

Peggy Blackford: Looking Back on 80 Years

<http://www.peggy.blackford.info/>

As I celebrate reaching eighty years, I find myself reflecting on the many blessings and cherished moments life has brought me.

Early Childhood Memories:

On July 12, 1943, I was born in Gary Indiana; the third (and last) child of Margit Vanja (Bengtsson) and George Weldon Steele. My aunt Hedvig was a nurse in the Gary hospital and I think that is why they chose to delivery me there.

Some of my earliest childhood memories take me back to the time when we lived in an apartment building on 79th Street in Chicago. Christmas was always a special occasion with a big family gathering, featuring delicious Swedish food and a beautifully decorated tree adorned with real candles. The house may have been small, but it was filled with joy and music. Everyone in the Bengtsson family had some musical talent, and the piano was a cherished part of our home. I also remember my hardworking and tiny Grandma Agnes Bengtsson, who always made the house smell wonderful with her baking.

My first real memory was when I was about three and we had moved to Lutherville Maryland. Daddy (George Weldon) had moved us there for work. Once, uncle Henry was there helping Daddy make the living room bigger. Well, I was upstairs and remember uncle Henry holding me and was teasing about dropping me over the 2nd floor banister. I remember saying "Mommy won't let me go down this way."

After Lutherville, we moved to Mokena, where I remember my father carrying hot water up the steep stairs for our baths. Eventually, we settled into our house on 1st Street, a corner house where my Grandpa Carl Benson helped make several renovations. I admired his master carpentry skills, especially when he finished the fireplace, the wood floors, and the impressive pocket doors that slid into the walls. In that house, my mother sewed in the dining room, creating beautiful garments. While in Mokena Ginger held a family meeting and said we needed a television. These were a new thing and we got one! Mother fell in love with the Giants baseball team and would always watch them during the season.

Our breakfast area was off the dinning room and I can clearly remember the dishes on the wall and below them the bins that could be pulled open and were filled with flower and other cooking items. I also remember that in Mokena for \$0.05 we could watch a movie at the train house.

When my father's work took us to Atlanta, it was a significant change, but my father loved the South. We moved into a new house with a large yard, and my father spent countless hours working on the landscaping, growing flowers, and creating swings and walking areas on the hill. During my elementary school days, I walked to school with other kids in the neighborhood. While school itself didn't leave a strong impression,

my fondest memories were made with friends from church. My parents were actively involved in the church, and many of my closest friends were from there. I had a special bond with one friend who had Arabian horses and collie dogs, and I even managed to get a collie of my own, which became my best friend. I also had a pet rabbit that I wasn't able to care for properly, and unfortunately, it passed away.

In high school, starting in the 8th grade, I commuted to school on a regular bus rather than a school bus. It was during this time in Atlanta that I got braces to straighten my teeth and started wearing contact lenses.

Family: Parents and Siblings

My father, George Weldon, grew up on a farm, as his parents were farmers. Unfortunately, my grandfather passed away when my father was young, and my grandmother, Agnes, had to support her three children by feeding laborers who worked digging ditches. She lived in a camper with her kids during that time. I remember my father sharing a story about his mother's resilience. She saved money all year so that her children could have Christmas gifts. However, one year, their trailer caught fire, and they lost everything. Despite such challenges, my grandmother was a strong and determined woman.

When daddy (George Weldon) was twelve he went to work shoveling coal. It was a hard job for a young boy but there was a Swedish man what would help him make his quota. When he was eighteen, he lied about his age and got a job with Swift Co. and drove a truck. Over time, he climbed the ranks in the company and took on traveling jobs.

We always went to the farm in summer. Daddy loved the farm but mother preferred Gary Indiana where her brother's family lived.

Although my mother, Margit Vanja, was from Sweden, Swedish wasn't commonly spoken in our household. However, my grandmother Agnes mostly spoke Swedish. When we visited my grandparents, Agnes and Carl Bengtsson, they would often converse in Swedish and maintain Swedish traditions.

Since daddy traveled for work, mother (Margit Vanja) was busy taking care of the three girls (Carol, Ginger, and Peggy). Mother was a great cook and also a great person at the sewing machine (she made lots of clothes for the girls).

Music:

Music was an integral part of our family. All of us played the piano. My mother bought the piano during the Great Depression when people had to sell their possessions to make ends meet. We acquired it while living on 79th Street in Chicago, and it was brought into our house through the upstairs window. My mother had a remarkable talent for playing by ear, and she could play almost anything. My sisters Carol and Ginger were

especially skilled at playing the piano, while I also had some proficiency, particularly when I was younger.

During our time in Atlanta, all of us took music lessons from Mr. Hoffman and Mrs. Stein. My sister Carol had a truly remarkable voice. She even sang the Messiah during Christmas time in downtown Atlanta as part of a celebration.

Hobbies as a Child:

My favorite hobbies were dolls and my dog (a collie). I also liked playing outside games with neighbor kids.

How I met Earl, my Husband:

I first met Earl when we were walking towards the campus, and our mutual friend Chuck offered me a ride. I declined and chose to walk. Earl worked on campus, involved in making movies, and that's how we started watching movies together. Earl's dedication to his studies and his hard work in obtaining his degree impressed me.

We didn't have much money while in school so often our time together was simple. When we were in school we would go to the lake and water ski. There was a friend with a small boat he didn't use and let Earl and me borrow when we wanted. We would often use this boat for fun times together. Earl even once used a trash can lid to ski with!!

Once on a date we had a car problem driving back to campus. The drive back was in the country so we had to walk to a farmhouse to find a phone. We did find a house with a phone and were told we were lucky we didn't come the day prior as a crazed dog had killed a cow. This scared me and I made sure Earl didn't leave my side as we walked back to the car.

Sometimes we would go for pizza (and I liked the shrimp pizza). The place was a bar called the Rat Hole and we could also go for a beer. Often I would go to the movies while Earl worked at the theater as it was inexpensive yet nice. Mostly, though, we just spent time with friends.

Our time together during those school days was filled with joy and simplicity. Earl and I embarked on adventures, held hands through trials, and found happiness in the most humble of moments. From watching movies to gliding across the water, from savoring shrimp pizza to seeking refuge in the Rat Hole, every experience brought us closer. It laid the foundation for a love that would endure throughout the years.

Earl and I were married on November 3, 1962. I was 19 and Earl was 23. He was liked by my entire family, and my father, in particular, was overjoyed to have Earl in our lives. They had much in common, both being avid readers and learners with immense intellectual capacity. It brings me great joy to think back to the time when I first met Earl's parents, Neva and Harry Blackford, at the farm while we were in college.

A Young Mother:

On September 5, 1963, when I was just 20, Curt was born in Fairfield, Ill. Grandma Neva Blackford had me walking around the hospital to help induce labor. Bret was born 10 months and 11 days later on July 16, 1964, in Bellville, Ill.

While waiting for Curt to be born Earl and I lived in Fairfield on the farm. Earl worked on the farm and at a local company. Not much free time for him. After Curt was born we moved back to SIU-E and lived in a small apartment in a complex where everyone was married. We had an old car that we needed to drive Curt around at night until he fell asleep.

When I was pregnant with Bret we moved to Bellville, IL. We lived there for almost two years. We later moved to 820 Bobbins Lane in Florissant, MO. Moving to St. Louis was perfect as we met many new friends. Bonnie and Dale Beard moved in almost as we did and Bonnie became my best friend foever!

Kim was born July 9, 1967 and Sheri (Booi) was born March 1, 1971.

My Proudest Achievement:

It may sound like a bad answer but my best achievement in life is the four kids.

Father's Early Death (George Steele died February 24, 1965, at the age of 57):

The day my father passed away at the age of 57 is etched in my memory forever. My eldest child, Curt, was just a newborn at the time. Thankfully, my father had the opportunity to see Curt a few times before his passing.

Daddy was sick for a while. The first real heart attack was in Atlanta. Doctors at first thought it was a nervous breakdown, but a young Dr at hospital correctly diagnosed the heart issue. This Dr gave him 12 more years of life.

On a wintry day, Daddy was returning from the train station in Western Springs with snow blanketing the ground. He had just obtained his new heart medication, the packaging still sealed, when he began feeling unwell. Struggling to retrieve his nitroglycerin, he walked slowly down the street. Observing his difficulty, a kind woman offered him a ride and inquired about his destination. Daddy replied, "I just want to go home." She invited him into the car, but as he circled around to enter from the passenger side, he collapsed in the snow.

The hospital called my mother and explained her husband's condition and to get to the hospital immediately. A friend of mother's, Mrs. Surls, went with her. Daddy had passed by the time they got there (he died while in the snow). Mrs. Surls had recently lost her husband and she said, "Margaret, you must take off that sad face because we're going to the bank. You need to take everything out of there before they find out about your husband's death." Mother did this and it helped her greatly.

Countries Visited:

1. Australia, 2. Bermuda, 3. China, 4. England, 5. France, 6. Germany, 7. Greece, 8. Hong-Kong, 9. Iceland, 10. Italy, 11. London, 12. Mexico, 13. Norway, 14. Puerto Rico, 15. Roatan, 16. Russia, 17. Spain, 18. Sweden, 19. Turkey

How has the world changed during your lifetime?

People are more aware of problems in the world. People are more aware that everyone needs to be respected no matter what their race. College has become a way to realize there was and is a future that helps advancement for our world. (Some advancements may not be perfect). Transportation is a big change. Products that are now available to everyone wherever you live and whatever the season.

So many things that children and young people don't realize they are gifted to have. Gizmos like Dick Tracy had were just an imagination but are now real. So many ways the world has changed.

What advice or life lessons would you like to pass on to future generations? What do you consider to be the most important values in life?

Most important values in life are family. Love them no matter what. Ask for their forgiveness for making mistakes you didn't realize at the time. Teach them, if you can, to help people and love others. Never forget that all people have needs and desires. It is hard for me to express my feelings, but God knows.

---- Peggy (2023 v1.04)

More photos and information on my mother, Margit Vanja (Bengtsson) Steele is here ... <https://margit.bengtsson.xyz/index.php>

More photos and information on my Swedish grandparents Carl and Agnes Bengtsson is here ... <https://carl.bengtsson.xyz/index.php>

More photos and information on my husband Earl is here ... <https://www.earl.blackford.info/>