

A Glass with Grace: Reflections on messy ancestry and my time at Curious

by Ben Fast

Every evening when I sit down to dinner I think of my great-grandmother. She died in 2004, but I'm reminded of her by a set of drinking glasses with her name etched on them.

Marian Grace Phipps was born in December 1905, the first of four generations in my family to be born in Victoria, a continuity still rare in this area. Grace, as she was known, worked as a switchboard operator at the downtown Hudson's Bay Company store until she married in 1929 - the first wedding in the new Central Baptist Church - and settled down to raise a family.



Grace Phipps and William Crabb were married in 1929, the first couple married in the new Central Baptist Church on Pandora St, Victoria.

Interestingly, it is Grace's son William Wallace Crabb – my grandfather-never-called-grandpa – who connects me to Grace every day.

My grandfather, who was long estranged from my family before I was born, died suddenly in September 2013. When his never-before-seen family showed up to run his memorial, Wally's yacht club friends were surprised. Many had never heard of us, but all welcomed us with open arms; stories were shared, new friendships created. And, unexpectedly, a new connection with Grace was formed.

When Wally died, he left little in terms of possessions to his children or grandchildren. Arrangements were made for his mechanic's tools, the boat he lived on and his prized accordion. But three plain drinking glasses – with *Marian G II* etched near the top – found their way into my family's cupboards.



A drinking glass etched with *Marian G II*, my grandfather's boat, named after Grace.

The *Marian G II* was Wally's boat, named lovingly but somewhat ironically after his mother, who didn't much like boats.



My great-grandmother, Grace (middle) looks surprisingly content on the deck of a ferry, given she didn't like travelling on the water. The small boy on the left is Donald, Wally's older brother, and the woman is Grace's friend, Dorris. Photo circa late 1930s.

Once he offered to take me, age 14, on a research trip to the site of Victoria's infamous Chinese leprosy colony – Darcy Island. But the weather turned and the trip was cancelled, leaving us to lunch together in the small cabin. We got on well, surprisingly, thanks to a mutual interest in local history that helped bridge the family divide.

Today, as I drink from the same glasses I likely drank from that day in 2005, I see the messy path of ancestry that connects me to Grace. The glasses themselves are Wally's possessions, a tangible connection to him and his boat. They also represent

the intangible connection of memory, to both Wally and Grace. They are his glasses, but the memories I hold on to are of her.



This candid photo of Grace as a teenager shows her great sense of humour, a characteristic that was still alive and well when I knew her in her '90s.

I remember the old woman in her rocking chair, chuckling and showing me her light, which turned on with only a touch – something magic to me as a child. But through *Curious* and the exploration of ancestry I can also picture a young woman

travelling with her own grandfather, on a day-long excursion to the wild frontier of Mount Doug Park.



A fun photo of Grace as a young woman hugging a tree while at Mount Doug Park with her family. It would have taken Grace a few hours of travel from Victoria to the park, a journey taking 20 minutes today.

As I sit down to dinner I wonder what I would ask her now. How many snowball fights did they have in the big snow of

1916? Did she remember John Bryant's infamous floatplane crash in 1919? What was it like seeing men return from two world wars? Did she see any Victoria Cougars games the year they won the Stanley Cup?



Grace (right) stands with her mother and brother. Later in her life, Grace used blue ball point pen to caption many of the her and the family's old photographs.

How would Grace have viewed those who came before her?



The ancestors of my ancestors, the most distant generation that Grace would have known. Her grandfather Theodore Sebring (1838-1926) stands next to (likely) one of Grace's aunts, October 1915. Theodore's wife Phoebe (born 1844) died in 1891.

Reflecting on this issue of *Curious*, I wonder what Grace could have contributed to its pages. I see points in time that she was connected with, either directly or through the collective memories of her community. She remembered the impact of the Point Ellice Bridge disaster – an event from nine years before her birth that

was talked about for decades after – and now-hazy family stories hint at a childhood carriage ride with an aging Judge Sproat, connecting Grace to BC's colonial days. Her 99-year life spanned from the destruction of the old Songhees Reserve through to the beginnings of digital First Nations language revitalization. I'm also sure that at some point she must have heard of DNA.

The stories in *Curious* show the messiness of ancestry and our desire to understand our connection to the past. Whether through tangible objects like etched drinking glasses and fossils, or through the intangible collection of memories and stories, this issue's contributors have helped straighten the lines in the family tree, broadened our understanding of our province's natural and human past and invited us to witness personal experiences of ancestry.



Grace Crabb, 1905-2004.

This issue of *Curious* may be at a close, but the exploration of ancestry is not. Each day – through memory or physical touch, in our work or play – we interact with the past and connect with our ancestors in our eternal quest to understand the world around us. We also become ancestors, passing on our experiences and what we know to untold future generations. I have faith that they, too, will reach out to us.

[Cover](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Contributors](#) [Issue Archive](#) [Search](#)

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