

Mabel

Americans, for whatever perverse reason, like to joke about mothers-in-law. Sometimes this gets out of hand, to the point where a mother-in-law recently sued her comedian daughter-in-law. The m-i-l lost. There is even an American movie, "Monsters in Law." The staid magazine Reader's Digest once ran a collection of mother-in-law jokes. Joan Rivers' jokes were vicious. British comedians are even worse. An English newspaper referred to mother-in-law jokes as the bedrock of British comedy. This must be an Anglo Saxon thing, although the earliest recorded joke dates back to the Romans, attributed to Juvenal, a first century satirist. But enough is enough, so one London borough banned m-i-l jokes a couple of years ago. Filipinos are not immune to making jokes about their families, but I have never heard a Filipino mother-in-law joke. Hooray for Filipinos. Instead of a joke, I will pay tribute to one mother-in-law.

This is about my former mother-in-law, Mabel Lewis Schermesser. Mabel turned 95 this past summer. She has got to be one of the sweetest, most generous, considerate, good humored, hospitable and tolerant women I have ever met. Mabel was an accomplished musician, playing the piano and organ. Not only did she raise five children, she was her husband Vic's partner in the family funeral business. Vic may have been the public face, but Mabel provided the behind the scenes business acumen. She was only in her 40s when I first met her, but she already had white hair. For nearly 50 years, she has maintained this beautiful white hair.

Mabel is a direct descendant of Colonel Fielding Lewis, an officer during the American revolution, who married Elizabeth "Betty" Washington. Betty was a full sister of George Washington, the second child of Augustine Washington and his second wife Mary Ball. Betty, George and their siblings were Col. Lewis' second cousins. Col. Lewis first wife Catherine Washington was the first cousin of Betty. Another of Col. Lewis' relatives was Meriwether Lewis, of Lewis and Clark fame. Meriwether was his first cousin once removed. Mabel's bloodlines are impeccable. Being Betty's direct descendants, my children, grandchildren and great grandchildren are related to George. Here's how it goes: Fielding Lewis & Betty Washington had Samuel Lewis, who had Charles Lewis. The rest of the genealogy is Charles H. Lewis, Edmund Mark Lewis and Mabel Lewis. My grandchildren can call George their great great great great great great uncle! Add one more great for my great grandkids.

The Lewises were of English heritage, the family coming from the county of Kent in southeast England. The English are meticulous record keepers and the Lewis genealogy can be traced back to the 16th century. No one else I know can trace their ancestry that far back. A cousin of Mabel put together the Lewises American genealogy, which I got a copy of. Sadly, I don't believe any of the younger generation has updated the information. There is, however, a lasting legacy of Fielding and Betty Lewis. Their original mansion, which stood on their Virginia plantation, has been restored and is open to the public. Named Kenmore by later owners, it is a National Historic Landmark, located in Fredericksburg, VA.

Mabel's father, Rev. Edmund M. Lewis, was a minister who built the Church of the Good Shepherd United Methodist church in downtown Akron. Edmund's four brothers were also ministers. The Akron property was imposing, covering 2 ½ acres and having 36,000 sq. ft. of

Mabel

building space. The church thrived during the decades when Akron was the tire capital of the world. But over the years, as the tire factories moved to southern states like Tennessee and Alabama, the congregation slowly moved away, to the point where the church could not be supported. A few years ago, the property was sold to.....hold your breath.....McDonald's! Where the choir once sang "Amazing Grace" or "How Great Thou Art," the refrain is now "want to supersize your fries and drink?" I don't think Rev. Lewis would be pleased.

When my first wife (Carol) and I moved to the town of Painesville, Ohio in 1966, we only had one car. In no time, Mabel presented us with a Volkswagen Beetle, which we kept until we moved to Illinois five years later. Mabel never interfered in our lives but there was one suggestion she gave that I wish we had followed. Florida was in the throes of a development boom, with the construction of Disney World in Orlando, opening in 1971. Mabel and her husband Vic signed up to purchase a still to be constructed condominium in Pompano Beach, north of Miami. It was right on the beach. Mabel suggested that we sign up to buy one. The purchase price was \$25,000 for a two bedroom, two bath unit. Two other relatives bought units, but I demurred. My salary of barely over \$10,000 in 1970 would not allow for two mortgages. Half of my salary would have gone to paying the mortgage. At the height of the real estate bubble in 2006, the units were going for over \$400,000. I should have taken a second job to buy the condo.

Mabel spends the winter months at the condo in Florida but returns to Akron, OH for the summer. I always try to pay her a visit. Up until a few years ago, she would even invite Val and me to stay for dinner. I always felt a little awkward, being a former son-in-law visiting with his new wife. But Mabel was ever the gracious hostess. There would also be freshly baked cookies on hand for her great grandchildren.

There is a picture that features Mabel, Carol, Mario Jr., and Dasha with her three children - Daylon, twins Gabriella and Giuliana. That represents five generations. Try to beat that! Thank you Mabel and may the Lord bless you always.

Mario E. Orosa
Dec. 9, 2013