

More than just a Housewife



March 12, 2021. By Gena Philibert-Ortega

The other day I was giving a presentation on researching female ancestors, something I do a lot of especially during Women's History Month. In this particular presentation, I talk about my maternal grandmother and discuss how even a woman who appears to be "just a housewife" can be researched.

My "just a housewife" grandma, Clara McNeil Nikolaus, was the daughter of Edith Petersen McNeil who was the daughter of Anne Kristine Hansen Petersen. My grandmother outlived 2 husbands and gave birth to 8 kids. Families leave genealogical relevant records behind - birth, marriage, and death certificates. Women appear in the records for themselves and their children.

But my grandma was more than just a daughter, wife, and a mother. Her first husband died when she was relatively young, leaving her with children to support. And he had been ill for years prior to that. So yes, that "housewife" worked. She was an active member of her church and not only attended church but took part in benevolent projects. Work, church, organizations all leave records behind. I knew my grandmother. She died when I was 22 years-old and prior to that my family spent every summer visiting her. She was a genealogist and told me family history stories. She told me the story of her grandmother, Mary Ann Smith McNeil, and other ancestors. She was also a quilter and gifted me and other family members with quilts.

As a genealogist and the keeper of the family history, I think about my legacy to my own kids. They came along long after my grandmother had passed. In fact, all of my grandparents passed away by the time I was in my mid-20s. So what can I leave behind to help tell her story so they can learn their family history?

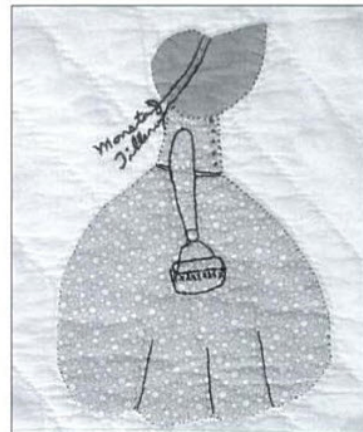
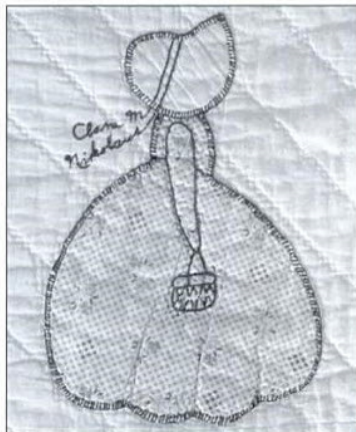
Your Grandma

Who was your grandma? Have you written her story down? Aside from gathering the vital records and census records, have you taken a look at archival collections and newspaper articles? What do you have that belonged to her? What are your memories of her (if you knew her)? What can you tell about her even if she was “just a housewife?”

If your grandma is still alive, lucky you. Call her up today and ask her a few questions. Ask her about what her life was like when she was your age. What are her favorite things? Who was her best friend growing up? What were her favorite hobbies? Who was the oldest family member she knew? What are the accomplishments she’s most proud of (not counting her grandchild)? What is her chocolate cookie recipe?

My favorite find as I search for traces of my maternal grandma was a chance discovery in one of those Images of America books from Arcadia Publishing. In looking over the images for the book from her hometown I came across a photo of a quilt. It wasn’t the whole quilt, just a part of it along with closeup images of 2 quilt blocks. This signature quilt was a gift to a local church leader complete with the names of the women who sewed the various blocks.

woman's name was included on her contributed square as an extension of the ribbon on the bonnet. The women who created this quilt ranged in age from 84 (Margaret Baird) to 20 (LaRue Bigler). (Below, David Ellis.)



From *Images of America: Snowflake* by Catherine H. Ellis. Arcadia Books. page 67

When I first saw it I recognized the familiar pattern right away because my grandmother had made one similar to it for me. Depending on the era you may know the pattern as "colonial lady" or in my case with a few changes, Holly Hobby. Of the two blocks featured in the photo, one featured the name of my grandma Clara Nikolaus.

Take some time this Women's History Month to write up something about your grandma. If you are a grandma, then tell a story about your life to your grandchildren. They will cherish that story in the years to come. Lucky for me my grandma took time to write her life story. I now can use that and add newspaper articles, images, and other information to complete it.

Family history is much more than tracing yourself back generations to an earlier time. It's about the story of your family.

By Gena Philibert-Ortega is an author, instructor, and researcher. She blogs at [Gena's Genealogy](#) and [Food.Family.Ephemera](#).