

The Gathering Place

by Kimberly Fletcher



When I was a little girl I spent every summer in a little town called Cowansville, an hour north of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The town was named after one of my ancestors, John Cowan, who purchased the land after the Revolutionary War. For over 200 years our family called the town home. When my mother was growing up, the little town was home to her eleven aunts and uncles and a virtual army of cousins. And the center of it all was our family homestead where my great-grandparents (Charles and Jesse) lived and where the family gathered for holidays, picnics, and special occasions. It was affectionately known as the Gathering Place and beautiful memories that would bind the family together for generations were created there.

My great-grandma, known to all as Grandma Jesse, birthed eleven babies in that house. It was the place where her sons would leave to serve in the Second World War and where jubilant celebrations were held upon their safe return. The Homestead sat on a small hill off an old dirt road. Lining the front of the house were

eleven soaring pine trees—one for each one of Grandma Jesse’s children which she carefully planted with her own hands. I spent a lot of summers climbing in those trees as a child. My mother told me it was a favorite place for her and her cousins as well.

When my mother was a young girl my great-grandfather passed away and Grandma Jesse gave the homestead to my grandfather and decided to move into the old parson’s house next to the town church. After Grandma moved from the homestead, it was her oldest daughter, my Aunt Helen, who would open her home as the new family gathering place. And that was the gathering place of my childhood.

Each summer, for as long as I can remember, my parents would drive me to Cowansville and I would spend several weeks with Grandma Jesse. To this day when I hear the sweet sound of birds singing in the morning, my mind is taken back to the memory of that little town.

There were a lot of special places in Cow-

ansville but my favorite was Grandma's front porch. It seemed as if you could see the whole world from there. It was the perfect view to witness the bustle at Uncle George's store across the street. And we had a front row seat to all the campers and travelers driving to Paradise Park to see Minnie Pearl or Roy Clark. The whole Hee-Haw gang performed at the park at one time or another. There were so many things to do and see in the little town but, for me, there was none more magical than Aunt Helen's house.

Aunt Helen's house was a bit of heaven for a little girl with a big imagination and thirst for adventure. The fruit orchards behind the house burst with apples and pears that Aunt Helen converted into delicious pies and preserves. Gathering the fruit was one of my favorite things because they used a wagon pulled by my Uncle's big green tractor. I just plopped in the back and enjoyed the ride.

A small pathway connected the garage (where they kept the tractor) to the house where everyone gathered. Along the pathway was a large white arbor laden with the scent of sweet smelling lilacs that floated through the air all summer long. Next to the arbor lay a little cement patio with a small white, intricately designed, cast iron table and two matching chairs. That little corner was one of my most favorite places as a child. I held all my best tea parties at that little table, surrounded by my favorite dolls dressed in their finest attire. I felt like a princess dining in her castle garden. It was a dreamy time in a magical place. To this day when I read the stories of fairy tales and princesses, I think of those days in Cowansville.

Aunt Helen's house was often full of people and always full of love. Little things like the candy jars filled with peppermint lozenges, and the sweet sound of gospel music played on the old pump organ made everyone who entered feel welcome and at home. I remember sitting at the foot of that organ at many family gatherings as Aunt Helen played old hymns surrounded by family members singing in harmony—Rock of Ages, How Great Thou Art, The Old Rugged Cross. I learned all the old greats at the foot of that organ. Aunt Helen was a fan of country music too—especially Kenny Rogers. I was only seven years old when I had memorized "Lucille" and could sing every word by heart without skipping a beat. I had no idea what I was singing but I was sure proud to be singing with the grown-ups.

There was always a buzz that went through the family when a distant cousin would come to town and everyone knew they would be stopping at Aunt Helen's house to catch up on family news and share the stories of their lives. Most of those stories were shared on Aunt Helen's front porch.

Stretching the entire length of the front of the house, the porch was a relaxing haven filled with cozy chairs and two porch swings that hung from either end.

The whole porch just seemed to be a big welcome sign and I guess I wasn't the only one who thought so, because the entire town seemed to accept the invitation at one time or another. You never knew who would pass by and stop in but almost everyone did. I loved to sit on the steps and listen to the stories of everyone's lives and all the news of the day. I didn't always understand what they were saying but I sure

loved hearing them talk. I can still hear the creaking of the swing, the chattering of voices, the rumble of cars going up and down the road in front of the house, and the occasional hum of a distant lawn mower filling the air with the smell of fresh cut grass.

Several years ago, soon after my husband Derek and I were married, we had an opportunity to visit Cowansville. I wanted to share my most treasured memories with the man I loved and I wanted to share him with the people I spent so much time with, so of course, we went to Aunt Helen's house.

The town had changed a lot by then. Grandma Jesse had passed away when I was twelve and the old parson's house where she had lived for so many years and where I had spent all those summers had been torn down. The grass had completely grown over and there was no sign there was ever a house there.

Uncle George retired and sold his store shortly before Grandma passed away. The postal service purchased it and converted it into a mail warehouse and post office. The rest of the town seemed pretty much the same as we came to Aunt Helen's front porch—which hadn't changed a bit.

Aunt Helen had grown late in years, her husband had passed on, and her eyesight was dwindling but she looked as wonderful to me as she always did. My husband and I spent hours on that old porch talking to my Aunt Helen that day. We shared the story of how we met, the places where we'd been, and she caught us up on all the family news. Visits to Aunt Helen's

had grown fewer and fewer over the years but Aunt Helen still seemed to have all the news. Though the days of parties and reunions were over and people stopped visiting, they all stayed connected through Aunt Helen's letters—a virtual gathering place through her pen and paper.

Just a few years after that visit, Aunt Helen passed away and I was so glad Derek and I had a chance to make that last trip to the Gathering Place. I wondered who would keep the family connected now that Aunt Helen was gone.

In the summer of 2002 my children and I were driving through Pennsylvania on the way to visit family and I decided to take the children to see our ancestral home. I was so excited to share all the memories of one of the happiest places of my childhood with them.

As we reached the bend that led into town my heart ached at the sight of so much change. The row of houses that once led up to the big white church was now just a big empty field of grass. Many of the houses had either been torn down or were in serious disrepair and needed to be. We drove by the old family homestead—the place that held so many years of memories as the original Gathering Place. As we passed by I counted the pine trees in front of the house. Grandma Jesse had carefully planted one for each child—eleven in all. There were only five now. The house had been sold years earlier and the new owners had no knowledge or understanding for the purpose of the trees. They didn't see the value, all they saw was an obstructed view that needed cleared. I told the children about the trees

but they just said, "That's great, Mom."

We drove down the main road and stopped at Uncle George's store. The outside looked the same but when the children and I stepped inside there was not even a hint of the place it used to be. The store had been completely gutted and the only thing left was a small white room with tile floors, a large glass pass-through window, and walls lined with mailboxes. I closed my eyes and for a moment I could smell the old wood that once lined the floors and heard the bell that chimed when someone entered the store. Familiar sights and sounds echoed through my mind—the rattle of the old manual cash register, the chattering of neighbors shopping and collecting their mail, the smell of pipe smoke.

"Mommy," my young son pulled me from my memories, "Mommy, I'm hungry."

Suddenly the room felt cold again. All the warmth that made it a special place was gone and I realized all my children could see were boring white walls lined with mailboxes. I gave the kids a snack and we drove over to the cemetery where I had walked so many times with Grandma Jesse to place fresh cut flowers on family graves. As we walked through the cemetery past names of people I never met but came to know, the children became more and more restless. "Mom, this is boring," they moaned. "Can we go now?" It was apparent they weren't seeing what I could see. While I saw the history and heritage in the lives of those laid to rest in this place, all my children saw were a bunch of names of dead people who didn't matter. It was heart wrenching.

Place after place we stopped, memory after memory I shared, but their reaction was the same. They were tired; they were hungry; they were bored. "Can we go now?"

I just couldn't understand why they didn't appreciate what I was sharing with them. Why didn't they respect the places and people whose lives were immortalized in my memory? Why didn't they understand the importance of this place?

And then I realized—it was because I didn't share it with them. The reason I had such a love and respect for all those things, is because Grandma Jesse allowed me to experience them. She took the time to take me to a cemetery to visit family members and tell me the stories of our family and the place we called home for two centuries.

I sent the children back to the car and we headed out of town. I had one place left to show them—the Gathering Place. I knew Aunt Helen had passed away but I could at least show them the house and the front porch that welcomed so many guests and was the focal point for generations of family gatherings. As we crested the hill I pointed to the place where Aunt Helen lived for so many years, but to my utter shock there was nothing there. The house was gone!

Devastated and stunned, I pulled over and called my mother to ask what had happened. She said after Aunt Helen passed away her grandchildren put the house up for sale and auctioned off all her things. A few years later the house caught fire and burned to the ground. The place our family gathered for half a century was now nothing but a vacant lot!

With aching heart and tear-filled eyes I drove out of town that day. Everything I knew was gone.

The town that was once the picture perfect backdrop for a Norman Rockwell painting was now just a shell of what once was. I couldn't help the regret I felt at not sharing the stories of this place and the people that lived there with my children. I felt such loss as I realized that, because of my neglect, the memory of this place that lived and breathed through our family for two hundred years...would die with me.

As I contemplated my experience in Cowansville that summer, I started to think about all the things I hadn't shared with my children. What else was dear to me that I should have shared with them and didn't? It wasn't long before I had my answer.

We were reading a book about the Founding Fathers and the Declaration of Independence one day after the children came home from school when my daughter, fourteen at the time, made a comment that left me utterly speechless. I was in the process of reading, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal..." when my daughter interrupted me to explain that, "What they really meant was that these rights were for wealthy, white, land owning men with a secondary education. They believed that equality was only for this exclusive group."

I was stunned. And the question I had asked over and over again since 9-11 "how did we get here" was answered. Our history was being rewritten. Our people were being stripped of their heritage.

The Founding Families that sacrificed so much were being denigrated. Our founding documents were being disregarded and distorted. All the things I counted on our children learning in school—because I learned them—were no longer being taught. Our garden was being stolen and we had to reclaim it!

Suddenly I realized just how vitally important I was, not only to my children, but to the preservation of America. How can future generations ever understand and embrace the history, heritage, and legacy of liberty that is uniquely American if we don't share it with our children? My heart ached at the thought of my children seeing the United States Constitution as just words on paper, or looking at the images of our Founding Fathers and seeing nothing but a bunch of dead people who didn't matter. Would they stand in front of the Statue of Liberty, the Lincoln Memorial or Constitution Hall like they did our family homestead and say "That's great mom" with complete disinterest? The answer was up to me. Would I be the bridge crossing the liberty gap that would link generations in freedom or would it die with me? I knew, for everything I hold dear, I had to be the bridge. I had to reclaim the garden and I had to start with me.

"Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States where men were free."

—Ronald Reagan

Discussion Questions

- ★ *What made Kimberly's memories of her childhood in this article so vivid?*
- ★ *Why did it mean so much to her? What is the value of gathering spaces?*
- ★ *What have you done or what would you like to do better to bring your kids close to their heritage so that it becomes a part of them?*
- ★ *What are some of your favorite traditions, or what traditions have you heard of that you want to start?*
- ★ *What are some ways you enjoy sharing your faith, patriotism, and family history with your kids?*
- ★ *What did your mom, (or dad, or other family member) do to instill those ideas in you when you were young?*
- ★ *What did Kimberly learn about the importance of her role as a woman and mother through the experiences she wrote about in this article?*