

# THE NIGHT GRANDMA GOT SHOT

*by Mary Lou Schlesinger*

The sound of a gunshot, followed by an anguished cry for help from a member of the family – these are part and parcel of one of my fondest childhood recollections. On many occasions I have happily re-lived the night Grandma got shot, and even Grandma herself was glad it happened. But not at the time.

It was the mid-1920s, when the state of Arizona and I were both very young. The shooting of Grandma occurred shortly after my family moved into a new farm home near Chandler, and the incident was only one of the rather bizarre events we experienced while getting settled. But it was the pick of the lot.

Our new place was west of the town of Chandler, home of the now venerable San Marcos Hotel, one of the first resorts catering exclusively to winter visitors. I can't remember if it was already built by 1926, but I'm sure there was an ostrich farm where the hotel's golf course is now located.

Living conditions were quite primitive for us at first. Our new house, jerry-built all the way, was on a 10-acre plot about three miles outside the city limits. It was months before we got around to fencing our yard off from the rest of the farm, so until then the family cow, a one-horned Jersey named Carlotta, found it very easy to peek in our windows when she felt like it. The entire property, however, was surrounded by barbed

wire and because of Carlotta, we had to keep the wire-and-mesquite-post gate closed except when driving a car in or out.

And cars came and went quite a lot, for several people lived in our house including assorted unmarried aunts and uncles. Grandma was queen bee and she let no one forget it. And we had a boarder too, named Andy. I've never figured out how, in that small house, we found room for that fellow, or why he even wanted to be our boarder, since Grandma was a miserable cook. Andy had a red face and mouthful of gold teeth, and laughed at everything. Grandma explained his good disposition to people by saying, "He's a Swede." Indeed, he didn't seem to notice that we had neither electricity nor inside plumbing but instead used kerosene lamps and a not-so-discreetly-located outhouse.

That outhouse had earlier figured in the minor barnyard drama which cost Carlotta her horn. A mean billy goat from a neighboring farm had penetrated our barbed-wire one day and Carlotta, with an unfortunate show of bravado, lowered her horns and tried to look menacing. For her pains she was magnificently butted head-on, thus losing her symmetry. My aunt Fay had been looking on from the kitchen and flew outdoors to face the goat, and it was lucky for her we had that outside toilet, for she soon retreated to it.

The goat was resolutely attacking the outhouse and about to topple it, aunt and all, when he was finally subdued.

Despite renegade goats and our lack of modern conveniences, everyone was very happy, and living was noisy but pleasant. The dirt road running close by our house was flanked by an irrigation ditch lined with large cottonwoods which gave us some shade. In those days farmers still let them grow along the canals, and burned-out stumps had not yet superceded fence rows of trees in the name of progress and water conservation.

But even with the shade from the cottonwoods, our house got very hot during the summertime and not having electricity, we had no way to cool it off, not even an oscillating fan. Summer days were often sizzling, and the nights not much better. Instead of bedrooms *per se*, we had one long, screened sleeping porch. It was bisected by

a six-foot-high partition that gave visual privacy, but allowed conversations to flow uninhibited over the top from one end of the porch to the other.

The large expanse of screen had canvas flaps, which we rolled up and down with an arrangement of clothesline cord on pulleys. I don't know why, but we called our flaps "flips" and we had quite a few technical problems with them because the ropes regularly jumped the pulleys and jammed.

Nights were often restless, because of my aunt Ev and her incipient goiter which produced choking sensations and, in turn, nightmares. She was always jumping out of bed, wild-eyed and clutching at her throat, convinced she had swallowed something. Most often she claimed it was a towel or her prized possession, a square-cut onyx ring centered with a diamond chip. Sometimes my father would be half-awakened and come tearing around the partition, befuddled as she, to help Aunt Ev save herself.

So there was considerable nocturnal unrest, and in a sense we were psychologically prepared for Grandma's traumatic experience, which came late one moonless night.

Earlier that evening, Andy had taken my aunts and uncles to a motion picture in town, one of the impressive new "talkies." They had made the trip in his shiny Buick touring-car, of which he was very proud. But eventually everyone was home and ready for bed. Our make-shift driveway was near the sleeping porch, and the Buick was parked there. The thermometer in its heavy glass radiator cap settled down for the night and so did the family. And yes, they assured my grandmother, the barbed-wire gate was securely fastened.

Hours later, Grandma was awakened by a noise just outside the closed flap of the screened porch, a sound like some hard object striking metal. Thinking it was our cow scraping her one remaining horn against Andy's car, Grandma called out in a stage whisper, "Carlotta, is that you?"

For an answer, she heard the sound of four feet galloping away. And they galloped without a pause after they should have been stopped by the closed gate.

Disgustedly, my grandmother clambered from her bed, presuming the gate was open after all, and that the cow was cavorting off down the road. Stopping only for her slippers, Grandma took off in hot pursuit, leaving everyone else sleeping undisturbed. After all, we were used to Aunt Ev's nightmares.

Meanwhile, my grandmother was in great danger of losing her quarry, for the dust of the road muffled the running feet, and the tall cottonwoods cast even darker shadows on Carlotta's already dark escape route. Halfway to the corner, Grandma was about to give up the chase and go back for help and a flashlight, when she spotted a large dark shape in the middle of the road. Canny now, thinking she had the cow at bay, she slowed her pace, preparing to ease around Carlotta and head her back toward the house.

But just as the tail of Grandma's gleaming white nightgown stopped being airborne and settled down to earth, so did Grandma – dropped in her tracks by a rifle bullet directly to the leg.

This maternal grandmother of mine was from the Ozarks, and when she hollered she didn't mess around. Her cry of, "Help! I've been shot!" awoke everyone at the house instantly, although I doubt they heard the sound of the gun.

A motley crew of rescuers streamed out into the night to aid the fallen matriarch, although not soon enough to prevent the would-be assassins from escaping.

By the time she was joined at the scene of the shooting, Grandma had everything figured out. What she mistook for our one-horned cow, she reasoned, were two thieves, attempting to steal some of the fancy accessories from Andy's new Buick. The dark shape she had attempted to round up was their parked flivver.

Eventually, my father pursued the prowlers by car, but they had too much of a head start. For Daddy, in his characteristic state of confusion after having been startled awake, had wasted too much time trying on the clothes of every male billeted in his wing of the sleeping porch before accidentally trying on his own. He was too late.

The hours that followed were full of excitement and confusion. A procession of law officers followed on the heels of the family doctor and even before their questioning

had ended, Grandma had begun to get some style into her account of the night's events. Over the years she honed her story to perfection, but she was never able to improve on her best line, delivered the memorable night she was "shot by a cow."

During her questioning by the law, one foolhardy young deputy decided to cross-examine the victim. He asked Grandma what model of car she thought the thieves were driving. A coupe, she said.

"Couldn't it have been a touring-car?" the young man parried almost accusingly.

"My dear sir," Grandma replied tartly, "It could have been *anything* if I thought it was a cow!"

