

This lively memoir brims with exquisite detail as it traces the story of an only child growing up in the mid 20th Century. Her journey from birth to her wedding day will evoke long forgotten memories of your own.

A Bowl of Cherries

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A Bowl of Cherries

**Memoir of a child of the mid 20th
Century**

By Lois S. Patton

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Part One — November 1935 - August 1947

One — A Firm Foundation

“**N**ow what do we do with her?” My parents, Peter and Charlotte Stein, had just propped me in the corner of the davenport in the front room. The apartment was fashioned from the upstairs of my maternal grandmother’s two-story house on Chicago’s near-north side. I arrived nine months and nine days after they married on the twentieth of February 1935.

Old photos testify to the mohair-cushioned arm of the davenport, carefully protected by a doily, one of many hand-crocheted by my paternal grandmother. My parents’ comments at my homecoming were retold so often, they became part of the family lore. Not only was parenthood new to them, they were both only children and had no idea what to expect now that they had their own tiny baby daughter with lots of dark hair.

Born in Edgewater Hospital, I was delivered by Dr. John F. Davis, a family friend of my mother’s, who also happened to be the team physician for The Chicago Cubs. Fortunately my birth on November twenty-ninth didn’t conflict with the team’s schedule. That season the Cubs had a twenty-one game winning streak and won the National League pennant two months before my arrival.

Mother named me Lois, after a girlfriend who had moved to Philadelphia. That’s all I ever learned about my namesake. In those days of no air travel, no e-mail, and no money for auto trips or, heaven knows, for phone calls, long-distance friendships were fragile. Another reason for my name was that Mother wanted something that couldn’t be shortened to a nickname; she had hated being called Lottie as she grew up. Her plans for me went awry: Often I had my name shortened to “Lo”. High school friends couldn’t resist calling “Hi, Lo!” to me, thinking they were being so original. To ensure the simplicity of my name, my parents decided not to provide me with a middle name. As a result, until I was married, any official forms listed me as Lois (None) Stein. And often the parentheses were missing. I wished I had another name; Louise, maybe. A number of years ago I was amazed to learn a “Lois Club” exists with chapters all over the country. I never

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thought that having the same name was enough of a bond to consider joining the club. Not surprisingly, every member is "of a certain age," if not of a certain sex. Some unfortunate men were actually named Lois.

My Grandma Childs lost her husband a few months before my mother's birth. Charlie Childs died on the job, while working for the railroad. Already in her mid-thirties, Blanche Childs hadn't wanted any children and early on made that clear to my mother. Life's events had left Grandma embittered and difficult to get along with. Still, she honed her dressmaker's skills to support them both. My mother benefited with well-tailored clothes, and the family album confirms my grandmother's skill at fashioning a velvet coat, leggings, and matching hat for her three-year old granddaughter. They told me it was a deep shade of green; the photo, of course, is black and white. What I remember most about my grandma is the hot chocolate she made for me. No cocoa since has smelled the same or tasted as good. Apparently the affection she withheld from my mother was transferred to me in the form of pretty clothes and sweet beverages.

Grandma's house, one of a series of three row houses with common walls between, faced Wilton Avenue. The Cubs' baseball stadium was just a short block away. She had managed to hold on to the house through the depths of the depression with her earnings from her dressmaking and with my mother's wages from working at Goldblatt's department store in Chicago's Loop. At sixteen years old, the mature and lovely Charlotte passed herself off as an eighteen-year-old so she could earn additional income in the evenings, teaching ballroom dancing at the Aragon Ballroom, an elegant and popular venue of the day. It was there she met my father. Ballroom dancing remained a passion for both of them throughout their lives. Many times over the years, other dancers cleared the floor just to watch the elegant moves of Peter and Charlotte.

Money continued to be "tight" in the months leading up to my arrival. Mother remained working at Goldblatt's, first responsible for reconciling all the cash receipts turned in by the store clerks at day's end, and then as an undercover security guard. At five feet five inches, she was a slim twenty-year-old undaunted by shoplifters, whom she accosted when necessary. I remember her tale of bringing to the floor a large woman who hid the pilfered items inside her coat.

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After high school my father worked at a jewelry store and attended night school to become certified for the heating and cooling business. By the time twenty-five-year-old Peter stood before a Justice of the Peace with his twenty-year-old bride in Chicago's City Hall, he and two partners were running their own refrigeration repair business. They sold the company when the unions stepped in and disallowed management from doing the repair work. My father wanted to be hands-on, so he went to work for another refrigeration repair firm.

Like all parents, mine figured out "what to do with me," and adjusted to the less-than-desirable situation of living upstairs from a hostile mother and mother-in-law. We moved when I was three, so most memories are likely based on anecdotes heard over the years and the one remaining wedding photo of my Childs grandparents. From later visits to Grandma's house I do recall the sound of the elevated train that passed right behind the kitchen window. Mother had lived with it her entire life, but I imagine it took my dad some time to accept the roar of the "el" as it maintained its dependable schedule.

Charlotte gained the dad she never had and a mother who adored her when she married my father. Peter Sr. and Magdalena Stein welcomed their daughter-in-law with their ample arms wide open. There was never a doubt that she was the perfect wife for their only son in whom they had such pride.

My paternal grandparents immigrated from "the old country" around 1904 and met through mutual friends in Chicago, where they both settled two years later. They had departed from different villages in an area that was then Austria-Hungary, later Yugoslavia, and today, Serbia. The people who had located there were known as Donauschwaben, Germans from the Danube Valley who were given land to farm by the Habsburg monarchy of Austria to legitimize its sovereignty.

Like many people of their time, my grandparents were very frugal, saving every possible penny to buy "two-flats," then "four-flats," and more. They purchased the properties to have both a residence and apartments to rent. They labored to fix up each place to sell and used the gains to do the same with a larger property. My grandmother, who was barely five feet tall, did the washing, scrubbing, and painting. My grandfather, a hearty man with an ever-

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present mustache, was a carpenter by trade and did all the repairs and remodeling.

When their son Peter Jr. married early in 1935, Grandma and Grandpa Stein were struggling to “get ahead” once again. I couldn’t guess how often I heard those two little words as I was growing up. In 1929, when the banks failed and the Great Depression hit with a fury, they lost the property they had worked so hard to acquire. My grandfather went from property owner to a janitor for one of the large apartment houses just off Lake Shore Drive. Still, they found a way to present my parents with a wedding gift of twelve place-settings of Noritake dinnerware. My mother cherished this beautiful soft-white china with gold floral trim throughout her life. Grandma Stein also taught her to cook. I’m certain my dad appreciated that gift far more than the precious china.

Frugality and hard work stayed in the family. When I was about three years old, my mother and dad had saved enough to purchase a two-flat. This property offered them their opportunity to scrape and paint, renovate and repair – and get ahead. Now that our family had a place of our own, the thundering of the elevated trains remained only a memory.

Two — The House on Ridgeway Avenue

The house at 4327 North Ridgeway provided the framework for my childhood; we lived there until I was almost twelve. When my father and I visited Chicago in 1994, we drove to our Ridgeway neighborhood to see how the house had fared over the previous fifty-plus years. To our surprise, all appeared well maintained and looked very much the same, except for a chain-link gate to the side yard and trees that now towered over the house. We rang the doorbell, hoping to introduce ourselves to the current occupants, but there was no answer. Daddy and I sat for a few moments in the car, holding hands, letting memories wash over us.

I can still visualize each room. The house itself had two stories, with dormer windows for the third floor attic space. Wide steps led up to the porch that extended from one side of the house to the front bay windows of the first-floor apartment, where we lived. An outer door led into a vestibule, from which one of two inside doors led upstairs to the apartment of our tenant, Mr. Lynch. He was a thin, dried-up man who lived by himself, worked during the days, and was seldom seen on weekends. That suited me fine.

The houses on the street were similar to ours; some with two families, some two-storied homes, all with narrow lots backing up to an alley. Our block ended to the north at Montrose Avenue, a main street with tracks running down the center for the streetcars that were powered from the electric cable above. As a tether from the car slid along the cable, sparks flew. The bell clanged when the streetcar approached a corner stop, adding to the sounds of the busy street. Whenever Mother and I climbed aboard and took our seats, I gazed upward at the brightly colored placards above the windows on both sides, advertising Wrigley's Chewing Gum, Borden's Milk, and Lucky Strike cigarettes—and spelling out pleas to buy U.S. Savings Bonds and reminders that "Uncle Sam Wants You."

All along Montrose Avenue, shops such as the A&P grocery, a bakery, the barbershop, and even a movie theater a few blocks down catered to those of us living nearby. I especially liked the ice cream store. On warm summer evenings, we walked there for a cone. Ice

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cream couldn't be kept in our refrigerator—it had no freezer compartment, only a small space for ice cube trays.

"I'd like a double cone, raspberry ripple on one side and vanilla on the other. You want the same, don't you, Daddy? Are you going to get chocolate *again*, Mother?"

As the three of us walked slowly back to the house, the leaves on the elm trees lining Ridgeway Avenue barely moved in the stillness of the hot night. "Quick, the ice cream is dripping on the other side, Lois! Lick fast," Mother urged.

Above and between the smaller stores on Montrose, apartment houses faced the busy street, but all the activity centered on the porches along the back of those buildings. Cooking odors drifted from the small, dark apartments within the buildings. On these back porch steps I played with my friends during long summer days and at night the adults escaped the heat of the apartments. Winter was a different story: snow-covered steps offered treacherous paths to young and old alike.

A single-car garage opened onto the alley behind our house and provided a wall for a trellis of fragrant deep pink rambling roses in the summer. Along the rear of the yard, Dad installed a picket fence he let me help paint. I ended up with as much paint on me as I put on the fence, but I burst with pride at my chance to "help." What an act of love it was for him to put a brush in my hand. I can only guess at the painstaking effort involved when he had to remove the yellow oil paint from my five-year-old self.

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Charles and Blanche Childs



The Stein Family
Magdalena, Peter Jr., Peter Sr.



Lois in her velvet outfit



Our family at Christmas on Wilton

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Grandma Childs' row house
(photo 1994)



4327 N. Ridgeway Ave.
(photo 1994)



With Mother & Daddy
in Michigan



The log cabin on Stearn's Bayou in
Grand Haven, Michigan

Three — Putting Food on the Table

In my memory, the kitchen was the largest room in the house. Two windows opened onto the sleeping porch, offering needed light as the back of the house faced east. The white sink with a large drain board was in the corner. When I think of that sink, I vividly recall the conversation with my dad — I must have been about six — when he told me not to let the water run so long. “It costs money,” he said.

“What do you mean, Daddy? All you have to do is turn the faucet on. You don’t have to pay anything.”

My first lesson in the realities of household expenses followed.

The other appliances in the kitchen were a gas stove and a refrigerator with the motor on top, looking like a hat too small for the wearer. Daddy, of course, kept this running perfectly. Probably the most important aspect of the kitchen was the separate walk-in pantry — storing all things good and necessary. Without a single cabinet in the kitchen, the pantry was essential for cooking utensils, dishes and glassware, and of course canned goods and a breadbox for baked goods. It was to the pantry I went when it was my job to set the kitchen table. Daddy sat across from me, and Mom’s chair was at the end, closest to the stove — where wonderful meals originated.

Daddy used our blue 1939 Plymouth for making his refrigerator repair calls during the daytime, leaving Mother and me to do the food gathering on foot. For our meat we walked two blocks to the meat market on Montrose with its pungent smells and plentiful sawdust under our feet. The meat cases were at my eye level, so I’d press my nose to the cool glass and try to guess what was what while we waited our turn. The butchers prepared cuts to order, all the while talking with the customers, whom they knew by name. “Six pork chops, Mrs. Stein? Coming right up.”

In summer, we walked to the Farmer’s Market, four blocks to the south on Irving Park Road. Local farmers piled their vegetables and fruits on long green wooden tables. The fresh-from-the-farm smell added to the fun of the outing. I caught a ride in the baby carriage on the way to market, but on the way back I walked as Mother pushed it home loaded with fresh corn, beans, snap peas, and tomatoes. When

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the carriage was passed on to another family, a red Radio Flyer wagon took its place. Sometimes purchases were made by the bushel: then I knew canning was on the agenda. All winter we drew on the stock of those fruits and vegetables packed in mason jars and carefully arranged on shelves in the basement.

One unforgettable canning incident involved fresh tomatoes destined for homemade ketchup. Somehow, during the canning process a lid blew off the jar, spewing the bright red sauce all over the ceiling and some of the walls of the kitchen. My parents laughed about that story for years, although they didn't laugh at the time. They had to repaint the entire kitchen. That was the last of homemade ketchup.

The shopping I liked best was only a block away—the bakery. Mother baked her own pies—lemon meringue and coconut cream were her specialties—but she didn't make our breads. And of course, we couldn't buy just bread—not with those scrumptious chocolate-covered éclairs right there in the bakery case. On Saturdays, weather permitting, Daddy and I visited the bakery first thing in the morning to buy fresh pecan and caramel-coated coffee cakes.

For breakfast Daddy ate a dozen oatmeal cookies with a glass of milk every weekday morning. The cookies were home-baked, of course. I, on the other hand, had to eat farina, a hot cereal I really didn't like very much. I'm certain my life-long habit of eating everything on my plate began with Mother's ploy to get me to eat all of the cereal: a large spoonful of strawberry jam at the bottom of the bowl.

Every meal ended with dessert—either the aforementioned pies or rice pudding with lemon sauce or the alternate bread pudding with vanilla custard sauce. I heartily endorsed all this culinary effort. It helped make up for the split-pea soup, which predictably followed every baked ham, and in season, way too much asparagus, Mom's favorite vegetable. Now split-pea soup is a favorite of mine and asparagus is often on my grocery list.

Not surprisingly, considering my diet, I was somewhat plump as a child—much to Grandma Stein's satisfaction. With her sweet face flushed from her cooking and an apron covering her generous bosom, she'd urge "eat, eat," whenever we were sitting at her table. My father filled out considerably after his marriage, his round face dominated by very dark eyes and an eyebrow he could lift when occasion demanded.

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Like his dad, he lost most of his hair in his twenties. "I have hair everywhere but on my head," he'd say good-naturedly. Still, he appeared young and virile, with his hairy arms and upper body quite developed from carrying his heavy tool chest up and down long flights of stairs on repair calls.

Mother never gained an ounce until she reached her mid-thirties—when it caused her great consternation. In the years we lived on Ridgeway, her favorite time to eat was midnight. They often entertained friends for pinochle or bridge games on weekend evenings, laying out a spread of cold cuts, potato salad, and Mother's pies once the scores had been totaled.

On those occasions when my parents went dancing, or more rarely, were gone overnight, I stayed with an elderly neighbor, or best of all, spent the night with Grandma and Grandpa Stein. Grandma and I always drank peppermint tea just before bed; mine was without the peppermint schnapps. They ate their "big meal" at noon, so when I joined them for supper, I looked forward to the ritual of a soft-boiled egg set in an eggcup perched on a little pedestal. I learned to crack the shell gently with my spoon, peel the shell off just enough, and carefully dip my spoon down to the still runny yolk. Then I'd dunk a piece of Grandma's homemade bread into the egg and enjoy this special treat while I watched my grandfather do the same—without getting egg on his handlebar mustache.

Grandma came to this country all alone when she was eighteen, traveling on the papers of a girlfriend who changed her mind about leaving their little village and her family. One position my grandmother took to support herself when she arrived in New York was "cooking for the rich people." We all became the benefactors of her early experience, especially when she baked a dozen different cookie recipes at Christmas: some jelly filled, others rolled in nuts or powdered sugar, or the sugary meringue "kisses."

But her specialty was strudel. I watched her start with the dough in the middle of her large cloth-covered dining room table. Her capable hands gently stretched the dough—around and around the table she'd go—until it appeared to be just another tablecloth, thin enough to see through. She put a row of filling—sweetened apples or carrots and raisins or sometimes cheese—at one end of the dough "cloth" and then folded the dough over and over until she reached the

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end. She cut the delicacy into lengths to fit her baking pan. I waited impatiently in the sweet air of the kitchen, anticipating my slice of the flakey finished product. "How much longer until it's baked, Grandma?"

When my own children were small, they watched their great-grandma with the same wonder, eager for the strudel to cool enough to eat. My daughter laments that the recipe wasn't passed down. I know I would never have had the nerve to try it. The last person I watched stretch phyllo dough was a very elderly man making baklava in Crete. My memories of Grandma tasted even sweeter than the Greek pastry.

This lively memoir brims with exquisite detail as it traces the story of an only child growing up in the mid 20th Century. Her journey from birth to her wedding day will evoke long forgotten memories of your own.

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