

AFTON'S CHILDREN'S MEMORIES

Afton Whitmer



ADELE WHITMER MORTENSEN

By the time my dad, Afton Verl Whitmer, came along in this big Whitmer family, and he grew up, got married and had kids of his own, Grandma and Grandpa were OLD ... that's how I remember them. Not spry anymore ... and here I am in 2007 writing this at 65 years of age and not feeling as spry as I once was! Too fat, arthritic joints and just wore out ... but I know I love my grandkids dearly and I know too, old or not, they love us. I don't remember Grandpa and Grandma living in Alpine at all...my first memories of Alpine are sort of mixed up with older cousins taking me through big barns and hay stacks looking for kittens and chicken eggs.

To me, going to Grandma's was going to Safford and her little house in 8th Avenue, near the bridge that goes over the Gila River.

We lived in Morenci and in those days you had to drive clear around by Duncan which was a 2+ hour long drive and most usually the kids were asleep. I would always know when we were almost there because of the ker-thump, ker-thump, ker-thump sound the tires made as we drove over the sectional concrete road east of town ... all of us kids would be wide awake to check out the big city of Safford.

Grandma's house was such a special place to go to and when Grandpa was still alive, he would sit out in the backyard with us kids, sitting in an old chair under a big shade tree. He would watch us play and tell us stories ... but mostly tease us by cracking our fingers

(Milking the Rats) or pointing to a spot on our chest and bring his hand up and thump our nose and say "Got your nose" with his thumb between two of his fingers. He was a big man with thinning grey hair, twinkling blue eyes covered with thick glasses. We sure did love him and it was a sad time when he died and was no longer there.

Their house was a small four room affair ... living room and dining room to the front and a bedroom and kitchen in the back with a tiny little bathroom connecting the two. There was a storage shed out back with space for a double bed. I remember sleeping there lots of times ... cold in the winter and stuffy in summers. I always thought it was strange because there was a single bed in the dining room and Grandpa was always taking his naps there. I remember sleeping there a few times too, as probably every other grandkid did at one time or another.

The bedroom was small and crowded with a high double bed pushed tight into one corner and barely enough room to get between that and the dresser ... but I loved going there to see all the things Aunt Ethel and Aunt Genevieve would bring to her ... nail polish especially, a long row of all colors on a narrow shelf up near the ceiling, powder and perfume, jewelry ... fun stuff all us girls liked!

Grandma always kept a glass candy dish on a chest of drawers in the dining room from which I remember sneaking candy. A lot of times she would have a pot of green beans and salt pork simmering on the stove and if you were hungry you got a small bowl of beans with

bread and butter to tide you over until everyone ate a meal. Daddy would always go get food at the store before we got there, something he knew Grandma liked, then Daddy and Mama would fix the meal.

Going to Safford and seeing Grandma and Grandpa was always great but there was a special thing we got to do we weren't able to do in Morenci. .. GO TO THE DAIRY QUEEN! It was close enough we could walk to, so if we had saved enough change or if Daddy was feeling a little bit generous, we could come up with the cost of an ice cream cone ... yummy!

There were always plants inside and a grassy, fun yard outside. I remember seeing aloe vera for the first time and she called it her mother hen and her chicks plant because of the way the plant grew and multiplied up from the roots continually.

She often had her sewing machine out working on some project ... usually a quilt top. I think she made a quilt for each of her grandkids and then some. She did a lot of quilts but as she got older, it was just the top. She crocheted lots of things.

I liked to hear her sing, and she did sing for us often, with a distinctive high sweet voice, yet a soft muted sound ... I would always know when it was her singing. She liked all (what we call) the old songs and Grandpa's favorite was "Carry me back to old Virginia."

The living room was quite small with a huge cooler blowing in with her rocking chair close in front of the cool air, and she would sit there and crochet, watch tv, visit, listen to her bird ... it was her spot and I don't remember seeing anyone else there.

I truly marvel at Aunt Mary's family and how they took such loving care of them both, and then Grandma after Grandpa was gone ... helping her, taking her to whatever, cleaning every Saturday ... and I know there was a myriad of things we will never know about... THANK YOU FOR ALL YOU DID! xoxoxoxo

One time as a teenager, I went to stay with Grandma because of a dance (I think it was a Gold and Green

Ball.) I wanted to go so Mom and Dad took me there to stay and my date, Larry Mortensen, came and picked me up. We had a fun time and all went well. Then another friend and his date wanted to come with Larry and me to say goodbye. We all walked up to the porch and even before I could open the door, Grandma was there and really sweet and nice but no one got in the house. She said, "All roads have a way to travel and yours points that way" to Larry. We still laugh when we think of it. She wasn't going to let any hanky-panky get started at her house! love you Grandma!!!

Grandpa and Grandma had such a large number of grandkids. I often wonder how they kept them all straight and remember their names. (Or if they really did or was it just that they love us all no matter which one it was anyway.) I know that I along with my brothers and sisters loved them and it was always a real treat for them to come visit or go on an outing with us.

One Easter our family, Aunt Mary's family, and Grandma, went on a picnic out on the old road to Clifton. It was great fun eating campfire dinner in a sandy wash, and all of us kid tplaying on a rocky hillside hiding eggs. Reunions on Mt. Graham and up in the White Mountains in Alpine, the church house in Central ... lots of fond memories of sharing family times ... as families grow and we get more involved with our own happenings, we see less and less of extended families. I truly do regret those lost associations.

The year Larry and I were living in Las Vegas, Grandma came to stay with Uncle Lawrence's family. We had Grandma over to our house for a visit. Eva and her daughter, Kim, were there with us. We all had a fun day.

I don't remember much about where they lived in Parker but we did go see them and I recall thinking, "Why would anyone want to live there ... It was so hot, dry and bare." The only green I can think of was some

old salt cedars, and I really think they were the ugliest trees growing on this early.

When Grandma was in the nursing home, Larry and I went to see her and we were warned that she might not know us but as we walked into her room, Larry said, "Hi Granny." She looked up and said, "Larry and Adele, I'm so glad you came." Larry always teased her by calling her Granny. There is a lot more I could share but this is just a bit to say how much I love and miss my Grandpa and Grandma .. Jennie.

Judy and Eva, daughters of Afton Whitmer, my mother's brother. Adele, Afton and Lenora's daughter

Alpine was a beautiful place. Big wagons with horses. Grandpa would drive them to Phoenix, load the wagons, and bring stuff back and peddle it. Grandpa and Grandma had a lot acreage and horses in Alpine. They walked everywhere in Alpine including the grocery store.

Our parents came every weekend they could to see Grandpa and Grandma after they moved to Safford. Grandpa would be in a chair. He gave us hot gum or candy, then Milked the Mouse on our fingers. Every time we came, Grandma wanted us to go in the back door because she didn't want us to have the hot candy and do the Milk the Mouse game. Grandma was always good to us. Whenever they came to dinner, Eva would sit by her side. She only ate biscuits.

After Von gave Grandpa and Grandma their nice television, Grandma always looked forward to wrestling matches. She would punch and swing with her arms like she was fighting and hitting them. Grandma always had a quilt on in the living room and we would play under the quilt. Eva: Mom said Grandma and I had personalities alike.

EVA'S MEMORY:

"When I wanted to spend the night with Grandma in Safford, I cleaned up her yard. It worked every time. Daddy wanted to spank me at times but Grandma hid me behind her so I could spend the night. Whenever someone told me I couldn't do something, I'd just stand by my daddy and he would take care of me."

Eva was the outgoing one, always wanted to be with the crowd. Judy, my sister, was the quiet one.

ADELE'S MEMORY:

"Afton and Lenora took Eva to stay with Grandma and when Eva went to help the little girls next door, Grandma brought her home and yelled at her about 'not to do that again' (whatever 'that' was.) Eva was crying and called her daddy to come get her."

We loved to see everyone at the reunions in Alpine. There were rodeos in Springerville. Grandpa liked the reunions so he could see everyone. He took the kids fishing on the Blue. We always liked that. Sometimes camped on the Blue for two weeks at a time, fishing, tents, sleeping bags. Whenever fishing, Daddy gave Eva all his fish to clean. Loved to go to Alpine in the summer where it was cool. Liked to see all the big trees. Wild flowers. Our dad went deer hunting every fall. He had deer horns on the wall. Afton went to all the square dance festivals. He was a caller.

When William was going to college in Safford, he would pick up Grandma and take her to church. The old ladies were always jealous of Grandma because she had such a good looking boy bring her to church. William Verl liked to hunt and fish. In the summer he would go to the cattle ranch up the trail between Clifton and Alpine. We would go there for spring and fall for the roundup for the big cattle and branding of the cows. William Verl liked to be outside always hanging out with his buddies. He went to church.

Mostly remember Uncle Rex and Aunt Claire at the PD store. It was a company store in Morenci. Rex worked the mine. So did Von and my dad. Their siblings would come visit them.

The Whitmers had a reputation for being onry. "You don't mess with the Whitmers." My daddy too. He just didn't put up with anything.

LARRY MORTENSEN, son-in-law:

I never met Grandpa but I have a few favorite memories of Grandma. When I first met her, Adele and I had been to a dance in Safford. We both lived in Morenci. Adele was spending the night with her. I took Adele to her home and she met us at the door. She pointed towards the road and said to me, "Every road has a way of travel and yours points that way. Don't come back." I did many times.

I called her Granny from the time I first met her. Every time she would tell me "I'm not your Granny. Don't call me that." The one time I called her Grandmother Whitmer she refused to answer me. She and I bickered a lot but I think she liked it as much as I did. Have to admire Grandma for protecting Adele's virtue!

When Adele and I lived in Las Vegas Grandma came to stay with Lawrence and Evelyn for a few days. She insisted on coming to see us. When I came home from work, she said, "What are you doing here? Evelyn take me home." I came back with "Hi Granny, what are you doing here?" She pouted but before she left she gave me a hug. One time we went to a dinner at Mary's. I remember Mary absolutely getting furious again because I was still calling her Granny. Every time Grandma would say she was no one's Granny, I'd just laugh. My best friend, George Given, said that his grandma was Granny to everyone and there was no problem.

The last time we saw her was at Uncle Rex and Aunt Claire's home. Adele and I lived in Anaheim. We were visiting Afton and Lenora and went up to see her. They told us we couldn't go see her because she wouldn't recognize us.

She didn't recognize anyone. We said we were going in her room anyway. When we walked in, she called out, "Larry and Adele." That was all she said while we were there that made any sense but it really meant a lot to us.

I kept trying to get Adele to elope. I wanted to get married but she told me, "No, I would never do that to my mom and dad. My sister was living with her and she had eloped." It really hurt her parents. To me, it wasn't a bad thing but when we learned how they tried to elope and ran out of gas, Adele said, "I guess I didn't know them as well as I thought."

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Grandma didn't know how to give compliments. She often started out with something rude when she wanted to tell you something. Sometimes people come off as rude in an effort to be honest, and it comes out as rude. Remember that they lived in a tough, mean time. Grandpa would go off with the cattle and leave her with all those kids to take care of. They lived in a time when only the strong survived.

Grandpa would play a game called Milking the Mouse where he would run his fingers down theirs like milking a cow and end by bending their fingers back. They would cry and no one knows why Grandpa liked to see them cry. Adele said that she didn't like to get close to Grandpa Whitmer. He scared her and he hurt her. There were other cousins that felt the same way and found that he also made them feel uncomfortable when he got close.

When we moved back to Safford, our daughter, Karen, was three years-old. Afton would want her to come to him and when she didn't want to, he would get upset and push her away. Karen stayed away from Afton for a long time because of how he made her feel. She came back when she got married and sadly commented, "I wish I could have been close to him like my brothers were."

Adele and I would go to their house and play cards two or three times a week. Her parents weren't home-bound but they didn't go out much. One night we were playing cards and Afton said to Adele, "Of all my kids, you were

the only one I didn't like, and now look how close we are." It's what is called a back-handed compliment. It seems he didn't know how to say he loved her outright.

When Afton was bed-ridden I decided something had to be done about their house. Their cinderblock home was as cold as it could be in the winter and hot as it could be in the summer. So I started working day and night on their house. I took their bedroom and bathroom and moved them out to insulate and drywall the walls. Put a ceiling in and insulated it. Every time I would go there he would ask me why I was messing things up, probably his way of trying to be funny. He never did thank me.

After Afton's heart attack, he was hospitalized at the hospital in Tuscon. Eva came to see him at the hospital after traveling from Stockton, California. She called me afterwards and told me that her dad had, "cussed me out of the hospital" after she made that long trip to see him. Eva had always been his little doll so she didn't understand

The last time I saw Von, he was here a week and I never saw him sober. He had a baby boy, H.B. in May 1985. Ethel came to see us when she was in town. Genevieve's only child, Billy Ray, was an alcoholic. Afton would often go to Silver City to see how his sisters were doing. The whole family was worried about them.

Ralph spent his winters in Alpine.

Wayne, Aunt Mary's adopted son, is troubled with the law for child porn.

Most of the boys drank and smoked while they were growing up and some of the boys have a beer now and again.

Three of the children were serious alcoholics: Genevieve, Ethel and Von. Ethel is the only one who gained sobriety. Once Bill Pringle left, Ethel was able to quit drinking. She became active in the church and was very happy.

Misty Gardner is Lenora's granddaughter. Shirley, Lenora's daughter, got pregnant by a man named Jim, at Ft. Smith,

Arkansas. She left him, came home and wanted to marry another man even though she was pregnant. When it was time for her to deliver the baby, she went to the hospital but when she came home there was no baby. Her mother-in-law came looking for the baby but Shirley said the baby had died. The mother-in-law went to the hospital to see the baby and on the way found the baby wrapped in a blanket on the side of the road. She brought Shirley's baby home, named her Misty and raised her. However, Misty never knew of her real mother until her Shirley's mother-in-law died. Misty found leads to the Whitmer in her 'mother's' things. It took some searching to find her grandmother, Lenora, in the nursing home. Larry and Adele got the call from Misty. Finally, Misty was home.

William Verl was Afton and Lenora's son. He died when he was only forty-four years old after falling off his roof. He was funny as a teenager but didn't really fit in with the Boy Scouts. He had two or three close friends in high school that weren't LOS. William married in August 1961. He didn't have a job so he went to work for Jesse's dad. William and her father didn't get along so he joined the Army. Jessie and William lived close to Larry and Adele in California but had less contact as time went by.

William was a fantastic artist. He made several bronze western art statues of horses and mountain men. A few sketches of his art are displayed in this book. They were in an art show, then they moved them to Safford. They stayed with Adele and me, during which time someone stole the statues. Afton and William bought property a quarter of a mile from each other. It didn't work out. Just before William died, he mellowed.

I became good friends with William. He was working in Morenci and one day three guys were riding with him in his truck, when he saw me and waved me over. We talked and when I was ready to leave, William said, "Okay, I'll see you tomorrow. I love you, buddy." The next day he was killed when he fell off his roof. When I told his son, Duane about our conversation, Duane couldn't believe it. That's how much William had changed. William and I had become pretty good friends.

