

CHAPTER ONE
FRED & BESSIE - THE FIRST GENERATION

LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES IN 1901

1. *The average life expectancy in the US was forty-seven.*
2. *Only 14 percent of the homes in the US had a bathtub.*
3. *Only 8 percent of the homes had a telephone. A three-minute call from Denver to New York City cost eleven dollars.*
4. *The average wage in the US was 22 cents an hour.*
5. *There were 8,000 cars in the US and 144 miles of paved roads.*
6. *The maximum speed limit in most cities was 10 mph.*
7. *The tallest structure in the world was the Eiffel Tower.*
8. *More than 95 percent of all births in the US took place at home.*
9. *Ninety percent of all US physicians had no college education.*
10. *Most women only washed their hair once a month and used Borax or egg yolks for shampoo.*
11. *Canada passed a law prohibiting poor people from entering the country for any reason.*
12. *The leading causes of death in the US were: a) Pneumonia and influenza, b) Tuberculosis, and c)Diarrhea.*
13. *The American flag had 45 stars.*
14. *The population of Las Vegas, Nevada was 30.*
15. *Crossword puzzles, canned beer, and iced tea hadn't been invented.*
16. *One in ten US adults couldn't read or write. Only 6 percent of all Americans had graduated from high school.*
17. *Marijuana, heroin, and morphine were all available over the counter at corner drugstores. According to one pharmacist, "Heroin clears the complexion, gives buoyancy to the mind, regulates the stomach and the bowels, and is, in fact, a perfect guardian of health."*

Frederick Charles Ameigh, a farmer all of his working life, was born in 1877 in Jackson Summit, PA. He died of prostate cancer on July 15, 1955 in Troy, PA.



My mother describes Grandpa as a man with wanderlust in his heart. He always wanted to be moving on, and if Grandma had not inherited a small farm in Wellsburg, NY, they would probably have wandered for the rest of his life.

The marriage to Bessie Willcox wasn't the easiest, though in those days, and for people of such fervent religious Baptist convictions, divorce wasn't an option. They just weren't well suited to each other.

Bessie was extremely intelligent, practical, down-to-earth, and led by her convictions. Fred, who lived in constant pain from a serious back injury sustained when he was about 20, was more of a dreamer. Considering how his Ameigh ancestors moved around so much, genetics may have had something to do with his constant desire to be moving on, but the restrictions on his movements may have been a more influential factor in this regard. It may also have had something to do with some of his farming methods.

My Uncle, Charles (Charlie) Pierce (Aunt Louise's husband), laughed when he remembered the Ameighs who farmed the property next door to the Pierce family's farm. He said that the Ameighs spent so much time planning the

most efficient method for running their farm that all the neighbors had their planting done before the Ameighs had even begun. Dad admitted it, saying that the boys found great joy in deciding the best way to do anything; but, the reasoning went, the payoff came the following year when the Ameighs had finished first with the least amount of effort. In fact, by the time the next planting season rolled around, they had discovered that with just a little more time spent in planning, they could reduce the effort even more, so of course, they were still in planning while their neighbors were out in their fields. For them, the planning was a game, a way to make light of very hard work. It added an interesting dimension to the hard labor spent at the most dull and routine tasks.

The family always ended up moving before they found the absolute "most" efficient way of farming that particular piece of land, which meant that they had to begin the planning process all over for the new farm. This was fine with them though. The move simply offered them a new puzzle to solve and new challenges to consider.

An event my grandfather always treasured happened the year he hurt his back. It was time for spring plowing and there was no one to do it. It looked as though the family was going to lose the farm because there was no one to work it to produce an income.

As often happened in the day when neighbor-helping-neighbor was not unusual, the word spread, and every farmer from miles around pitched in to do the family's spring planting.

This gift of the spring plowing and planting was no small favor. For a tenant farmer, such injuries as he sustained are matters of life and death for a whole family. When you can't get the fields plowed and planted, there is no harvest to pay for the next year's lease. If you lose your lease, you lose it in the autumn, and your family is homeless and

without food over the long, cold, northern winter. "It's a cruel system!" my father used to complain.

Leaving their own farms untended, his neighbors showed up to do HIS spring plowing! That was a real threat to their own farms! If you missed the good days, and the rain came, you missed out on the whole spring planting season. There was no room for a single lost growing season. If the weather had interfered, every one of those farmers' families would have been in dire straights, but they came, because that's how people treated one another back then.

Grandpa always treasured that gift. As a matter of fact, a photographer took a picture of the neighbors as they joined together to do his plowing, giving the picture to him as a gift to remind him to take time to heal and not worry about his crops. Grandpa cherished the picture. He would never forget those families who risked their own security so that his fields would produce and his family would be taken care of during his recovery.



Neighboring farmers plowing Grandpa Ameigh's fields

My mother also tells me that Grandpa had peculiar habits - like in church. Yes, they attended the conservative

Baptist church regularly, but Grandpa would never sit with his family. No one ever knew why - he just didn't.

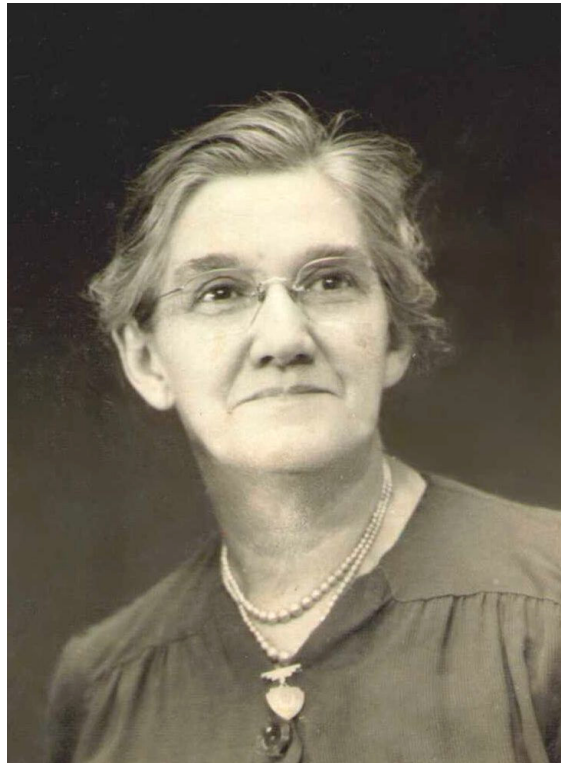
I have very clear memories of Grandpa – memories from before he was taken ill. We used to visit Grandma and Grandpa every other Sunday. It was a tradition when we had a car.

I remember that when I walked through the door, Grandpa's eyes would sparkle as he opened his arms for me to climb into his lap. Mom and Dad always told me to be careful because of his pain, but I didn't know why I should. He never looked like he was in pain to me. I sat in his lap for as long as my three-year-old patience would allow. I always felt a special connection to Grandpa and believe that his spirit came to me to say goodbye when he died.

Grandpa is buried next to Grandma (Bessie Willcox) in the Gillett, PA cemetery.

Bessie Willcox was born on April 22, 1880 in Gillett. She died September 6, 1975 in Elmira, NY.

Grandma was very proud of the fact that she had been a member of the W.C.T.U. (Women's Christian Temperance Union) since infancy. She became a member at a time when children could be inducted into the organization at birth.



My mother always spoke of Grandma's keen intellect. That is certainly a trait that passed through her to my father and his children.

Grandma's first job was that of a teacher. She taught in one of the many one-room schoolhouses that were common

in rural America at the turn of the twentieth century. She was to become a mother of nine children. My father was the youngest son and the third from the youngest child.

Grandma was part Native American Indian (Blackfoot). I remember her telling me one day that the magnificent leather doll I was playing with had been her grandmother's and then her mother's, and that it was a real, hand-made Indian doll - very special and very rare. The wonderful doll disappeared upon Grandma's death. How I would love to have a photograph of that marvelous doll that prompts so many fond memories.

Another thing I remember about Grandma was her hair. It was very long, and during my lifetime, gray. She said it had never been cut. She wore it in a braid that was knotted on the top of her head. Every night she would unbraid her hair, brush it for one hundred strokes, and then rebraid it before going to bed. In the morning, she would knot it back onto the top of her head and secure it with hairpins.

What I remember most about Grandma was her in the kitchen.

The kitchen was long, large, and yellow. There was a huge, cast iron, wood-burning cookstove on the southeast side of the kitchen. Across the room from the stove was a door that went outside, through a large woodshed.

The woodshed was meticulously organized - by wood type. No one mixed wood species in my grandma's woodshed!

Cooking with wood is an art that is lost on us today. Grandma knew her species by sight and she knew what wood to use to cook any particular food in any particular season. In other words, in summer, for breakfast, she used a quick burning, softwood that would cook the food and then die out quickly so as not to heat the whole house. In the winter, she patiently explained, she used a lot of hard woods that burned longer, more evenly, and cooler - allowing her to heat her kitchen, which was otherwise unheated. She

played that stove like my sister, Truuke, an accomplished organist, plays the pipe organ - adjusting the draft and the dampers on the stove while keeping an eye on the fire and the food, and, when baking her much prized bread and cookies, the temperature of the oven.

Ah, her cookies! What a treat they were. For years after her death, I tried to replicate her cookies. I never came close. When lamenting this fact to my mother, she told me that Grandma's cookies were so special because she never used butter or margarine when she cooked - ingredients typically used today. She used lard. Today, lard is considered such a health risk it is nearly impossible to find.

Grandma used to make her own butter. My mother still has a couple of her butter molds. She had little use for money until later, when it became an essential commodity. Before that, she went to market to "trade" her eggs and butter for needed commodities. Grandma and Grandpa always lived frugally. There was never anything left to spare.

Frederick Charles Ameigh and Bessie Willcox were married in Gillett, Pennsylvania on July 8, 1900. He was 23 and she was 20. They were married for 55 years when Grandpa died.

Carrying on the tradition of large Ameigh families, Fred and Bessie had nine children. They were:

- i. Marjorie E. (Marji) Ameigh
- ii. George Chester (Chet) Ameigh
- iii. Mahlon K. Ameigh
- iv. Anne Marie (Annie) Ameigh
- v. Howard Lavelle Ameigh
- vi. Freda May Ameigh
- vii. Robert W. (Bob) Ameigh
- viii. Doris Louise (Louise) Ameigh
- ix. Genevieve (Gene) Rose Ameigh

Here are some old postcards showing what Gillett looked like at the turn of the 20th century. Except that the road is now paved and has more trees, it does not look very different today. The white building on the left side of the road behind the tree is the Gillett Baptist Church where my daughter, Tracy Lynn Gustin, my father, Robert Ameigh, my grandparents, Fred and Bessie Ameigh, and many other of my relatives are buried.

Not far behind the place where the photographer was standing to take this picture is a road that goes to the East, crossing a creek before heading up and over the railroad tracks and then going farther up and then over a mountain. My father was born in the house that bordered the east side of the creek. During my lifetime, my grandparents lived in the house that bordered the west side of the creek. When I was young and spending the night, I would revel in the sound of the whistle from the old steam train. It's a sound that modern trains don't even try to reproduce. (What a loss!)



The building on the left in the next post card was the store where Grandma went to “trade”. Until a major fire in the first half of the century, this was the Gillett W.C.T.U. I believe this post card is a photograph of the W.C.T.U. hall.

Almost across from that building is a road heading West, the beginning of which is barely visible in the picture. If you follow that short road, past the "old" cemetery, you will come to a fork in the road. Each of the two roads head up steep hills that are sometimes called mountains. If you turn into an opening in the trees between the two roads, you will find yourself in a lovely wooded valley with a creek. My father remembered dawdling along that creek on his way home from school, and then getting whipped more than once for being home late for chores. Here also is where his own grandmother played, nearly dying once when she fell into the creek by the old mill which is no longer there. My parents bought that land and made it as beautiful as any park, giving another generation of Ameighs memories of the finest kind.



