

13. The Dennis Sisters: Corrine and Juanita (including much about L E Jackson)

By

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Jack Dennis was just two years older than Zibe, but their older sister, Corrine Dennis (Bolton) was about 9 ½ years older than Grace Juanita Seabay Sara Ellen Oleta (Dennis) Jackson. (1) Aunt Seabay was a hard worker. She spent many years employed as a sales lady in the J. J. Newberry's five and dime store in Central City. As far as I know, Mamaw Bolton never worked outside the home, presumably, because she was too busy tending her brood of six children born between 1920 and 1937.

With the birth of her fifth child, Betty Joyce, it undoubtedly became quite hard for Mamaw to find time for even the minimal household chores because Betty was mentally incapable of taking care of herself. When she was old enough to go to school, she spent only one day there. She cried the entire time, evidently terrified at being separated from her mother for the first time in her life. The teacher wrote Mamaw a note requesting her not to send Betty to school again because she upset the other children too much. That was the end of her formal education.

In a different time, Betty Bolton might have become a more normally functioning adult, but in the early 1940s, special education classes were likely not available anywhere in the country, let alone in Central City, Kentucky. Thus, Betty spent her entire life playing with dolls, listening to the portable radios that her brother, Bill Bolton, bought her after his life settled down in Charlestown, and sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch, waving at truck drivers as they passed on busy Indiana State Road 3.

Before Interstate 65 was constructed, State Road 3 was a main link from Michigan to Florida and other points south. On at least one occasion, police were called to investigate the woman who sat with a "baby" on the front porch during the cold days of winter. Some of the truck drivers stopped and got acquainted with Betty, one of them saying it brightened his day to see Betty wave at him as he made his long hauls. One of them even bought her a doll. It took some convincing to get my Republican grandfather to seek government Social Security funds for his disabled daughter, but he finally accepted the aid. By 1972, the Boltons were even on food stamps.

Complicating Mamaw Bolton's life even further was the development of epilepsy early in the life of her last child, Dickie (Edward Earl). My mother said Dick was ok until he fell off the back porch and landed on his head, leaving a large gash that Mamaw treated by putting spider webs in it to stop the blood. (2) It is conceivable that the fall had something to do with Dick's epileptic seizures, since brain injuries are known to cause epilepsy. Eventually, the seizures were brought under control by phenobarbital.

Mamaw was not much of a disciplinarian, according to Mom, leaving the children to ponder the corporal punishment that awaited them when Papaw would be told what mischief they got into that day. The spankings he delivered were severe, according to Mom. She remembered quite a few instances when household items that Papaw bought to improve their lives fell victim to the children's play. She told of several alarm clocks that were destroyed by hammer blows from the children.

At some point in their married life, Mamaw ran off with another man, according to my mother. I'm not sure when this happened, but she obviously returned and lived out the rest of her life with Heaverin and her children.

Music played a part in the Boltons' early lives in Central City, and Mom spoke of going over to the Everlys in Brownie for singalongs in her youth. (3) Papaw played the fiddle, Mom plucked the mandolin, and it was a shock to me in the early 1960s to learn that even Mamaw was a string instrumentalist. This occurred one Christmas when we lived in Charlestown at 224 Marcy Street, one half of a duplex in the Pleasant Ridge project. Aunt Marg, Uncle Tip and their children lived in the other half of the duplex, and we had cut a door in the wall to allow easy access from one home to the other. David Grace received an electric guitar for Christmas and was creating one heck of a racket with it. After a period of silence, I suddenly heard someone playing chords on the guitar. Imagine my surprise when I rounded the corner and saw it was Mamaw.

Heaverin and Corrine Bolton did not have running water in their house until 1974 when they were both about 75 years old. A frequent complaint in her letters to Aunt Seabay before this time was how Papaw was so lazy that she always had to haul the water from the well into the house. Aunt Marg wrote Seabay in January 1971 to set the record straight on that point. According to her, it was in fact Papaw who carried in all the water.

Seabay and L E had neither the experience nor the expense of raising children. They didn't have to invest the time and energy required of parents. Later in their marriage they thought Seabay was pregnant, and L E would caution her to take care of their child, but that turned out to be a false hope. Instead, they focused their attention on making their home as comfortable as it could be. To supplement their income, they planted large vegetable gardens and raised farm animals (chiefly hogs and chickens) on their 7 acres of mostly hilly farm land. Sometimes L E rented out the land to others who pastured cattle or goats on it.

L E's aunt, Lena Jackson, who raised him, used to laugh and say that she thought he would never stop playing around with bicycles, but eventually his attention turned to motor cars. L E became a master mechanic working in Stuart Maddox's garage, a business that he eventually bought. One summer a major dispute with Mr. Maddox caused L E to move all his tools to the 2-car garage next to their house. That didn't last long, and soon all the tools went back to Maddox's garage.

It was Seabay who had the real head for business in the Jackson family, and she was responsible for keeping all the receipts and tax information necessary to run a successful small business. I've often wondered what Seabay might have become in a different age and under different circumstances. She had many talents, but not many opportunities to apply them.

Although L E had no son to help him in his auto repair work, he eventually recruited and trained a very capable assistant, Roy Tooley. The Tooleys lived over the hill along the road that ran toward Grandad Dennis's old place. They did not have drinkable water where they lived, so at a very early age, Roy and one of his siblings would pull a wagon up the hill to L E's house and fill jugs to cart home. Eventually, L E asked Roy to help him in the garage by handing him tools as he worked in and under cars and trucks. Despite being totally illiterate, Roy became a fine mechanic. By 1968, Roy was doing all the mechanical work on automobiles.

A crisis arose one summer while I was visiting. Roy, married by now, demanded more money. I was shocked to hear how little L E was paying him. When L E refused to increase his wages, Roy quit. L E asked me to visit Roy to seek a reconciliation. I did, and suitable terms were agreed upon to allow Roy to return to work. As L E turned more and more to the repair of lawn mowers, he finally built a garage next to their home to work on smaller engines in early 1970. Roy set up his own car repair business, depending on his wife to handle any tasks that involved reading and writing.

A few years later, L E began to explore another source of income, the Black Lung Benefits Act of 1973. When I heard about his efforts to get Black Lung money, I said to him that I never knew he worked in the mines. "Oh, yes," he replied. "I was a water boy." By 1973 many of the mining companies in the area were long defunct, and their records destroyed. Someone came up with a solution that allowed former miners to find two other people to swear that they had worked together in the mines. I heard that there was quite a network of people in Muhlenberg County who were willing to swear on an affidavit that they had all worked together in various mines. L E got the Black Lung money.

L E was a hypochondriac, but he really did have some health problems, one of them associated with the difficult birth that took the life of his mother. He suffered from a mastoid condition that eventually required him to have an operation performed in Louisville by Dr. Gordon Green, one of several medical people in the Bishop family. (4)

L E was always a nervous person and would sit at the kitchen table with a piece of white bread, carefully pressing it together until he compacted it into a small half-inch cube. His nervous condition eventually led him to stay for a long period of time in a restful environment near Louisville. Despite that and taking several medications aimed at calming his nerves, L E never gained complete control over the demons that haunted him. He spent a lot of time sleeping in later life.

Long before people became so health conscious about their diets, L E practiced what he thought were more healthful approaches to eating. He never ate white bread straight out of the package. Instead, he toasted every piece of bread that he ate. He also blotted with a paper towel the copious grease from the bacon that Seabay fried and insisted on poached eggs for breakfast. Grease was a real concern, as was soap residue on the dishes. I still can hear him asking Seabay, "Did you rinch off them dishes?" This used to infuriate Seabay, who had her own way of doing things. She was a great cook, even if some of it did tend to be a bit greasy. Hey, you can't make biscuits and gravy without grease!

L E had a hiatal hernia and to combat food from coming back into his esophagus when he slept, the bed was propped up at about a 20-degree angle. He developed fixations on certain drinks that he liked and was convinced were good for him. For years, he drank lots of iced tea from a very large glass. That was followed by chocolate milk as his next addiction, followed by Ensure nutrition shakes.

An accident that L E had at work led to a story often repeated in our family. There was no air conditioning in the old Maddox Garage, so to get a little ventilation during hot weather, he had to jump onto the work benches and raise the large windows. Sometime in the last half of the 1950s, L E fell backwards while jumping onto a bench and stepped hard on the end of a middle finger. The finger became badly infected. Despite efforts by doctors to draw out the infection by placing his entire hand in a rubber mitt that had warm water circulating through it, the end of the finger eventually had to be removed at the end joint. While it was healing, L E took some time off work, and he and I did a lot of fishing together that summer. He was sitting on the floor in front of the TV one evening when he let out

a yell. I ran in from the kitchen and asked what was wrong. He said that he reached up to scratch his head, and feeling nothing with the middle finger, thought he had a hole in his head! That was his idea of a joke.

L E didn't joke around much, but he once emerged from the bathroom in the morning and announced, "I'm 20 pounds heavier with a hard on." After our initial shock, we got quite a laugh out of that. Aunt Seabay could crack you up too with comments such as, "What do you think of a man whose idea of romance is to ask, 'You wouldn't want to give me a little tonight, would you?'"

If I searched for one thing to distinguish the lives of most of our family living in Charlestown in the 1950s, compared to those in Central City, it would be personal wealth. The people in Central City seemed much better off financially than their poor relatives across the Ohio River, not necessarily happier, but financially more secure. You could bet that if one of the Dennis siblings got a new piece of furniture, an almost identical style would be found in the homes of the others very soon thereafter. There was always a sort of "keeping-up-with-the-Joneses" contest among the families of the Dennis siblings in Central City, but the game for all in Charlestown was "keeping your head above water."

When color TVs became available in the 1950s, L E got the largest home antenna tower I have ever seen, complete with a device to rotate it remotely toward stations in Evansville, Nashville, and Louisville. His TV had by far the best reception of anyone around the area. The TV became a source of great enjoyment for Seabay and L E. She liked to watch The Lawrence Welk show and such religious broadcasts as the Billy Graham crusades. (Who could forget George Beverly Shea's rendition of "How Great Thou Art"?) For L E, it was the news programs that drew most of his attention, especially such Sunday morning features as Meet the Press.



L E Jackson and the big TV antenna



L E Jackson and his RCA color TV

Many were the "Care packages" that Aunt Seabay sent to Mom and others in Charlestown, loaded with clothes, curtains, towels, etc. she no longer wanted and old copies of newspapers from Central City. These were always eagerly read by several of the ladies in our family.

It became a time of intense activity in the homes of the poor Charlestown relatives when we learned that Seabay and L E were planning to come for a visit. Walls were scrubbed or painted, new linoleum was bought, and generally any evidence of turmoil was carefully hidden when Seabay arrived bearing more gifts and L E came in with his little suitcase loaded with the many types of medication that he thought he might need on the trip. Invariably he would forget to bring along his Vaseline hair tonic, and we would have to make a dash to the store to buy a bottle.

On one of these trips around 1960, L E had me drive him to the Louisville airport. He always liked to see the big planes take off and land when they came up our way. On the way back, I kept hearing thumping noises coming from underneath the car. We stopped at the service station where I traded, and the owner put the car on the rack, revealing huge humps the size of grapefruits on all four of the tires. The service station man could not believe what he saw. The tires appeared to be new, with most of the tread intact, so he asked L E how long they had been on the car. L E replied, "Let's see now. I bought that car in 1949, and it's 1960 now—about 11 years!" The Buick sat idly in L E's garage most of the time, and the tires had dry-rotted to the point that they almost exploded.

L E had no choice but to buy a new set of tires, but the station owner did not have his size in stock. He sent his helper to Louisville 13 miles away to get a set of new tires and, in the meantime, began to take off the old tires. In those days, changing a tire meant mounting it on a rack and manually prying it off the rim with a lever with an attached roller. Running the lever around the tire's inner edge freed one side from the rim. The flattened inner tube was then removed. Only this time all the air did not come out of the inner tube; it deflated only about halfway down. The old Buick had what were known as safety tubes, smaller inner tubes within the outer tubes so that if you got a puncture, it would not go down all the way, allowing you to continue driving for a while.

The service station man grappled with the tubes until he was blue in the face, and finally, one by one, he got all the tires off the rims, just about the time his assistant pulled up with the new set. L E took one look at the very narrow white sidewalls that were popular at the time and said he didn't like the way they looked. He wanted another set with no whitewalls. After considerable urging from me, L E agreed to let them put one of the new tires on a rim to see how it looked on the car. Fortunately, he liked it enough to buy the set, thus averting a conflict with the service station man.



Seabay and the 1949 Buick Roadmaster

This was another quirk of L E. Whether it was a car he bought or a truck or a TV or whatever, you could almost always count on him wanting to return it the next day because something about it didn't quite

look or work right. It fell to Seabay most of the time to call the dealers and try to get something that L E would be satisfied with.

Despite all his quirks and idiosyncrasies, I loved this man dearly, for in many ways, he was my surrogate father. The savings that he and Seabay were able to amass through their hard work were largely used to pay the fees that inevitably came their way when Seabay's progressive Alzheimer's Disease and L E's decreasing ability to care for himself led to their final residence, Greenville's Maple Manor nursing home. But those are stories for a later chapter.

NOTES

1. I ran across another person in the family tree who used the same spelling of Seabay that I do. She is Emma Seabay Annis, wife of George Washington Faught, Aunt Seabay's great-aunt on her mother's side.
2. "Spider webs have natural antiseptic and antifungal properties that help keep wounds clean and free of infection. In traditional European medicine, cobwebs are used on wounds and cuts to help healing and reduce bleeding. The reason they heal so well and so quickly is because spider webs are rich in vitamin K - the clotting vitamin." <https://remedygrove.com/remedies/Organic-Healing-Treating-Bleeding-Wounds-With-Cobwebs>
3. The Boltons undoubtedly played and sang with Isaac Milford "Ike" Everly, Jr., the father of Phil and Don, the Everly Brothers. The Bolton girls were supposed to have been gifted singers, and in his high school years, Dick Bolton was known for his singing.
4. Grandad Dennis was fond of quoting a neighbor, old Mr. Berry Bishop, who said that he raised a doctor, two nurses, and one horse's ass. This last was his son, Cecil Drake Bishop, one of Mom's former boyfriends, who ended up marrying a Polish lady, Kaye. Drake made quite a reputation as an artist. Mother even had a little squirrel that Drake carved in walnut, but it has since been lost. For more on Drake Bishop, see: "Central City artist is jack of all trades." *Central City Times-Argus*, April 21, 1976, p. 4.

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