

The Grateful Dead...Living

I should start by prefacing this article with a warning about the sentimental musings to follow and an apology for the (intended) puns along the way. That caveat now being given, I hope you will stay with me just the same as it is likely that what follows will strike a familiar chord.

Sometimes in genealogy research, the fragmented morsels of discovered names, dates, and places suddenly come together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Our eyes widen trying to take in the emerging picture, our breath catches, our mouths open involuntarily and our lips form the word “*oh*.” Sometimes that “*oh*” signifies the joy of finding one of our lost family members; other times it signals a sad realization about the life of an ancestor. Genealogy buffs know that all of it, positive or negative, happy or sad, triumphant or tragic, forms the unique fabric of life—whether we are talking about a life being lived today or one lived two centuries ago.

Among those present lives, the ones being lived right now, are lives barely begun and others many decades into their journeys. When I do genealogy talks or teach introductory genealogy classes, I always emphasize the necessity and urgency of talking with our oldest living family members and documenting their recollections and stories about the early years of their lives. Even if there is an old family rift or estrangement, an effort can still be made (tactfully) to seek out the elder members of our extended family who may no longer even recall the particulars of a dispute or injury that happened decades ago. Even if they still have hard feelings toward our grandmother or great-aunt, those feelings rarely extend to us and the interest we show in asking about the family usually wins the day . . . at least in my personal experience.

Being a genealogy and history addict myself, I began (decades ago) probing my mother’s and grandmothers’



Arlene



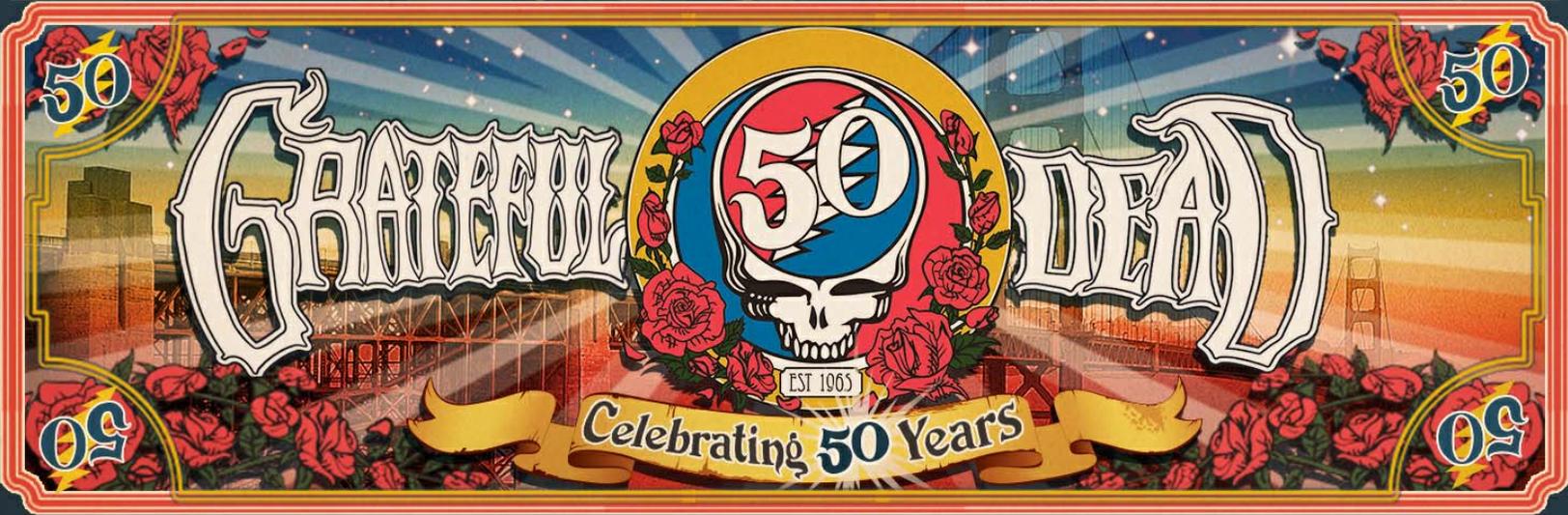
On one of our
“cemetery jaunts.”

recollections of their early lives, including asking them to recall and share family stories they heard from their elders. I should confess that I routinely ask the elderly I meet to tell me about their younger days as I never tire of their reminiscences. (I was once hospitalized in Ireland for a week in an orthopedic ward with several “senior” Irish ladies who, at my urging, delighted me with old stories of life in the rural, rugged west of Ireland.)

The wisdom of asking my mother (early and often) to talk about her youth and the rewards that came from that are especially vivid to me these days. My dear mother, now 85-years-old and a hospice patient, is in the waning days of her life journey. Besides generously sharing stories of her childhood and adolescence, my mother gamely accompanied me on my early genealogical outings, wandering around in cemeteries with me or keeping me company as I nearly went cross-eyed from examining roll after roll of microfilm.

My very first published article was about my mother’s recollections of growing up in Jersey City, a place she recalled fondly. She was a Depression-baby, born in late 1929, one of six children living very modestly and very happily with her parents and siblings, growing from childhood to adolescence during days of economic struggle brought about first by a financial collapse and then by World War II. Like others of her generation that I have met and interviewed, there was no hint of any feeling of being “deprived” by virtue of the circumstances of her childhood. Her stories centered on happy memories of the closeness of immediate and extended family and neighbors. That is not to say that there were not family struggles or losses. Instead, it underscores a way of living in which family and community (albeit a local neighborhood) were integral to daily life as a support system, a safety net, and an all-around balm providing comfort and relief in the face of struggles and challenges.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Grateful Dead rock group, whose anthem “Truckin” contains a line I have recently begun borrowing for use in my genealogy presentations and programs: *“Lately, it occurs to me, what long*



"Lately, it occurs to me, what long strange trip it's been."



Arlene

strange trip it's been." That phrase, not to mention the fact that it comes from the *Grateful Dead*, feels like it was made for those of us who have been traveling (dare I say "truckin") down the genealogical highway for years in search of our elusive dead, finding many a strange thing along the way.

We who take on the quest to find our ancestors and then resurrect them by retelling their stories bring context to the continuum of our family history. In doing so, we become both beneficiaries of our discoveries and benefactors to those with whom we share those unique life stories. We are, you see, the *Grateful Living*—grateful for the lives we have, lives that only exist because of those who preceded us on this earth. At the simplest, most basic level, it matters not if they were saints, sinners, or something in between or whether we admire them or find their behavior disappointing or just plain wrong. Without *them* . . . there would be no *us*.

Following is my first published article mentioned above that appeared in the *River View Observer* newspaper in October, 2011 and was later included in my book *Jersey! Then . . . Again*. I hope you enjoy "meeting" my mother Arlene.

My mother Arlene was a "Jersey Girl" decades before anyone thought of calling us Garden State girls by the moniker that now evokes images of big hair and dark suntans. Arlene wasn't that kind of "Jersey Girl." She was a Jersey City girl, born and raised. Born just weeks after the stock market crash of 1929, a child of the Depression and an adolescent of World War II, my mother remembers a very happy, if modest, childhood in

the city she loved, surrounded by caring family, friends and neighbors in the Greenville section. I enjoy hearing her talk about those “old days” and I am usually the one to prompt her to tell me those stories.

Arlene is a girl of 81 (well, almost 82). We were having lunch at her place recently and as she neatly constructed a petite sandwich for herself, I asked her to tell me what she did for fun when she was a teenager in the mid-to-late 1940s. She looked up and thought for a moment. “Well, we went to dances at the ‘Y’ and other places, went to the movies, and always stopped in to hang out at ‘our’ soda fountain.” She explained that there were soda fountains all over Jersey City and that young people had their favorites where they knew they would meet up with friends.

“Where did you go to the movies?” I asked, knowing that Jersey City has a rich history of early movie theaters. After reminding me that her memory isn’t as good as it once was, she told me about going to the Cameo on Ocean Avenue, near Cator Avenue. I don’t remember the Cameo, although we lived in Greenville until I was five years old. I do remember coming back to Jersey City to stay with my maternal grandparents during summer vacations and taking the bus to Journal Square with my grandmother to see a movie at the wonderful Stanley Theatre.

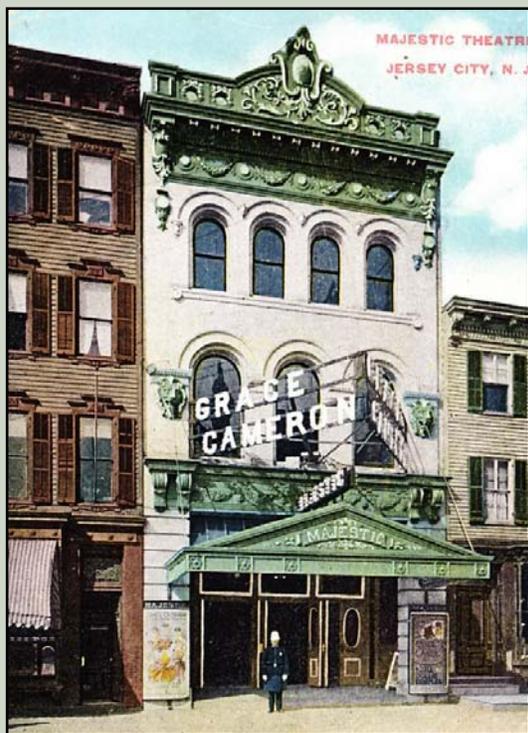
Curiosity piqued, I dug around a bit to find out more about those iconic houses of live shows and cinema that entertained people for many years before falling victim to perceived obsolescence by the 1960s and 70s. Most of the best remembered theatres, including the Stanley, Loew’s, State, Palace, Capitol, and Cameo, opened during the Roaring Twenties and began their runs showcasing live acts in the days of vaudeville and early movies. The largest and most lavish



The Bayonne Opera House



The Jersey City Academy of Music, 1911



Jersey City's Majestic Theatre

were architectural and interior design works of art, and no doubt prompted many wide eyes and dropping jaws among theatre-goers, even before the curtain came up.

Two decades before these grand movie houses opened their doors, however, there was already a lively theatre community in Jersey City, Bayonne, and Hoboken that included the Majestic Theatre, Bon Ton Theatre, and Academy of Music, all in Jersey City, the Gayety Theatre and Empire in Hoboken and the Bayonne Opera House. The Majestic, located at Grove and Montgomery Streets, opened in September 1907 to raves.

Months before that, the *Jersey Journal* reported "Curious Crowds at the Majestic Theatre" that gathered daily to watch the progress of construction at the new playhouse building that would seat over 2,000 people and include dressing rooms to accommodate 200. The "curious" included not only locals but "architects in charge of new playhouses in other cities." The *Journal* went on to describe construction specifics that would result in a brick and masonry building "far in excess of the requirements of new building laws." The *Journal* also covered opening night at the Majestic under the headline "A Brilliant Audience at the Majestic," reporting that "the consensus of opinion was that the latest addition to Jersey City's dramatic temples was a credit to all concerned."

A hundred years ago, locals could have gone to the Majestic to see Fiske O'Hara, "America's favorite Irish singing comedian," in the romantic comedy-drama *The Wearing of the Green*, to the Bon Ton for "Bohemian Burlesque" or to the Bayonne Opera House where "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*" was finishing its run. The Empire Theatre was offering vaudeville, "nifty girls," and "sensational acrobats."

Then, as now, a play, movie, or musical entertainment could (temporarily) transport its audience out of their own lives and away from daily cares and struggles through the talent and creativity of writers, musicians, and performers. Given the choice, I wonder if they would have traded their seats at the Majestic for the chance to watch *Dancing with the Stars* on an iPad.



*"Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains
as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge
hidden in every cell of our bodies."*

— Shirley Abbott

Maureen Wlodarczyk

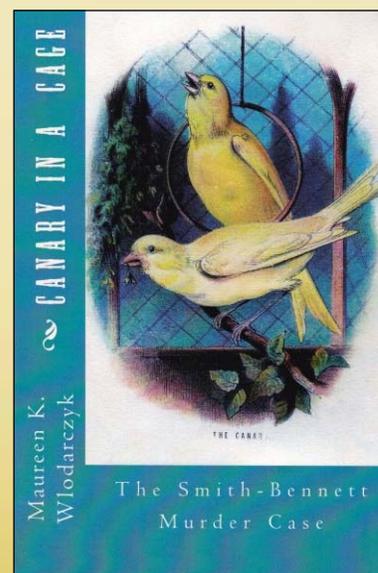
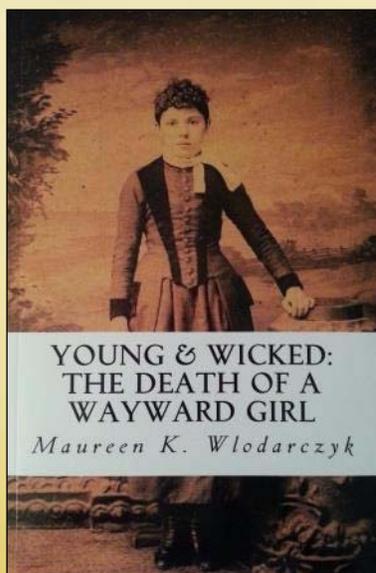
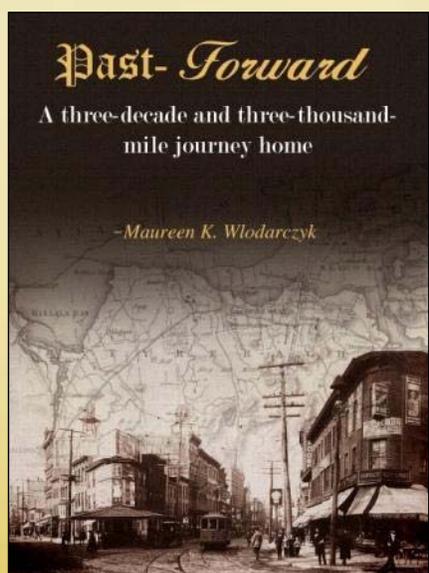
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