

Mae Abbott Piper
by Helen Olson
(with a lot of help from Helen Piper Vicary)

She was born Margaret Abbott. That much we know. Or, at least, we think we know. She was called Maggie.

Grandma Piper's early life remains to us as much of a mystery as she was able to keep it. That was her way of protecting us from a the disgrace in her family background—a disgrace not of her own making, but of her parents, one or both. Unfortunately for us, she was for the most part successful. The few stories we do know were told to her two young daughters, Helen and Isabel, at times when she was feeling blue or distressed. My mother, Isabel, told me once that she thinks most of the things Grandma told, she did when she thought the two little girls were too young to remember.

We know this. Grandma was born November 20, 1882, somewhere in Ontario, Canada. She lived her early life in Erin, Ontario with Anna Sellers Abbott, who was the only mother she knew but who was, in fact, probably not her birth mother, and her "grandmother", Anna Sellers' mother. Her "sister" Minnie, who was Anna's daughter but probably not George Abbott's, was five years older and had been "pastured out" to the family of Anna's bother, Will Sellers, who had a farm somewhere in Ontario.¹

Not surprisingly, Minnie married young, an older man with money named Will Lannin, and moved to Toronto. She chose not to have children. According to my mother, Isabel Piper Olson, Minnie considered herself a "modern woman." She and our grandmother were not particularly fond of one another.

When Grandma was eight, a strange man appeared late at night. Grandma's grandmother gasped and hustled Grandma off and hid her. Was it because he was a fugitive from the law and they were afraid Grandma would tell, or were they afraid he had come to take her away? We don't know. That was the second and last time Maggie Abbott was to see her father, George Abbott. When she awoke the next morning, he was gone.

An appropriate number of months later, Grandma's little sister, Nellie, was born. Many years later, our uncle, Arthur Piper, visited Erin to see if he could solve the puzzle. When he inquired of former neighbors about George Abbott, he was told in short order that they were unaware of George Abbott's visit, or even that a "Mister" Abbott existed. There does exist a picture that Anna Sellers told Aunt Helen was her wedding picture. If Erin didn't know about this occasion, life there must not have been very pleasant for Anna Sellers Abbott. My mother once said that Anna was very "anti-church" and that there was some story about cleaning chickens for the church and being criticized for not doing it properly. Mother's impression was that Anna felt "looked down on" by the good people of the church.

Grandma had no happy memories of her life with her mother and grandmother in Erin. Mostly she remembered how strict they were with her. She used to run away to visit her father's parents who lived at the back of Anna Abbott's lot. Those visits were happier, but she wasn't supposed to go there. George Abbott's parents were apparently from the wrong side of the

¹ We now believe that both Minnie and Margaret (Mae) were Anna Sellers and George Abbott's daughters. See the story "George Abbott."

tracks and looked down on. For all of that, Anna Abbott seems to have loved this child who probably came into the marriage with George Abbott and was reluctant to relinquish her.

When Grandma was nine, Grandmother Sellers died. Will Sellers, who by then had moved to Port Huron, Michigan, came for the funeral. By that time, the little family was living in Brampton, Ontario; Anna Abbott having come into a legacy with which she bought a little house.

Minnie had left Will Sellers' home and Will asked his sister to let him have Maggie. At first, Anna said "no", but Will prevailed, arguing that without their mother, Anna would have a hard time caring for both children. (I recall my mother mentioning that Grandma was "hard to handle", though I don't know if she heard this from someone or just surmised it.) Finally, the decision was left to little Maggie. She didn't understand that the move was to be permanent and thought that a visit to Michigan sounded exciting. She forgot her doll in the move. The various adults decided that she was too old for dolls and refused to have it sent. She was later to love every single doll that her two daughters or her seven granddaughters ever had.

The Sellers had only recently suffered the death of a daughter named Margaret whom they had also called Maggie. They didn't think they could call another child by the same name. They asked our Grandmother if she would choose a new name for herself. She chose Mae.

The other Sellers children were Jenny, Earl and William, who were older, and Archie, who was closest to Grandma in age and her dearest cousin. Most of the stories that Helen and Isabel recall about life with the Sellers are not happy ones. Our mother's impression was that life was happy until Mrs. William Sellers died, but then became pretty hard, with Grandma treated more like a servant than a member of the family. Jenny Sellers, especially, was targeted for being bossy. But when Grandma was very old, quite senile, and living with Aunt Helen, she called Helen "Jenny" by mistake. Aunt Helen said, "Oh, I don' want you to call me Jenny. Jenny wasn't nice to you." Grandma replied, "Oh no, Jenny was very good to me."

Without a mother in the family, however, things were certainly not simple or easy for this bright, strong-willed girl. It probably goes without saying, that there was no one to teach her about many of life's "facts." When her periods started, she had only a vague notion about what was going on, confided in no one, and washed her rags in the cows' tub.

William Sellers was the family scalawag—charming, full of himself, and definitely the black sheep in the family. He was living away by the time Grandma moved to Harbor Beach. The family "boarded" the school teacher, which gave them a certain status in the community. Will Sellers came home for one of his visits when Grandma was in her early teens. Life was always a bit chaotic when Will was around. One day Grandma forgot a book at school and went back to fetch it. When she walked into the schoolhouse, Will and the teacher were doing something unfamiliar on the desk. A few weeks later, the teacher became extremely ill and the doctor had to be summoned. William Sellers rather suddenly left town. Grandma did a little reckoning and confided her thoughts to her best friend, mostly because she was trying to figure things out. The best friend, whose father was the head of the school board, told her parents. Grandma was chastised for disgracing the family.

Our grandfather, Samuel Piper, first saw Mae Abbott when she came to their little school shortly after moving to Harbor Beach. He was three years older, but was instantly taken with her prettiness. He confided to his brother Will that someday he was going to marry this new little girl. To our knowledge, there was never another girlfriend in his life and she remained, in his eyes, a beautiful woman always.

Mae Abbott loved learning, especially literature--fiction and poetry. She finished the eighth grade in the Harbor Beach School and then, as was a practice in those days, stayed on and studied under the teacher for the teaching certification exam. This certification allowed someone to teach in a rural school and had to be renewed by exam each year. Grandma passed the exam the first year and taught in a local school. The next year, she was sick with the flu on exam day, so lost her chance for certification.

By that time, she was engaged to Samuel Piper and wore his hand-carved gold "friendship" band because she didn't like jewels. Sam had joined his brother John in Calumet, Michigan, where he got a job in the mines. Not having a teaching job, Mae accepted her sister Minnie's invitation to come to Toronto to look for work.

Mae answered an advertisement for a position as a maid to look after two parties. The job was with a single lady, who had both a dog and a gentleman friend who came regularly for dinner. Grandma always joked that she didn't know which the second party was. Her employer told her she had advertised that there were two people because she feared no one would want to work for an "old maid." Grandma liked her and the year in her employ was rather pleasant.

Only one dinner party story remains. The gentleman friend was coming to dinner. The lady told Mae that they would be having lobster, which would be delivered on ice shortly before it was to be cooked. She asked Mae if she knew how to cook it. Grandma didn't. "It's quite simple," said the lady. "Just put a large pot of water on the stove and when it comes to a hard boil, drop in the lobster. It will be ready when it turns bright red." Grandma nodded and got the water ready. The gentleman friend arrived. The lobster was delivered. Grandma brought it in. The lobster moved. Grandma shrieked. The gentleman friend came running, followed by the lady. "It's moving," Grandma screamed. "Of course," they said. Grandma refused to go near the lobster. The gentleman friend cooked it and was much amused. No one was angry. For her whole life Grandma refused to even think of eating lobster.

Sometime during that year in Toronto, Grandma's family, either Minnie or Anna Sellers, told her the thing we are never to know. She wrote to Sam and told him that because of the disgrace in her background, she was forced to break their engagement. He wrote back that he didn't intend to marry her family, he intended to marry her. On June 20, 1901, Mae Abbott got on the train in Toronto and traveled to Calumet, Michigan. She had not seen Sam in a year. She got off the train and married Sam Piper that afternoon. Her wedding outfit was an incredibly tiny gray wool traveling suit. Their marriage license lists Samuel's parents as William Piper, father, and Isabel MacKensie Piper, mother. Mae Abbott's parents are listed as George Abbott, father, and mother, "unknown."

Determined that her children and grandchildren would not have to suffer under her family disgrace, Mae asked Sam to vow that he would never divulge the secret. He was an honest and honorable man, so because he had promised Mae, he told no one.