

**George Abbott**  
**Discovering Grandma Mae Abbott Piper's Secret**

In 1900, our Grandmother, Mae Abbott, having missed the opportunity to take the yearly teachers' exam and therefore could not renew her teaching job, moved to Toronto, where her sister Minnie lived, and took a job as a lady's maid. While she was there, Minnie told her the family secret, which led Grandma to write to her betrothed, Sam Piper, to break off their engagement, feeling that she couldn't bring her family's disgrace on him and his family. He wrote back that he was marrying *her* and not her family. At that, she made arrangements to travel by train to Calumet, Michigan where Sam worked as a mine foreman in the copper mines. She married him the day she arrived, June 12, 1901, still in her traveling suit.

Not wanting to pass this "disgrace" on to her children, she swore Sam to secrecy, and he, being a man of his word, kept that promise. This has led Mae's descendants over the years to attempt to unravel the mystery. As my mother, Isabel Piper, used to say, "we want to know which branch of the family tree to hang him (George Abbott) on. We all assumed that George Abbott was on the lam for some reason, probably a fugitive from the law. There is also the puzzling issue with Mae and Sam's marriage license on which George Abbott is listed as Mae's father, but her mother is listed as "unknown." This led to fantasies about a mysterious mother, possibly with Native American or African-American heritage.

Thanks to some diligent research by John Piper, Mae's great grandson, we finally have some answers. DNA testing showed no evidence of Native American or African-American ancestry, so we're not as exotic as we had hoped.<sup>1</sup> What John did learn through his research of Canadian records was that George Abbott spent from around 1889 till his death in 1913 in an insane asylum. John suspects the reason may have been alcoholism, since people were committed for reasons that would not now lead to permanent institutionalizing.

John thinks that George Abbott was originally housed in Mimico Branch Asylum, later known as Mimico Insane Asylum, which opened in Etobicoke, Ontario on Lake Ontario in 1889. This would put him not far from Brampton, Ontario where Anna Sellers Abbott owned a small house.

In 1891, Brockville Insane Asylum in Brockville, Ontario opened with 73 inmates transferred from Mimico. Records indicate that George Abbott was an inmate at Brockville in 1901. He died on October 20, 1913 in The Hospital for the Insane (now Waypointe) in Penetanguishene, Ontario about 90 miles North of Toronto. According to the death record signed by the doctor, his length of stay was 8 years, 11 months and 13 days, indicating that he was there from about the time it opened in 1904. We presume that he is buried in the adjoining cemetery.

Records from Erin, Ontario, where the family originally lived, indicate that a baby boy, named William Abbott, was born on March 3, 1874 to Anna Sellers and George Abbott. Anna Sellers and George Abbott were married on March 23, 1874. Baby William died on April 2. Minnie was born April 26 1875; Margaret (Mae) on November 20, 1880; and Helen (Nellie) on December 3, 1888 in Erin, Ontario.

This all does line up with the other, somewhat scanty, information that we have. Grandma Piper told her young daughters Helen and Isabel that the only time she saw her father was one night

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<sup>1</sup> John did learn that he has a very small amount of Swedish DNA. Further research shows a 15<sup>th</sup> century Piper ancestor with the last name, Istad. According to an article John found, the name is thought to be from 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century Ystad, Sweden on the Southern coast of Sweden, not a long boat trip to southern England.

when he arrived rather late. Her grandmother, who lived with them, whisked Grandma away. The mysterious man was gone by morning. Helen, who was called Nellie, was born nine months later in 1889. When the Grandmother died in 1890, Anna's brother, Will Sellers, convinced Anna to let him take Margaret (Mae) home to live with his family. It was there that her name was changed to Mae because the Will Sellers family had recently suffered the death of a daughter named Margaret. Grandma said she picked the name Mae herself. About that same time, Minnie, aged 16, went to Toronto to work as a domestic. The Canadian census is taken on years ending in "1." An April 8, 1891 census shows Anna Sellers Abbott living with just two-year-old Helen (Nellie) in Halton, Ontario which is near Erin and Brampton.

A September 28, 1898 marriage registry shows that Minnie Sellers, age 23, married William Lannin in Toronto, Ontario. She lists her parents as George (no surname) and Anna Sellers. I recall my mother Isabel saying that William Lannin was somewhat older than Minnie.

This still does not answer why Mae Abbott listed her mother as "unknown" on her marriage license. Perhaps that will be resolved if a birth record can be found. Or perhaps we'll always live with some mystery.<sup>2</sup>

Addendum: Cousin Meg Vicary March sent the note below. It agrees with what Aunt Helen told me, but the marriage dates of George Sellers and Anna Abbott would seem to indicate that all three girls belonged to both of them. It would be interesting to find their birth records.

According to my mother, Grandma Piper told her (when she was living with Mom at the end of her life), that Grandma Abbott was her Step-Mother. When her father George and Anna were married, Anna had a daughter Minnie and George had a daughter Margaret (Grandma), Then they had Nellie together. So ..... Aunt Nellie was Grandma's 1/2 Sister. That is why Grandma was "given away" or "sold" at the age of nine (poor little girl) when Grandma Abbott could not care for all three girls alone. It was then that Grandma's name was changed to Mae. The only two possessions that she was allowed to take with her was a black leaf candle holder (which is on my mantle) and a rag doll (I think).<sup>3</sup> Mom always thought that Grandma's natural mother was a "dance hall floosie" and they were never married. That was why (according to mom) that she listed her mother as "unknown" on the marriage certificate to Grandpa.

It looks like the best thing that happened to our poor Grandmother when she was young, was meeting Sam Piper. Aren't we all glad she did!!!!

That is the story as my Mom told it!!!

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<sup>2</sup> I have since learned from Nellie's daughter, Dora Rasmusson Gear, that the courthouse in Erin burned, so no birth records exist. Brother John Olson says he remembers that our parents, John and Isabel Olson, went to Erin in hopes of finding birth certificates and learned that the courthouse had burned.

<sup>3</sup> I remember my mother, Isabel Piper Olson, saying that Grandma forgot her doll and didn't realize that the move was permanent. It was decided that she was old enough that she didn't need the doll. Mother always thought that was the reason Grandma always loved dolls.