

Jean Lamorte's Story

Jean was born in Fresno, CA, while her parents were en route to Albuquerque, New Mexico. When Jean was 6 months old, her mother packed up everything and took her daughter to live with her grandfather. Jean and her grandfather would run away regularly to go flying in planes, but never actually got off the ground.

Jean's grandmother looked somewhat like Queen Victoria, but certainly did not behave the same way. Grandmother loved the movies and loved to shop. When she came to visit she would take Jean to a movie, out for refreshment, to another movie, perhaps to the library, and to another movie—all in the same day! When they went shopping together, Grandmother would always buy Jean "a few things." Jean said that her grandmother was great fun when she was having fun, but could be difficult as well.

Summers at Manhattan Beach, Oregon were very special to Jean. She and her mother would stay with her grandmother, aunts, uncles and cousins in one part of the house, while the other side was rented to holidayers. The "beach grandmother" was a completely different person from the "town grandmother." She taught Jean all about sea life, and one of the highlights of the summer was to watch the circus train go by, complete with caged animals.

When the Lindbergh baby disappeared, Jean's mother brought her to Victoria where they lived for the next 2 1/2 years. Young Jean was thrilled by the freedom she had to run and play without constant supervision and feelings of fear. Her tuition to St. Margaret's School for Girls was paid in advance, which proved to be a blessing during financially hard times. At first the school experience itself was difficult as she found the girls very cliquish and she felt rejected. Though in reflection, she said it was the best school she ever attended. For the relatively short time Jean and her mother were in Victoria, they lived in eight different places, because her mother kept "having words" with their various landlords.

In preparation for one such move Jean was told to don her best clothes and display her best manners for an interview with the prospective landlady. The door was opened by a gruff and imposing figure, much like her own mother, who deemed that the child would do, so Jean and her mother moved into the house of Emily Carr. Jean and Woo, Miss Carr's monkey, never did get along, but smelly, toothless Billy, one of her three dogs, adored Jean and they became fast friends. For the longest time Jean was uncomfortable around, if not afraid of, the eccentric Miss Carr.

Jean's birthday is December 25. Her mother had taken work as a governess, so was not at home to celebrate either Christmas or Jean's ninth birthday. Jean had made her own breakfast, done her chores, and was reading quietly when suddenly Miss Carr tore open the curtain that separated their spaces. She proceeded to give Jean an art lesson, displaying infinite patience for her lack of talent, and from that moment on, Jean was no longer afraid of the artist.

Then hit the depression. The money from home was less, but when a generous cheque arrived, Jean's mother took her to tea and had her fortune read. A big white door with black rivets and a man with an affliction were to play significant roles in her future. From tea, they went to buy blouses for her school uniform. When Jean emerged from the change-room, her mother was talking to a man who invited Jean to his camp for girls. The gentleman was Mr. Newton of Craigflower Manor. When Jean arrived at the manor house the door was white, studded with rivets. When Mr. Newton descended the stairs he had a limp and a twitch.

The girls attended the camp at Craigflower on weekends and during the summer holidays. Everything was provided for these girls from respectable, but poor families: fruit, candy, water sports, archery, riding, but under no circumstances were the girls allowed to talk to any boys!! These girls were not angels, getting up to their share of mischief and creating their own fun, sometimes with disastrous results. Sliding downhill on the log-roller nearly cost Jean her leg. It rolled right over her leg, crushing all the veins, so there was the fear of amputation due to lack of circulation. Fortunately, it was not necessary. This is just one example of the high-spirited antics that have peppered Jean's life.

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When Jean's mother recovered from a winter illness, she took her daughter back to her grandmother's in Rose City Park, Portland. No one was home when they arrived, and they were so poor that they picked and sold daffodils from the garden in order to buy food. They then moved south to California to live with Grandfather. By the time she graduated from high school, Jean had moved 56 times.

Her graduation was shortly after Pearl Harbor Day. All citizens were required to give two weeks service on agricultural land to "save the crops of California". Jean wanted to do it and get it over with, but discovered she loved working the land. Her two weeks extended to 3 1/2 months, until her mother commanded her to return home to San Francisco.

Jean worked for Shell Oil, all the while waiting until she was old enough to take the Navy Exam. At 20 she did, and once accepted, was terrified of telling her mother what she had done. To Jean's surprise, her mother was completely supportive of her move since she herself had been in the Navy in WW1.

While in the Navy, Jean says she had "the most exciting adventures of my life". She may have played Betty Hutton's feet in the movie, "Here Come the Waves", as her platoon had parts, and they sang a song that was heard on the track, but the singers were not shown.

Jean became a Link Training Instructor. With help from friends, she overcame her extreme claustrophobia to sit in the cockpit of the plane; Jean flew the planes, but never performed a take-off or landing. After marrying one of her fighter pilot students she had two children, and attended university paid for by the Navy. Jean characterizes herself as always ready for all the opportunities that came along.

Jean has been a volunteer since her college days. She had two honouraries – Sociology and Psychology. She has been president of a homeowners association, involved in the school PTA, president of the Parents' Council, and taught a seventy year-old woman to read while she was volunteering with Project Literacy.

In 1988, Jean retired from twenty-six years of teaching. She taught Special Education (learning disabled, saying she herself was an L.D. student) and Learning Assistance. The age group she liked best was sixth graders. Jean volunteered her time to write plays for her Drama Club and spent ten years sponsoring an after school programme for gifted students: **Guiding Our Able Learners**.

In retirement, Jean began to make regular visits to Victoria, stay as long as six months at a time. She says, "It is one place I've come back to and felt comfortable." So much so, that after her 1996-97 visit, Jean decided she did not want to return to California. Her son sponsored her immigration. As a self-avowed packrat, Jean was able to trace all her places of residence since she was eighteen, which hastened her entry into Canada. Jean joined activities at the Monterey Centre including Scrivener's, a writing group. She saw a notice there asking for volunteers for Oak Bay Volunteer Services and has been with us ever since.

Jean's other interests include meteorology, music and dance, and writing. She has just acquired a musical keyboard, and has three novels in progress. I asked her about her collection of owls, and Jean modestly said it started when she received the Orange County Owl Award for excellence in teaching. Her daughter raised an owl from an egg. Hooty eventually went to live in Irvine Park in California.

Nancy, Jean's artist daughter, is coming from California for a visit later in May. Jean's son lives in Oak Bay. He has a risk management consulting business. She has a grandson and two great grandchildren living in California and two granddaughters here in Victoria.

Macular degeneration may have put restrictions on Jean's volunteer office work at Oak Bay Volunteer Services, but she is still very involved making several good day phone calls every morning. Restricted vision may have put limits on other things she is able to do, but it has not affected her zest for life, her sense of humour, her thirst for knowledge, her ability to tell a story, but most especially not the mischievous twinkle in her eye!

By Bronwyn Taylor