

'GRANDPA WAS A CHARACTER, ALL RIGHT'

In Celoron, N.Y., lived Fred C. Hunt and his family, including a grandchild, Lucy

By Dwight Whitney

CELORON, village (pop. 1349) on Chautauqua Lake near Jamestown, upstate N.Y.; inc. 1896.

It's such a dinky little place, it's not even on most maps. Once there was an amusement park with ferris wheel, and a pier ballroom where Rudy Vallee used to play, and a lot of summer visitors dropping in from Chautauqua 15 miles up the lake to hear John Philip Sousa play the outdoor band concert. But these are long gone. The breeze coming in off the lake is now

Lucy as teen-ager (left), with brother Freddie, cousin Cleo (right) and unidentified friend.

tainted with gas fumes, and condominiums tower where once the lilacs grew.

Lucy can still smell those lilacs. These are her roots, the well-spring for whatever is unique about Lucille Ball's comedy. She can still see the little white, two-story "American Gothic" house where she grew up; hear her grandfather, Fred C. Hunt, scandalizing her strait-faced grandmother by declaring, "The first Hunt in America was a Texas horse thief"; remember his kindnesses to children; smell his Prince Albert pipe tobacco; and bask in the glory of his vegetable garden, a culinary Eden which he cultivated, he said, so that no one in Celoron, no matter how impecunious, would ever go hungry.

Oh, Grandpa was a character all right. He was, according to his other granddaughter, Cleo Smith, Lucy's cousin and oldest confidante, "an enormously earthy, humorous man with a great sense of roots and heritage." A hardy French-Irish-English descendant of Early American homesteaders, he loved the underdog with a fine passion. He hated bureaucrats or any- →



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thing else that tended to box him in. He himself was not a churchgoer—churches were too bureaucratic—but he condoned his grandchildren's Sunday school because they wanted to go, and he figured it was probably good for them. Old-fashioned, no-nonsense Socialism appealed to him more. He read the *Daily Worker* and led the cheering for labor leader Eugene V. Debs at the Jamestown furniture factory where he worked as a wood turner, and the joke was that Grandpa could not so much as get two underpaid chambermaids together without organizing them into a union.

He had an insatiable, if curmudgeonish, love of life which found its most glittering expression through children. "Got us up early, otherwise we might miss something," recalls Lucy. "Sunsets, he loved 'em. Made us love 'em. He wore an old cardigan sweater" and a wide-brimmed hat always on the tilt, played ricky-tick piano and sang naughty ditties. Always he made things—playhouses in trees, teeter-totters, doll houses, tents, bobsleds, stilts.

In the winter it was skating and sliding and fishing through the ice for muskie. In the summer, boat rides and groaning picnic baskets.

"Then there were those five-cent streetcar rides into Jamestown to 'do things,' see the vaudeville show, which he loved. Every week something new. It gave us a closeness, let us know someone cared."

Next to love, his greatest gift was for survival. Grandpa was nothing if

not an outfoxer of the fates, an endeavor in which he was not always successful. He hung a framed copy of Kipling's "If" near the isinglass-fronted kerosene stove in the parlor, and he believed every word of it, particularly that part about triumph going hand in hand with disaster. His jousts with the establishment became legend. Like the time in his dotage when the City of Los Angeles refused to let him cut down the tree in front of Lucy's N. Ogden Drive house.

It blocked his view of the world going by. Grandpa furtively hacked away at the roots, replacing the sod after each hack, until one day it fell down in a rainstorm—right on Lucy's yellow convertible.

All this was as ingenuous and somehow as touching as a Lucy show—any Lucy show—in which Lucy haplessly fends off Gale Gordon's establishmentarian ways, fights her manic battles of the sexes, or hatches some incredibly bizarre plan to bend fate to her will. Grandpa was Lucy's secret ingredient, and there is a lot of him in "Lucy Ricardo,"

even more in "Lucy Carter."

Not that life in Celoron was all that "You Can't Take It with You"-ish. There was a bit of "The Cherry Orchard" mixed in. Hard times plagued everyone. The family knew tragedy. Grandpa was the strongman who held things together. He played father figure to all the family orphans, taking them into that tiny but miraculously expandable house, making them laugh, fortifying them with rhubarb (his favorite →



Grandpa and Grandma Hunt.

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food) and other powerful elixirs of the spirit.

There was his oldest daughter, Desiree, called De-De, who married Henry Ball, a telephone lineman with a Barrymore profile, who begat a brash, skinny daughter named Lucille and moved to Butte, Mont. When Henry Ball died of typhoid shortly before Lucy's fourth birthday, it was Grandpa who took in De-De and Lucy and her as-yet-unborn brother, Freddie. The year was 1915.

There was Cleo's mother, Lola, whose husband, George Mandicos, a darkly handsome Greek immigrant boy, fell upon hard times shortly after their marriage in 1918. Grandpa ultimately took them all in.

There was Uncle Ned Orchutt, who used to drop in from Chagrin Falls, Ohio, kept money in his shoe because he didn't trust banks, and, no matter what marvels you showed him, always replied, "Humph! We got the same thing in Chagrin Falls." There was Aunt

Lucy's mother—De-De Ball.



Carrie, who had 10 children. There was cousin Thelma, who induced Cleo to smoke cigarettes out behind the barn. There were those endless great aunts and uncles, Grandmother's kin, who dropped around for Sunday dinner—rhubarb pie for dessert. Grandmother Hunt (nee Flora Belle Orchutt) came from a family which had five sets of twins. "A real pioneer woman," says Lucy admiringly. "When both parents died, they all ended up in orphanages. It was my grandmother who got them out. When she died at 51, it was almost too much to bear. All I remember is holding on to my brother Freddie's hand, walking to the funeral."

Then there was Ed Peterson, a sheet-metal worker who looked like King Gustav of Sweden. He married the widowed De-De, and for a while after Grandmother died they lived in Jamestown. Not for long. When times got tough, they returned to Grandpa's protective cocoon. Meantime, big things were happening to Lucy.

"She always had enormous energy, flair, style," says Cousin Cleo. "She took us all over, particularly me, who was eight years younger. She was a reactor—she reacted to everything. Always conning us to be in her plays, and always in hot water with somebody. Running away was reacting. She'd inveigle me into going with her—I had a piggy bank. It was always very dramatic when we were caught. And that was the point. What she really wanted was to play a scene."

As for the more formal side of show biz, she got her first taste of that at the vaudeville show with Grandpa. "Then there was Tom Mix and all those Pearl White serials. Wow! I knew I had to be part of it," Lucy says. "I tried out every year for the Scottish Rite Revue. I got with the Jamestown Players. I did 'Within the Law,' a Sadie Thompson-type thing. The reviews compared me to Jeanne Eagels, someone I'd never heard of." →

"It was my stepfather who introduced me to the Chautauqua circuit, then at its height as a platform for lecturers, musicians, actors. One night a monologist named Julian Eltinge was appearing. A female impersonator yet. Ed insisted I go. There sat this man with one light bulb, a little table and a glass of water creating a whole world out of nothing, making people laugh and cry. It was magic. I can still see him, lank and tall. He looked like Lincoln."

It was one thing to impulsively dedicate one's life to becoming an actress and another to break out of Celoron. Around upstate New York, "actress" still had a wicked connotation. Luckily her mother was a remarkably emancipated woman for that time.

Cousin Cleo remembers how it was: "De-De was never bound by the social conventions of the day. She didn't mind the ridicule of the neighbors. Lucy said she wanted to play the saxophone? He got a saxophone. Freddie a cello? He got a cello. She never cried poor. She allowed us to express ourselves. She taught us character, values, involvement. She operated on the theory that none of us would ever disgrace Grandpa. It was a relationship based on trust. She was the one who decided to let Lucille—everybody called her Lucille then—go to New York at 15."

Lucy was hardly an instant success. The John Murray Anderson drama school wrote De-De shortly after Lucy's enrollment that she was "wasting her money" and recommended immediate abandonment of any attempts to make this squawky, gawky girl into an actress. "I was shy, terrified," Lucy says. "And I got so homesick I grew physically ill. I'd run home for a while, then gather up my courage and go back. For years I never even got inside a theater. But I sure managed to burn up a lot in train fare."

Meantime the Celoron idyll came to an abrupt and tragic halt. Freddie had

been given a .22 rifle for Christmas, with the promise that he could shoot it on his 12th birthday. When the birthday arrived, Grandpa set up a target in the back yard and all the neighbor kids stood around to watch. Suddenly a 6-year-old neighbor boy darted across the line of fire, stopped a bullet, and was crippled for life.

Grandpa was in agony. The embittered parents went to court and charged that he had "made a target" of the child. To worsen matters, the court made a cruel disposition. It ordered Fred C. Hunt to await trial in Mayville, the county seat up at the other end of the lake, and never to move beyond the city limits while the trial was pending. Grandpa was acquitted, but the damage had been done. He had been forced to sell the Celoron house to pay for legal fees. "It broke his heart and his spirit," Lucy says.

Ed, De-De and Lola (by this time separated from George Mandicos) rented a house in Jamestown. De-De worked in a department store, Lola took up nursing, and Ed continued to work in a factory. The Depression was coming on strong. When Lola died a year or so later, the breakup was complete. Cleo went to live with her father in Buffalo. Grandpa retreated further into his books. The smell of lilacs never seemed more remote.

Lucy figured it was up to her to put the family back together again. To do that she'd have to put a hammerlock on her old nemesis, show business, and never was there a more unequal contest. "I had no training, no personality, no talent," she says flatly. Her assault reads like an old *I Love Lucy* script, complete with pratfalls. When she couldn't make it as an actress, she became a Hattie Carnegie model. (Hattie wanted her blonde; Lucy settled for red.) She fell in love a lot ("Love? I was *always* falling in love!"). She was accident-prone. She survived a Central Park auto accident in →

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which she lay for half an hour untended in the freezing cold and developed a severe case of rheumatic arthritis. Still she kept plugging.

When she finally made it to Hollywood in 1933, it wasn't much—she was a Goldwyn Girl in Eddie Cantor's "Roman Scandals"—but it was enough. On the strength of a \$50-a-week contract with RKO, she bought an old house in 1935 and started sending for people. De-De and Freddie and Grandpa were the first to arrive. Cleo, just turned 17, followed a year later. Even Uncle Ned Orchutt showed up from Chagrin Falls, money-shoe and all. Grandpa fooled around in the garden, made little presents in the garage and took to nipping. Later, Lucy got him a job in the RKO woodworking department. It didn't last long. Grandpa retired to his "corner," a space behind the front door where he had his ottoman chair, his meerschau, his dictionary and his National Geographics, from which he would heckle Lucy's or Cleo's or Freddie's date. "Now, listen here, young fellow, about this fellow Roosevelt," he would begin.

It was Lucy who now organized the picnics in Griffith Park and led all the parades Grandpa used to lead. In 1940 Desi Arnaz, the Cuban bongo player, joined Lucy's procession. "Grandpa! A beautiful man. I loved him!" cries Desi. "Couldn't get in the door without his reading all those People's World editorials. I told him cut it out or I'd teach him how to rumba."

As he grew older, Grandpa got to be a handful. He used to go down to the corner, Desi remembers, where the hookers hung out, lecture them on the evils of the oldest profession, and offer them \$5 to "take the night off." For a while during the war he was an air-raid warden. Trouble was, Grandpa had a hernia, and by the time they got him into his truss, the all-clear had sounded.

Grandpa died in 1944. His funeral

was more like a wake. The whole family (which by now included Desi and Ken Morgan, about to marry Cleo) piled into a big black Cadillac and rode to the cemetery. "It was wild," Morgan recalls. "We kept topping each other's Grandpa stories and before long we were laughing instead of crying."

On the day we talked about Grandpa and Celoron, Lucy said, "That's where I learned about life. That's where I found out what was right and what was wrong and that you have a responsibility to people who love you. The values you get as a child, they open the door."

Lucy wove a whole world around the Celoron ethic. It was "right" to favor her own kin. Kenny Morgan became her press agent. Freddie was Desi's band manager for years. Gary Morton, whom she married in 1961, became her executive producer, and Cleo her producer. Little Lucie and Desi she made into instant stars. She made no apologies. "Nepotism? You bet it's nepotism," she was fond of saying, "and I love it."

Breaking up her marriage to Desi was "wrong." There they were, America's Sweethearts and, as Norman Vincent Peale used to tell Lucy, everybody's idea of the perfect married couple. To admit to their fallibility would betray the faith of millions.

"I used to cry a lot, but not any more," Lucy says now. "We had everything, Desi and I—two beautiful children, our own show, even our own studio. That's when everything *really* began to come apart." She pauses and dabs at those hot blue eyes. Then, as quickly, the mood lightens. "Now I have a man, a conscientious man, who really takes the role of protector of the family to heart."

Ah, that's good. Particularly pleasing to the spirit of an old man in a worn cardigan sweater who raised rhubarb, smoked Prince Albert pipe tobacco, and had an ancestor who was a "Texas horse thief."

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