic abilities were displayed. Instead, seemingly grotesque parodies of everyday life were performed by midgets dressed in street clothes.

Not realizing that the whole concept of the Midget Town at the top of the Blackpool Tower was as big a draw as the Midget Circus in the circus ring, she wasn’t aware that Lester was hedging his bets and fulfilling a consumer demand for midgets doing “everyday tasks” as well as circus acts. She just found it pointless and slightly offensive.

Beginning of the End

There was one saving grace. Lester was an accomplished musician and always had assistants who could teach music. He decided to assemble midget girl bands. He asked my mother what instrument she wanted to learn to play and she had her heart set on the guitar. He got her a mandolin instead. She was very upset.

⁹⁵ Sandra Trudgen Dawson, “*Selling the circus*, p 89.

⁹⁶ Short promotional film for previews to film audiences – Blackpool <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/little-uns-a-blackpool-sidelight> [accessed 10/17/2015]. This film can be purchased online today.

As far as she was concerned, it was the beginning of the end. She had been with him for eight years, she actually had grown too big to be a midget anymore (she was almost 4'8" tall) and she was tired of being gawked at, so she decided she wanted to come home. She was nineteen years old and with the optimism of youth, she felt that she could make her way in the future, given her talent and training. She decided to leave Lester's and came home to Newcastle. It was 1934.

Vaudeville Saves Two

Without the training and abilities Norah learned while working with Lester and the contacts she made with other show business people, she would never have had the opportunities that were just on her horizon. Little did she know that she would soon be recruited into a highly regarded aerialist act, and she would travel throughout Europe, the United States, and would work in Mexico City.

Within a few months, Mr. August Deters, the German-born manager of The Flying Herzogs, tracked her down in Newcastle, England, and came to her home. He had worked at many of the same fairs Lester had worked. He had watched my mother perform and knew how talented and athletic my mother was. Just as importantly, he had gotten to know her through talking with her and he saw how well she got on with her work mates, mostly women. This was important as he had a wife, a stepdaughter, a step-granddaughter, three English ladies already in the Herzogs, plus a stepson, all traveling together. The last thing he needed was a troublemaker in the group. Norah was anything but that. He asked her to join his troupe and he said she could bring her fifteen year old sister, Peggy, with her and he would train her, as well. It was a testament to his regard for Norah that he was willing to let her bring her untrained sister with her. They were both on their way out of Newcastle.

Traveling with the Flying Herzogs

“Shoes. It was all those *damned* shoes.”

That was the answer I got when I asked “Pop (everyone’s name for Mr. Deters, the Herzog’s German-born manager), “what was the hardest thing you had to deal with when you were traveling with all those ladies?” I expected the answer would be arguments over hairdos, seating arrangements, who looked best in what color, what costumes would they wear, favoritism, who got more money for lipstick, makeup, who said what, but no...it was *shoes*.

He was married to Mütchen, his stoic hausfrau (I never heard her called by any other name). He had a step-daughter, Welda, who was about fifteen years older than my mother. She had a daughter, Norma, who was about ten years old at the time. Then there were, collectively, the pre-existing members of the Flying Herzogs: Rhoda Bailey, Alice Dalton, and Eva Musgrave (the “Herzog” girls), all in their younger 20s. Not one of those three ladies was over five feet tall. When my mother joined the act, she had just turned twenty, and my aunt Peggy was fifteen. In total, there were six grown women, one teenager, one pre-teen, plus another step-child, Arthur. I believe Norma stayed with an aunt most of the time in Germany, as she was so young and perhaps Arthur stayed with the aunt periodically, as well. Everyone traveled in a huge car; one of those big 1930s cars that seemed cavernous: more like an enormous land-based ship than a car. They would stop along the way on their way to an engagement and take wonderful black and white photos – and buy more shoes. They towed the equipment and the gear – rigging, sundries, the trapezes and webbing for the aerial act – in a large trailer behind the car. Sometimes more shoes were stashed there, as well.

It seems that at every location they performed, whether it was a fairground or theatre, everyone would go shopping. And, women being the vain creatures that they were and still are, shoes were irresistible. Shoes just seemed to leap into the car of their own volition. Every time Pop opened the trunk more shoes came tumbling out. Every time he cleared out the back seat to repack luggage more shoes appeared. And, every single member of the entourage was guilty. No single member was an outstanding offender.

All female members of the entourage were equally guilty. Pop was probably the only person in the group with four pairs of shoes to his name.

There was a popular 1960s television series called *Star Trek* with a memorable episode titled “*The Trouble with Tribbles*.”⁹⁷ In this episode, one cute little lovable furry hamster-like creature called a Tribble smuggled itself aboard the Starship Enterprise as it would “boldly go where no man had gone before”, then proceeded to reproduce exponentially, eventually occupying every square inch of the Starship Enterprise. Every time an officer or a crewmate opened a hatch or even sat in a chair, yet another Tribble greeted him or her by tumbling out onto their head or squirming out from under their seat. They all made such cute little purring noises as they took over the spaceship! How could you not love them? Even the dispassionate Mr. Spock fell prey to their charms. So it was with Pop and his earthbound female Starship Herzog crew of Mütchen-Welda-Norah-Rhoda-Alice-Eva-Peggy-Norma (even little *Norma!*?) and their collection of shoes. The rule of “buy something and throw something out” never seemed to stick for long.

Finally Pop gave up in defeat. Putting up with dozens of pairs of shoes seemed a small price to pay to keep everyone happy. All these shoes served a purpose, it seemed; they were destined to go with all the “outfits” these same women accumulated along the way. But, in 1962, when I asked him, Pop certainly remembered those dozens of shoes more than anything else.

I didn’t know much about Pop, or Mütchen, even now, except that they were always very kind to my cousin, my mother, my aunt, and me. I know, from his obituary, that he had been born in Germany in 1895, and that he was sixteen when he came to America.⁹⁸ He had a sister living in Germany who stayed there through World War II. Mütchen had been married before. He certainly traveled with ease in Britain, since my mother often met him there when she worked with Lester’s troupe. He traveled all over Europe because my mother, as part of the Herzogs, worked in Vienna, Budapest, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Berlin, and Copenhagen. The timing of my mother’s departure *from* Britain

⁹⁷ Star Trek, “*The Trouble with Tribbles*”, Season 2, Episode 15, (originally aired December 29, 1967).

⁹⁸August Deters obituary, Sarasota Journal, May 14, 1970, https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1798&dat=19700514&id=v_YeAAAAIBAJ&sjid=Bo0EAAAAIBAJ&pg=2728,2487204&hl=en [date accessed 10/21/2015].

into Europe and Germany (1934/1935) and their relative freedom to travel around seems odd, though, since most circus people in Germany were trying to get into Britain to avoid the German circus, which faced reorganization by the Nazis.⁹⁹ How could Pop travel so freely around Germany and Europe? Was Pop a member of the Nazi Party? It remains, to me, a fascinating riddle.

A New Family

Norah and my aunt Peggy were both very lucky in their association with Pop and Mütchen. Lester's troupe had been a "family" of sorts; he took care of the members, made sure the troupe was well fed, their medical and other needs were addressed, they were trained well, and he made sure that they were safe, but there was always the understanding that Lester conducted a business, first and foremost. Pop and Mütchen always went out of their way to make my mother and my aunt, and all the other Herzog girls feel as if they belonged in their family; they were treated as if they were daughters to the Deters family. My mother always addressed Lester formally; one never addressed him as "Pop" or would ever think of addressing him familiarly.

The Herzog girls always thought of Pop and Mütchen as family. Everything was shared; there was no demarcation. When they were in Germany, they stayed at the family home whenever possible. My mother had a new, caring family watching over her, with none of the deprivations she left behind in Newcastle

Since Lester's troupe (often 20 and more often over 40 midgets, plus ponies, apparatus, accoutrements) traveled by train, it was a cumbersome and more impersonal group that traveled. Pop's entourage drove everywhere. The nature of the vaudeville act – and vaudeville itself – had changed; now everyone in Pop's group traveled by car – travel by rail was too cumbersome, expensive and inefficient. This new mode of travel encouraged familiarity.

Pop had no trouble getting engagements within Germany in the mid-1930s; my mother spoke of being in Berlin during the Olympics in 1936. When they stayed in lodgings for longer periods of times, the family analogy took over. Welda did much of the cooking (she was a terrific cook) with everyone pitching in with the chores and

⁹⁹ Sandra Trudgen Dawson, "*Selling the circus*, p 96.

helping to clean up. Mütchen showed them the proper way to keep a good German kitchen. They all designed, sewed and repaired their costumes and they had quite a family group with language classes thrown in for good measure. Peggy was especially good at mapping; she and Pop would plot out their route and itinerary for the next engagement. She became the navigator of the group.

Everyone now spoke fluent German and could discuss current events of the day or everyday issues and bonded as families do, although I suppose from time to time, personal topics surfaced that might have needed smoothing over or further discussion. And, of course, everyone needed practice to hone their skills. When my mother spoke of traveling in Europe, it was mostly of these ordinary occurrences that she spoke. It was a very “clean” act with attractive but modest costumes and an emphasis on skill, artistry, and unique capability.

Trouble Brewing in Europe

I know that Pop became concerned about the turmoil going on in Europe around 1938 because my mother told me once that she was having a hard time getting served in some shops and Pop would have to step in and argue with shopkeepers on her behalf, emphasizing the fact that she was English. The shopkeepers would *still* refuse to serve her. They would say, “There are Jews in England, too”; because, to them, she looked Jewish. She remarked to me how absolutely ridiculous it became, so it must have happened frequently and it must have been significant. I suppose it would start to become increasingly difficult for Pop because he was traveling with five young women with British passports. Eventually, Pop decided it was the better part of discretion to get everyone out – Mütchen, Welda, the Herzog girls, young Arthur, and himself – very quickly in the summer of 1939.

The first inkling that she knew she was coming to the United States was when Pop said, “Girls, we’ll go to the States until things quiet down. This can’t last for long.” He was certainly able to come to the United States on very short notice with everyone but Norma, just before England declared war on Germany. Norma, who was about fifteen by then, was a member of the Hitler Youth, so she stayed behind in Germany with her aunt for the duration of World War II. Everyone left for the United States and arrived on the

liner, the Hamburg, In New York, on July 21, 1939.¹⁰⁰ Hitler invaded Poland on September 01, 1939, and Britain declared war on Germany on September 03, 1939. Pop, Mütchen, Welda, the Herzog girls, young Arthur – barely escaped Germany in time. My grandfather must have been beside himself with worry.

Life in New York City

Their new home base became New York City. Pop had to register as a German alien when he arrived. I know this, because my mother said the FBI visited the apartment...repeatedly. It seemed suspicious: a newly arrived German gentleman and his German wife, five British showgirls, a stepdaughter and a stepson who was a ham radio hobbyist, all living in a large New York City apartment, traveling around the East Coast...what *could* they be up to? The FBI agents actually had everyone visit the New York City offices once or twice and everyone got to know each other on a first name basis after awhile.

Pop also registered with the William Morris Agency, which got the act some local bookings in and around New York City. My mother registered as an alien, as did the other British Herzog girls.¹⁰¹ Registration address requirements were very strict; it seems that every time a change of address occurred it had to be reported every five days for *resident* aliens to any local post office. For visitors, students or others not admitted as permanent residents, their address had to be reported every three months to post office locations. Since the group began traveling to various locations after about a year, they became adept at compliance with these necessary restrictions. They played fairs and local venues in Boston, Hartford, Connecticut, Flemington, New Jersey, and other local and easily drivable locations, while they became accustomed to the United States. Pop, of course, had been in America before, so he had no problem acclimating himself to the United States.

New Direction for the Act

My mother never told me how it happened. Probably it happened accidentally in rehearsal. She was always outstanding on the trapeze. Peggy was very good on the

¹⁰⁰ New York, Passenger lists, 1820-1957 for Norah E. O Hagan, Ancestry.com.

¹⁰¹ My mother's Alien Registration receipt card number 7595162, document in possession of author.

Spanish web (the rope that had the loop at the top). The other Herzog girls – Alice, Rhoda, Eva – were all very, very good on the trapeze and the web. They wouldn't be in the act if they weren't. But the trapeze was my mother's specialty – as well as clowning around.

She may have accidentally misjudged her acceleration and flown off the trapeze as it made its furthest trajectory out past the edge of the stage and then instinctively caught it behind her knee. Whatever it was, it was breathtaking. She just CAUGHT the trapeze by that one leg, barely in time. Very few aerialists – if any – had ever done a trick like that before. Could it even be repeated?

I can hear Pop saying excitedly, now, in his German accent, “Norah! Can you see iff you can do dat AGAIN?” My mother, always up for something new (did I say she was courageous?) would have certainly tried it again. And again...and again. Pop would have taken precautions before he let her try it again; perhaps he jury-rigged a harness of some sort, attached to the trapeze, so that if she missed she wouldn't fall and get hurt. But she would practice it until she had it down cold.

It became her signature trick and the Herzogs became renowned for it. She never used a net or any other safety device. No one else in the world had ever done it before and no one else, as far as I know, has ever done it since. She repeated it flawlessly for over twelve years from 1940 and only fell once, in 1947, and that, only because a stage hand placed a back curtain improperly and the trapeze caught on the backswing and tangled in the curtain. I remember, vividly, sitting on the side of the stage watching her do the trick at the end of every show.

The Plant in the Audience

Pop changed the direction of the act dramatically. Adding to the artistry and skill involved with the trapeze and web tricks, he included a comedy twist. My mother, who had a natural flair for the ridiculous, now became a “plant” or “stooge” in the audience. Peggy, Rhoda, Alice, and Eva would perform the standard act onstage and towards the end of the routine, my aunt Peggy (who was most comfortable with my mother's very funny line of patter, could trade witticisms with the best of them, and, who, by the way, was the “looker” in the group) would come to the front of the stage, step up to the microphone, and announce in her *very* British accent, that anyone who felt like it could

come up to the stage and try their hand at working the trapeze. Amazingly, sometimes, brave young women did so! My mother said that once or twice there were individuals they could have hired. But, most of the time no one volunteered...and in an instant, my mother would come clattering out of her seat, clothed in a fashionable dress, hat on her head, high heels, purse over her arm, stating brazenly, "I can do better than any of you."

Up she would stumble onstage, seemingly blinded by the lights: Peggy and Eva would help her up onto the trapeze, while she would do the I-Love-Lucy routine of trying to keep her skirt down, her purse clutched tightly, try to keep her legs and arms in order, her hat on her head, and fail in all attempts. She would sit astride the trapeze as if she were on a horse, her skirt would be hiked up...it would be *absolutely pathetic* and all the time Peggy, Norah, Eva, Rhoda, and Alice would be trading jokes and witty remarks over a live microphone. The closest analogy would be Lucille Ball or Carol Burnett...or Minnie Pearl...on a trapeze. The audience would be roaring with laughter.

Then someone on stage (usually Norah) would suggest that the *real* test was the ability to maneuver on a *swinging* trapeze. "*All right*", my aunt would roll her eyes and sigh theatrically, "*if that's what you really want.*" She would help my mother straighten out, give the trapeze a huge push, my mother would start doing all sorts of wonderful spins and tricks and after several minutes came the grand finale – my mother's one knee catch almost over the edge of the stage, over the orchestra pit.¹⁰² It was all very breathtaking, as numerous press clippings attest. The only time there was a variation on the stooge-from-the-audience routine was when the Herzogs played an extended booking in the Florentine Gardens in Hollywood, or in Mexico City, where the element of surprise was lost.¹⁰³ In that instance, my mother would just join the group as an ensemble player and do the finale as the last part of the act.

Norah Earns a Purple Heart

I asked my mother, one time, if anyone ever stopped her from going up to the stage. She told me that once, during the war, a big burly American soldier seated behind her stood up as she got up to run down the aisle, grabbed her by the scruff of the neck, shook

¹⁰² Please refer to Figure 11 for a photograph of my mother doing the one knee drop in street clothes.

¹⁰³ Figure 10 shows my mother performing the catch at the Florentine Gardens; Life magazine did an article on the Herzogs in the January 31, 1944 issue.

her like a puppy, and yelled at her, “Sit down. You’re not going anywhere” and slammed her back into her seat. My mother was stunned. My aunt, knowing approximately where my mother was seated, waited a few moments, then, shielding her eyes, looked into the audience in her direction, and said plaintively, “Anyone? *ANYONE?*” in her British accent. Once again, my mother stood up and once again the soldier slammed her down into her seat. My mother waited a moment, then stood up, turned around, looked him dead in the eyes, slammed her purse into the side of the soldier’s head and hit him, then raced off up the aisle. He was stunned. My aunt shielded the microphone when my mother got on stage and whispered, “Where the **** were you?” and they continued on with the routine. At the end, after all the applause, my mother stepped up to the microphone and apologized to the soldier...whoever he was. You just did NOT mess with my mother.

“Mad Nora” Arrives

Pop started this new and improved act in mid-1940. I have a clipping from a *Playland Review*, Rye, New York, newspaper, mid summer 1940. Titled “*Sensational Act Features Five Daring Girls*” it goes into great detail, mentioning the group’s proficiency at “dental spins”, acrobatic feats, and in this instance, my mother barging up from the audience announcing she could do better than anyone up there. It is a glowing review.¹⁰⁴

By the early 1940s, the Herzogs were not playing as many fairs or circuses. The demands of war necessitated economies of scale; so performing in theaters became the new normal. The Herzogs performed in Fort Worth in 1944, at the Will Rogers Memorial Coliseum at the Pioneer Palace where, in a glowing review they refer to “Mad Nora” as the person who “keeps the whole show a little insane.” She never told me what she thought of this review (or her new nickname) except that she had worked before, in 1943, with the two comedians – Olsen and Johnson – who shared the bill on this venue. She had a bit part in their movie (*Crazy House*) as a stand in for Cass Daley, a forgettable movie “star”.¹⁰⁵ I stayed up very late at night with my mother, one time, when the movie was shown on television, eagerly anticipating seeing her and any acting “chops” she may have

¹⁰⁴ *Playland Review*, Rye, NY, July 31, 1940. Please refer to Figure 2 for a photo of the Herzog girls accompanying that article.

¹⁰⁵ *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, Sunday, March 12, 1944.

exhibited, only to see her wildly swinging on a trapeze in a LONG shot.¹⁰⁶ “That’s IT?” She just shrugged, and said, “What can I say?” She wasn’t even credited!

Another reviewer writes, in 1942, “The Herzogs, all feminine, do sensational stuff on the swinging bars and one planted in the audience – coming up as a – volunteer – does purposefully clumsy and funny antics before climaxing the act with a thrilling one-legged catch while swinging proscenium-high.”¹⁰⁷

They worked their way through Boston, Washington, Chicago, all over the United States. I have newspaper reviews without names of papers or dates; one such clipping is an article totally dedicated to my mother fronting the Herzog group with very little mention of the other Herzog girls; I am sure it wasn’t very conducive to amity among Peggy, Eva, Alice or Rhoda. It even includes a single studio photo of my mother, with none of the other Herzog girls. Another news clipping is a small article from a Newcastle paper titled “North Girls in Hollywood” described the fact that Norah and Peggy O’Hagan went to America two months before war and described their experiences in the United States.

Go West....and South....and North....East

Once the group got to the West Coast and Hollywood, however, a change in the nature of show business had taken place. Especially on the West Coast, the bombing of Pearl Harbor had transformed California into a wartime economy. People who were still unemployed from the days of the Great Depression flocked to Southern California looking for jobs in the booming aircraft plants and other industries.¹⁰⁸ The Florentine Gardens was an already established, albeit a slightly down at the heels nightclub in Hollywood, California, that was patronized by movie stars and war workers alike.¹⁰⁹ The manager, Nils T. Granlund, signed the Herzogs for a short term stay in 1943. He signed them again for a longer booking lasting a little over a year in 1944. The trend was moving towards comedy acts and nightclub work with showgirls and singers. Since this was a

¹⁰⁶ Undated newspaper article in author’s possession, stating, “Herzogs signed to appear in Olsen and Johnson’s movie “Crazy House” set for 1943”. Unfortunately, my mother was the only member of the group to appear in the movie; the rest were edited out.

¹⁰⁷ *Washington Daily News*, Saturday, October 10, 1942.

¹⁰⁸ Larry J. Hoefling, *Nils Thor Granlund : Show Business Entrepreneur And America's First Radio Star* (North Carolina, United States: Macfarland, 2010), p 168.

¹⁰⁹ “Florentine Gardens, It is a big, flashy, Hollywood night club.” *Life Magazine*. January 31, 1944, 62-64.

long-term engagement, the element of surprise was eliminated from the act. Instead, my mother worked with the group and closed the act with her trademark one knee catch.

Pop had a relative (I only knew his first name – Hugo) who owned a twenty five acre ranch in San Diego and he and Mütchen often stayed with Hugo during this longer engagement. The Herzog girls rented a house in Hollywood and I believe that some of the Florentine showgirls stayed with them as well, so it was quite a little sorority.

After the Florentine engagement ended, the Herzog girls went to Mexico City for another long term engagement. Mexico would not allow Pop to come into the country during wartime, so my mother acted as the manager of the group, collecting monies and handling details. The advertisements for this engagement screamed “Sexy American Pin Up Girls” which was disconcerting and annoying. They weren’t even American! The emphasis was on “sex” as opposed to talent and ability.¹¹⁰ They never said which adjective was more annoying – the term “sexy” or being called “American” – when they were British. My mother, however, loved everything about Mexico City; the music, the culture, the vibrancy, the nightlife. As an added bonus, everyone became fluent in Spanish while staying there.

By late 1946, Eva was in a serious relationship, as was my aunt Peggy. Welda, Pop’s step-daughter, had married and moved to the Midwest, and opened a restaurant in Edwardsville, Illinois. In the spring of 1946, as their engagement in Mexico City was finished, Norah, Alice, and Rhoda re-entered the United States at the border crossing in Laredo, Texas.¹¹¹ My aunt Peggy stayed in Mexico City with friends.

My mother and my aunt were able to bring my grandfather over from England in 1947 and he was able to spend some time at Hugo’s ranch in San Diego. Since Pop hadn’t yet lined up another engagement, they decided to join Pop and Mütchen to go visit Welda and her new husband in Illinois. The little caravan took off to Edwardsville, Illinois. It was at Welda’s restaurant in Edwardsville that my mother met my father, John Toomey.

¹¹⁰ Undated newspaper advertisement in author’s possession.

¹¹¹ Border Crossings From Mexico to U.S, 1895-1964, 1947, for Norah Ellen Victoria O’Hagan, Ancestry.com.

All Good Things Must End

Everyone, it seemed, met and married someone in 1946 or 1947. The Herzogs broke apart as a group. My grandfather remained in this country and came back to New York City in 1948 with my mother, my father, my aunt, and my uncle. He saw and held his two granddaughters (my cousin Rita, and I) when we were little babies but he died when my cousin and I were almost a year old, in 1949. Life had come full circle for him.

By twos and threes, the individual Herzog girls tried to keep remnants of the act going but by 1953, no one was performing vaudeville – at least stage acts of this type – anymore. Singers and singing groups were the craze. Pop and Mütchen started a small business in Danvers, Massachusetts and Eva, Alice, and Rhoda settled near them. Welda's marriage failed and she, too, came back East to be near her parents. My aunt Peggy and her husband, my wonderful Hungarian uncle, Louis Kalocsay, and my beloved cousin, Rita, lived close by, in New York City. The Herzog "family" reassembled on the East coast, augmented now by my uncle's show business troupe "families" in New York City. The New York City gathering was a warm group of family and show folks, especially at Christmastime.

My parents moved to Aurora, Illinois. Over the years, my mother said that she would have been far happier in the Southwest, and that she had often asked my father to move to Santa Fe, New Mexico, when they first married. She felt stultified by the flat Midwest with its prim, judgmental values and always felt more compatible with the more stimulating qualities of the arroyos and canyons of New Mexico or the beaches and groves of California. I would much have preferred those environments as well. I was very artistic, very tuned-in to such surroundings, and in addition, I, too, shared my mother's affinity for horsemanship.

Why we never settled out West is something of a mystery to me, except that my father felt that he wanted to return to where he had grown up, although he had been far from home for many years...something about returning to his roots lured him back. I found out after he died that he had been adopted, which made it even more of a mystery as to why he felt so rooted to Illinois and why he felt such an urgency to come back to people who really didn't share an emotional bond with him...or really care that much for him. It was a mistake to return to Illinois and his resulting unhappiness figured largely in

the resulting turmoil of their marriage. As of this writing, Pop and Mütchen are gone, as are Welda and all but one of the Herzog girls. The only surviving member of the Herzog girls is my aunt Peggy, who moved back to England in 1994 and now lives in Gateshead, England, a close-in suburb of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, England. She lives in a residential care facility and is 95 years old.

Conclusion

It is a fact that coal mining unions in Britain remained ineffective and powerless long after the strike of 1926. Such unions in Britain never recovered any significant power until after World War II. My mother's life, had she stayed in Newcastle, certainly would have been depressing, drab, and relentlessly filled with endless days of drudgery and hard work, primarily because of the economic limitations imposed on her, given her gender and her social class. Her health would have been severely compromised, if she survived at all. My grandfather's selfless decision to let her leave home with complete strangers to embark on an adventure most people could only dream about opened up vistas beyond their wildest imaginations. He was reasonably certain that a life of adequate food, clothing, mental and physical stimulation and challenge; a life of security and well-being, would be hers if he let her go with John Lester. He also knew that her exposure to travel and new experiences would be an education beyond that that could be offered in the standard schooling she would get in Newcastle, England.

He knew that she had talent and courage, and she would try her utmost to be the best at any task she was given. He understood that once she got proper nutrition, exercise, and was relieved of worry and stress, her health would improve and she would improve mentally and physically. He realized that the increasing popularity of circuses would offer her a life of exciting opportunities unfettered by the restrictions imposed by her birth, her economic deprivation, and her social status. What he could not foresee when he let her leave in 1926 was how far she would progress in her life story beyond John Lester's Midget Circus and the impact that his decision would have on her life, and on other lives far in the future.

How could he foresee that his oldest daughter would progress far beyond John Lester's Midget Circus and perform to acclaim in most major cities in Europe, in the

United States, and in Mexico City? Or that she would learn to speak two foreign languages fluently and one or two others passing well? He knew that Norah was compassionate, but he would have been gratified beyond measure to learn the level of empathy and maturity she developed for those less fortunate in life, for those whose life trajectory offered them little in the way of hope and opportunity. He had no way of knowing that his youngest daughter, Peggy, would join Norah in show business, and that both of them would marry and settle down in America. It certainly must have surprised him to have two American granddaughters, and certainly, it would have been a surprise to find that he would, eventually, have over a dozen American great and great-great-grandchildren. All he could know was that his daughter deserved a better life than he could offer her in 1926 and that he would make any sacrifice to save her from a dismal existence and a life of hardship and drudgery.

My mother and her remarkable life and achievements illustrated a greater indictment, however. I never heard my mother make a mistake in grammar, spoken or written. She could read like a Philadelphia lawyer and did so, frequently. She was by nature impatient (at least, with me) but she taught me to read – well – by the time I was barely four years old. She never spoke with the thick “Geordie” accent so common to Newcastle, England, or “Tyneside”; hers was always an upper-class English accent. One could never guess her origins, other than she was from England.

From her travels she had acquired a sophisticated worldview that surpassed global leaders of the time, it seemed; a worldview that was at odds with her Edwardian origin. She had a great impatience with xenophobic views of nationalities and races, and an utter disdain for propaganda. She could see right through it. Having lived in Mexico and Germany as well as other European countries, she could quickly discern that all sides in a conflict fabricated details of an opponent’s “characteristics” to rally support or engender hatred. In spite of the fact that her brother was killed in conflict when his ship was torpedoed by a German submarine, she never hated the German people. She realized the hysteria that politicians whipped up in their frenzied efforts to gain support during wartime. She reserved a special loathing for Churchill.

She had an abiding scorn for the doctrine of “American exceptionalism” espoused so frequently in this country. Every time she encountered an advertisement or hyperbolic

statements flaunting the “world’s greatest” or “world famous” she would roll her eyes in exasperation. Her travels and experience gave her an ability to discern such shallowness and fallacies. She could be difficult, sometimes, because of these attitudes. She was difficult to impress; she had associated and worked with famous people and notables, on their way up and on their way down, so titles and awards never impressed her. What mattered to her was how you treated a person, not who you were or what title you were awarded. She shared that trait with my father. She always had empathy for the “down and out”; she had a great impatience and anger with anyone castigating “illegal immigrants” saying that she, too, “came to America illegally in 1929.” When she worked in restaurants and encountered Spanish-speaking coworkers she made it a point to speak Spanish to help them. Once she offered help, too late, to a desperate young woman coworker in order to help her avoid deportation. She was distraught when she failed.

She was an absolutely brilliant child and woman, a remarkable individual, and a living indictment of the British class system. She never got an education beyond the equivalent of our sixth grade and yet she accomplished so much and led such an exceptional life. What did that say about others of her class? What did that say about others whose lives and talents were wasted because of the lack of opportunity or prejudice accorded them solely because of their poverty and lack of social status? She was so lucky... what about others whose parents never had that opportunity for their children? Why did such a choice have to be made at all? The reality is that my grandfather had to make such a heartbreaking choice, and showed so much courage in doing so and my mother stepped up and redeemed her father’s choice beyond anyone’s wildest imagination. I was and am proud and honored to be Norah’s daughter and William’s granddaughter because of their commitment, their sacrifice, their abilities, their intelligence, and their courage to persevere and surmount unimaginable pain and hardship.

Figures



Figure 1. Californian Girls Band, John Lester ★ His Stars. Norah O'Hagan, upper third row, third from right. John Lester, older man, first row, third, between ponies. Sometime around 1933.



Figure 2. Herzog girls in Europe. From left to right: Norah, Peggy, Alice, Eva, Rhoda. Notice the handmade costumes, high heeled shoes. Circa 1939/1940. *Playland Review*, Rye, New York, July 31, 1940.



Figure 3. Herzog girls, Europe. Clockwise from top: Norah, Eva, Rhoda, Alice, Peggy, in the middle. Circa 1935.



Figure 4. Poster in Germany, Herzogs in Variety Show. Notice the emphasis on gymnastic ability and athleticism. 1938. Things were starting to become difficult in Germany. Pop Deters made the decision to come to America in 1939.



Figure 5. Pop with Rhoda, Alice, and my mother, Norah, on a lakeside beach somewhere traveling in Europe, mid 1930s. Notice, for once, no shoes!



Figure 6. Herzog girls traveling in Europe mid or late 1930s. Front to back, Eva, Peggy, Rhoda, Alice. My mother, Norah, took the picture. There was a great deal of friendship among everyone. It was one extended family with few disagreements or problems.



Figure 7. My mother, Norah, on the right, and my aunt Peggy (left) clowning around on the rooftop in New York City. Some shipmates of my Uncle Barney were visiting New York and they were all catching up. This was taken in 1941; Barney was killed in action after this photo was taken, in April, 1942.



Figure 8. My grandfather at Hugo's ranch in San Diego, California, in 1947. Hugo on the left, my grandfather on the right, adorable donkey in the middle is nameless. My granddad loved every minute of his stay there. Notice how small my grandfather was. Granddad was just 59 years old, but looks much older; a hard life working in the Durham coalfields aged him prematurely.

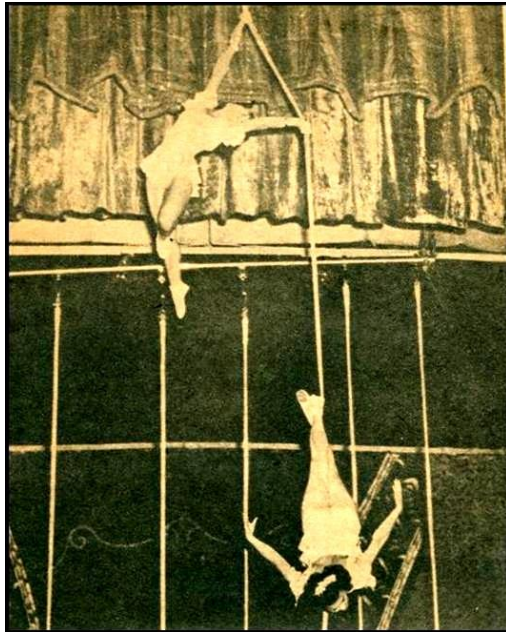


Figure 9. Two of the Herzog girls performing in Mexico City. I cannot tell which of the ladies are on the rope, other than neither is my mother. This was taken around 1945-1946.



Figure 10. Norah doing the one-knee catch as the finale at the Florentine Gardens in Hollywood, in 1943 or 1944. This photo is from a Life magazine article dated January 31, 1944.

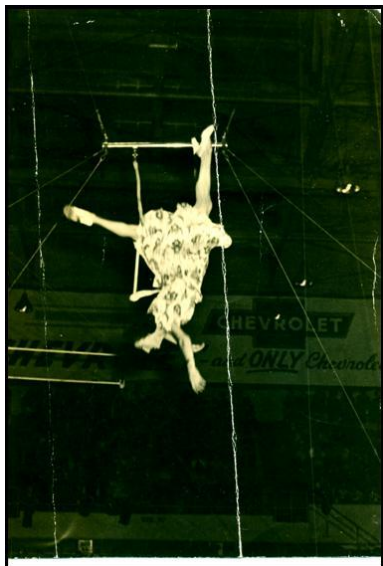


Figure 11. Norah, dressed as a member of the audience, in mid-air on the one knee catch. This was one of the last performances she ever did, circa 1952 or 1953.



Figure 12. Norah Toomey [O'Hagan/Herzog] after she left the Herzogs and after she married, when Norah, my aunt Peggy and Eva traveled independently from 1950-1953. Everyone disbanded soon after that.

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