Bill Maxey and the Story of his Pioneer Mother Bernice Frey and Waldo's Carpet

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Mr. Bill Maxey Yeah, my mother, Bernice Frey Maxey, born in 1900 in a farmhouse on Aldrich’s Road north of Battle Creek, southern Berry County. Oldest of four; it wasn’t the older, Galen was the oldest, okay.

Mrs. Jeanette Maxey: She’s a third of four.

Bill: Third of four, first one to go to college, I think. She enrolled here at Western Normal in 1917 in the Rural Education Department, as shown by the listing in this genealogy book. Jeanette is a genealogist, so we’ve done extensive work.

Jeanette: There’s a copy of that in the archives.

Cassie: Okay.

Bill: So we have a picture of her in 1916 and a listing explaining the Rural Education program in 1917. She left, graduated in 1918, and then was back at Western in 1953. That’s a 35/36 year break, and you might wonder how that came to be, so let me just walk through that part of the story.

She started writing a diary daily in 1916, so every day for the rest of her life, which was almost 101 years, she wrote in a diary. So I’ve got all those diaries, and I sent some of the transcription, I transcribed a few months of her Western experience, not the whole thing. It’s hard work translating old diaries.

Cassie: Tedious.

Jeanette: It’s a five year diary, so it’s like five lines for each day.

Cassie: Over the span of five years.

Bill: June 30 for five years, July 1, five years. You can compare years pretty easily.

Cassie: That’s true.
Bill: It’s a tiny little script. Anyway, I transcribed some diaries just to see what life was like, she had an apartment on Woodward Avenue. Roommate was the daughter of the grounds keeper at Brook Lodge, Dr. Upjohn’s Augusta estate, and she’d sometimes stay in town weekends, sometimes ride the inner urban, I presume, to Urbandale or Battle Creek, and a family member would pick her up, take her to the farm.

Sometimes she would go to Brook Lodge with her roommate and play tennis and swim in the pond and chitchat with Dr. Upjohn. One of the stories that she enjoyed telling later in life was what got you and us together. And that was Thanksgiving, she’d come off, she enrolled in September, so two months we’re into Thanksgiving and, in her limited experience, the day after Thanksgiving was a day off.

So she hopped the inner urban, went home thinking she was in good shape, came back, found out she wasn’t, and she was then called on the carpet, as she was happy to tell, called on the carpet in Dr. Waldo’s office, literally on the carpet in front of his desk.

And I can picture, here’s a 17 year old farm girl two months off the farm in this walnut paneled, I’m sure, dark, ornately furnished office facing, no doubt, a bearded, severe looking guy and being dressed down. And I had hoped that her diary would reflect that terror, and it doesn’t.

It shows that, yes, she missed of class and she got in trouble for it, but it doesn’t elaborate. She might have been frightened of it or something at the time or didn’t want to remember that, so didn’t put it in the diary. But she was quite happy to tell you many times later in her life about being called on the carpet in Dr. Waldo’s office.

So anyway, she graduated with her one year teaching certificate, went to teach in a one room school in Barry County and then moved on to Battle Creek schools. Taught in the post school there, coached boys sports, including to some state championships, middle school boys. And then reading her diary, she’s a very sociable kid, lots of parties back on the farm on the weekends.

My wife is smirking, we never knew her then in that party girl. But anyway, she was a party girl, and she had boyfriends, and she got engaged to Leon Wildermyth. And at the time, the Wildermyth family was a well known family in Richmond, there was a Hazel Wildermyth School for years up there. She was a teacher and I think maybe the super and principal, longtime principal. So she married Leon.

Jeanette: No, no, no.

Bill: She didn't marry Leon, she got engaged to Leon.

Jeanette: No, the story goes, he asked her to marry her, and she didn't tell him an answer. And then he was a construction worker in Jackson. And there was a terrible accident, he fell five stories.

Bill: 14 stories.
Jeanette: 14 stories, was killed, and so they called her out of school to tell her that he had died. So she was terribly distraught, I mean, really distraught.

Cassie: Right.

Bill: And in the diaries at that time are really hard to read, as you can imagine, she was devastated, but in the diary, she refers to Leon as fiance. So that’s why I say, in her mind she was engaged, whether she ever put the ring on or not.

Anyway, that caused turmoil in her life, and she quit teaching, wanted to do something more meaningful.

Jeanette: Meaningful.

Bill: With Leon’s death. She enrolled in the Sanitarium, John Harvey Kellogg’s Sanitarium to become a nurse. Graduated in… I’d have to look it up, ‘29 maybe ’28, as a nurse.

And then with her family, moved to Michigan City, Indiana, where the men, brothers and father were. They bought some virgin timber, and they were timber cutters and opening a lumberyard which operated for years in Michigan City, so in Michigan City, she became a nurse.

Jeanette: The family had contacts with the school there, and so the superintendent or somebody in authority knew about her graduating, having been a teacher, and wanted her to become a nurse at the school. So he held a job for her as the school nurse.

Bill: So she was a school nurse and a private nurse, and then at some point began substitute teaching in the Michigan City public schools. Met a young teacher from southern Indiana who became my father when they married in 1935.

So she substitute taught, I didn't really know her as a nurse. She pretty much stopped nursing by the time I was cognizant, but she was a regular substitute teacher. And then in 1951, roughly, the Red Cross and the school system, recognizing that she was both a teacher and a nurse, asked her to open one of several in the state of Indiana, among the first classrooms for what they called then handicapped kids.

So she had blind and deaf and cerebral palsy and all sorts of age groups back to the one room schoolhouse thing, in a sense, with different ages and different abilities, and in this case, different disabilities. So there was no curriculum for this, she had to invent things to teach these kids skills.
Jeanette: And find tools for them for motor skills. One of the things she did, the old switchboards where you use the lines to plug in plugs to connect people.

Cassie: Right, yeah.

Jeanette: So she got one of those for motor skills, but she had to invent everything.

Bill: Yeah, so as she got the switchboard from Banfield, Michigan which was near the family farm.

When they upgraded the equipment, she took the switch. So anyway, after doing this for a couple of years, the State Board of Education wrote her a letter saying, you’re unqualified to do what you’re doing, you have to go back to school. And I was there the day that letter came, and that was the only time I heard her swear in my entire life.

She’d been teaching for two years, inventing the thing, and then the state said, you're not qualified to do this. So anyway, that led to then coming back to Western. And she graduated then in 1953, June 30, I found it in the diary, the graduation day. I don’t know what kind of semesters Western was on, or terms.

Cassie: Yeah.

Bill: I know that she was working, she was teaching in Michigan City in May, cuz the diary says, also studying for classes. So she was, I don't know if she’d come up here and had stuff take home or mailed, and certainly it wasn't Zoom in 1953. But she was studying Western classes and doing exams and writing term papers all leading up to finishing work in the school system at the end of May, and then, coming to campus in June, and graduating at the end of July. So when we have a graduation, I sent you the graduation picture in 1953.

Cassie: Yes.

Bill: In the robe. I don't know what degree she earned, probably a bachelor's degree. But I don't have a proof of that, the college would know, I'm sure. But she’s in a robe.

Cassie: Right, I can see that, yeah.

Bill: So she went through a graduation ceremony.

Cassie: Yeah.
Bill: And that's it, that's her connection to Western Michigan. It's a long haul in there. But two different, totally different times, but East Campus— the only campus in 1917 was East Campus. And Dr. Waldo's office, I'm guessing, was probably in East Hall, though I don't know that.

Cassie: Yeah, if it was in 1917… is that right?

Bill: Yeah.

Cassie: Yeah, his was in here, I think it was actually around this area, cuz this is where used to be.

Bill: Okay, so this is where she got dressed down, right here? 100 and, yeah, years ago?

Cassie: Yeah, a little over 100 years ago now. And that you said, she didn’t write in the diary some of what she was feeling, but that she used to tell the story a lot. When she told the stories, did she tell you what she was feeling then?

Bill: No, I think she rather enjoyed just telling that she got called on the curb. It became, at the time, I’m sure she was terrified, I would have been terrified.

Cassie: Yeah.

Bill: But over time it became a memorable thing to smile, to joke about it.

Cassie: Right, yeah.

Bill: She survived it, so.

Cassie: Yeah, and I’m curious too, obviously, you knew her and you talked to her cuz she’s your mother. But how did that differ from reading her diaries and transcribing them? Did she ever tell you some of the things that you read about?

Bill: The life at Western…

Jeanette: She talked about going on the trolley up the hill after classes, and-

Bill: Yeah, she would tell about going home, taking the Interurban. She drove us.

Jeanette: Bring the food back to her lodging places.

Bill: Yeah, we drove up and down Woodward Avenue to find where she remembered the house she was in. And she taught school, Woodward schools, but that, I didn't find that in her diary. There was an Oakwood school, where they did practice teaching, but she might have done some at Woodward, the building is still there.

So I didn't talk about her college day, that I recall, other than the Interurban, Brook Lodge, being called on the carpet.
Jeanette: And like kids, the recess is the most important part of your day, going home from school.

Cassie: Right, finally being let out.

Bill: Yeah, her first job would have been in September of 1918, which is right when the flu epidemic broke out, and World War I broke out, and we got into it. And her brother was called up, he went to Fort Camp and then Camp Custer, which was brand new built right then for World War I training.

There was a huge flu outbreak there, the death rate at Camp Custer was nasty, and it made no matter to them. He would come home weekends, bring buddies with him, and then go party.

Nobody masked up or anything, she did note, the diary noted that school was closed this week because of the flu. And there's occasional entry flu really bad in Detroit or Chicago or something. Mostly her diaries dealt with laundry. Chores. Fixing dinner, cleaning the cupboards.

Cassie: Yeah, the everyday things.

Bill: Yeah, just the mundane things-

Cassie: Yeah.

Bill: Of daily life. She would throw in tidbits about war news, World War I, World War II, war news, presidential elections might be noted, maybe not. When FDR died, I think it was a short note. Life went on. So, they were interesting to read and some tidbits here and there.

Cassie: And when did you guys start doing this, start going through her diaries and transcribing them?

Bill: Well, I've got them in two big boxes, there's two big boxes of diaries. I started on them a long time ago, just little bits here and there. COVID gave me lots of time to read, and with the improvement in speech recognition software.

I can sit there with my magnifying glass and a bright light and the microphone and, have it flow into the computer, which is infinitely easier than trying to read a line and then type it and then read a line and type. That's impossible, people have done that, but I wouldn't care to do that.

Cassie: Yeah, I wouldn't either.

Bill: So during COVID I did it, but I just picked out times in her life, wartime experiences, birth, my birth, my brother's birth.

Jeanette: Trips too.
Bill: Trips, yes, she drove, she and her friend drove to California by themselves. Two girls, 1932, drove to the Olympics-

Cassie: Really?

Bill: In Los Angeles.

Jeanette: Yeah, she talked about that, but what was the surprise when you read the diaries, cuz they were only there for, was opening ceremony. They only went to one event. This whole trip-

Cassie: What?!

Jeanette: Was going to the Olympics. And all they went to was-

Cassie: Trip across the country just for the opening, wow.

Bill: There was family on the west coast.

Jeanette: That's not all they did, I mean, they took the whole summer cuz they were both teachers, and-

Bill: Yeah, they were gone June to the end of August on this 6,500-mile driving trip on mostly dirt roads at the time.

Cassie: Wow, yeah.

Bill: If you can imagine, with flat tires.

Jeanette: 50 miles I'd say here.

Bill: Lots of flat tires. Guys would stop and fix the girls' tires and invite them to a party that night. So they partied all the way across the country.

Cassie: Is this the party-girls days?

Bill: Yeah.

Cassie: They partied all the way across the country.

Bill: And back again.

Cassie: All the way to the Olympics and back.

Bill: Broken axle on the way back, and spent ten days in Wyoming. And got to know all the guys in town, I'm sure. She was an adventurous soul, for sure.

Cassie: And, I just had one more question I wanted to ask, your mother is no longer with us, right?
Bill: No.


Cassie: November, 2000?

Bill: 1900 to 2000, yeah.

Cassie: Wow, that’s very long life. And just to give some background to other people then who read about her story and whatnot, how would you summarize her as a person later in life?

Bill: Adventurous.

Jeanette: Outgoing.

Bill: Pioneering.

Jeanette: She would go to, we often went to auctions together but she would learn the story of everybody at the auction or the people whose stuff was being auctioned, she would visit with people until she got the story, so she was-

Bill: I recall when like the meter reader would come to go down the basement to read the electric meter, she'd have his life story before he was out the back door, she just engaged people always and had to know the details.

Cassie: It's interesting too that she tried to figure out other people's stories and now other people will be reading about her story too.

Bill: That’s fitting, I guess.

Cassie: Right, well, did you guys have any last stories or anything you want to talk about?

Jeanette: You might talk about what it was like having your mother gone for those summers while she was going to summer school at Western.

Bill: I don’t recall her being gone.

Jeanette: You have mentioned it to me.

Bill: That was probably the summer… The family farm was near Banfield Deweys of Hickory Corners, and the farm went from Lenar Road down to a lake, north shore, Fine Lake. And my grandfather built in several cabins on the lake shore, one of which became his widow, he died in 1930, became his widow’s summer cabin on the lake.

So we would spend our summers at Fine Lake in this hunting cabin that he built. My father then turned it into a cottage in 1960, so in ‘53 when she would have been a Western, that’s probably the summer I was there alone with my grandmother fishing, that’s the only time I recall her not being home.
My dad also went, he was also a teacher, he went back to school, he was gone some summers, but I don't recall that was traumatic in any way life yeah. What was going to happen? Yeah, other stories?

I just always admired what she did with her handicapped kids and she loved those kids and then she'd bring them home, I was a little bit intimidated sometimes. Some of them were seriously handicapped and kind of a little bit frightening to me at my young age, but she handled them with grace and followed. Some of them went on to successful, there was a bridge in Michigan City off Over Trail Creek that had to be raised for boats.

And one of her kids became the gatekeeper yeah, and she was so proud of that. He was a badly damaged kid, but he went on to live independently and she took great pride in that, justifiably.

Cassie: She was allowed to continue the program then after she got her degree?

Bill: Yes.

Jeanette: While she was getting the degree, she was still, did she have to stop?

Bill: I think she just had to get more credentials, I don't think she had to stop.

Jeanette: She also went down to a case reserve for classes because there wasn't any one program that had what she needed as far as being able to work with the kids.

Cassie: Cuz, it was like you said, one of the first programs that-

Bill: That was my understanding, I haven't read up the Indiana history, I just understand from what she said that it was one of the first.

Cassie: But it was fairly new idea then at the time, whether she had to go different places to sort of help her build?

Bill: Yep.

Jeanette: So we tried to get Western to recognize her pioneer role before she died because she was living at the Fountains, but it didn't work.

Bill: So now we're back full circle here today, so appreciate your project.

Cassie: Yes of course, and I'm so glad that you guys reached out too, and that we were able to connect and get the story shared, great.

Bill: Good, I'm glad I saw the notice.

Cassie: Yeah, well thank you so much for taking time out of your days to meet with me today and talk, I really appreciate it. And I'll be sure to share her photos that you sent me accompanying her story.
Bill: Okay, is there anything else you want in the diaries? We come up with dates in 1917 that you wanna know something about, I can look it up in the diary and see if she noted anything.

Yeah, she does note events, class activities and so forth.

Cassie: But she did note every day then, for years? Wow! And would it always be five years in one diary, so that-?

Bill: For those years, yeah, there were some later years different, but yeah, they’re all about that big, and about that thick.

And it’ll be 1925 to ‘30, ‘30 to ‘35, ‘35 to ‘40.

Cassie: Has she kept them all since she started them?

Bill: Yeah, I’ve got hers, I got some of her mother’s diaries.

Cassie: Really, her mother’s diary?

Bill: I’ve got her mother’s.

Jeanette: That’s even harder.

Cassie: I bet.

Jeanette: Well, no, they’re even smaller.

Bill: Smaller, spidery. And then they’re thin.

Cassie: And they had thin script?

Bill: Her script was small as well. Cursive yeah, one of the funny ones, I dug into my grandmother’s diary, cuz I just happened to have the year she got married, 1897. And I read up the days approaching the big wedding, nothing said about anything about getting married.

And then her husband was Will Frey, her husband to be, Will Frey and wedding day talks about cooking and cleaning things. Then it says “Will went to Battle Creek in the morning, we got married at eight o’clock”, that was it! And then they went off to the World’s Fair in Chicago for honeymoon, 1897.

Which she does talk about in the diary, but the wedding itself was we got married at eight. (All laugh)

Bill: Didn’t even say who was there.

Jeanette: It was evening I think too.
Bill: Yeah, eight o’clock in the evening, and we don't even know who was there, presumably it was in the farmhouse, possibly in the church nearby.

Cassie: Yeah, so both of them were somewhat nonchalant about big events in their lives during the times that had happened.

Bill: In terms of their diaries, yeah.

Cassie: Right, yeah, wow, that's very interesting, and that you still had those diaries from your grandmother as well.

Bill: Yeah, I'm not sure what I'm going to do with them, I think I may offer them to the archive.

Jeanette: I know what we're gonna do.

Bill: What are we gonna do with it? I'm gonna offer them to the archives. I hope Lynn Houghton would want to have them, since they are local, the first 20-30 years are local, and it's Michigan City.

Cassie: Right, okay.

Jeanette: Sharon would have.

Bill: Sharon would have taken them.

Jeanette: No, but they’ve also started sending a whole bunch of stuff from the big Waldo library, to the archives, they were getting close on cramped space after the newspaper stuff came.

Bill: The archives, no sense of that, genealogy.

Jeanette: I turned it this way so you could see the title.

Cassie: Yeah, I’ll take a photo.

Bill: Show the sanitary picture, some pages.

Cassie: So you put this together?

Jeanette: Mhm.

Bill: So here's the nursing graduation certificate, and then the sanitarium was big on naturalism (pointing to nude photo of Bernice sunbathing), get the sun.

Cassie: Yeah (chuckling).

Bill: Don’t know why she would have kept that nude photo, sunbathing in the courtyard out in the sanitarium, in the girl’s dorm.
Cassie: Wow, that’s very cool, I mean, it’s not a photo that you’d expect to see.

Jeanette: No, we had never seen it until after she died.

Bill: She had not thrown it away.

Jeanette: Yeah, it was under the glass...

Cassie: Yeah, wow, she thought, well, hundred years ago, they can see the photo now.

Bill: All right.

Cassie: Yes, well, thank you so much, was there anything else that we should include with it?

Bill: Not that I can think of.

Cassie: Okay, perfect.

Bill: If I think of anything Western related I’ll let you know.

Cassie: Okay, yes, of course, yes, you have my number and my email as well, so you can feel free to send anything over, yeah. And then I will reach back out to you guys too, when her story is up on the website with the link so that you guys can go see it.

Bill: If you want me to come back and redo any bit out of your tape, I’d be happy to do that.

Cassie: Okay.

Bill: Figure out what you want and I can do that bit.

Cassie: Okay, sounds good, yeah well, thank you so much for meeting with me!