

## A Cowgirl from the Bronx

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You could say that the city of New York celebrated my arrival by throwing a parade.

I was born on March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1940 in New York City, at the hospital on 124<sup>th</sup> and Amsterdam Avenue in Harlem. In those leisurely times, mothers stayed in the hospital for ten days. I left the hospital on a wet and snowy Sunday, just in time for the St. Patrick's Day parade. Since my family is Irish American, I was named Patricia after St. Patrick

I was the first child born to Rita and Frank. Sixteen months later, my sister Anne came along. When she was born, my mother had another ten day stay in the hospital. When she came to pick me up from her mother's, I didn't remember her. I just looked at her and said, "Nice lady, nice lady."

When my sister came home, I kept trying to poke her eyes. It wasn't a jealousy thing. It was because her eyes were brown and bright. My sister had brown hair and hazel eyes. And I'm blue eyed and blond so we were opposite in looks.

At first, we lived in an apartment in the Bronx. My earliest memory is of going to a nearby park in the summertime. It was a popular thing for mothers to do with their children. I remember rolling down the hill on the grass, then running up and rolling down all over again.

My father was not a very good breadwinner. A lot of times we didn't have enough of even basic things. Often my mother had to make pancakes for supper because that's all we had in the cupboard. Luckily, when I was about three, my father's dad let us move into a house he owned. If he hadn't done that, I would have grown up a Bronx slum. We had to pay my grandfather rent but it was lower than it would have been elsewhere.

The day we moved, I wanted my Sleepy Doll. It was packed and my mother wouldn't get it for me. A small thing to an adult, but to a child, a tragedy. My mother was not a loving person and she probably was very annoyed by my tears. Still, she tried to do right by her children. She was protective and she taught me from an early age to love books and reading. She read to us every evening from the time I was 3 years old, which was wonderful.

Our new home was next door to my paternal grandparents' home. It was in a blue-collar neighborhood of one and two family homes, in the North Bronx, just on the border with Westchester County, Mount Vernon.

The house, a two-story wood frame, was very plain both inside and out. The front steps led into an enclosed porch which didn't have any heating. You'd go from there into the living room, which connected to the dining room, and then to the kitchen. From the dining room there was a staircase upstairs leading to the back bedroom which was mine, then a middle bedroom which was my sister's and the large front bedroom, which was my parents'. There was one bathroom at the back near the top of the stairs where I was.

As I got older, I liked to lie in my bedroom, reading. I had two windows. One of them faced a lot next to us that was undeveloped and had nice big trees in it, maple trees and elms. I had a little "junior" bed, low to the ground so if I fell out I wouldn't fall very far. Often I did fall out but I'd stay asleep. I could sleep through anything in those days. A couple of times lightning struck close to the house. It woke everyone else up, but not me.

There were blankets covering my bed. In fact my favorite blanket was one my uncle gave us. It was wool, white with blue stripes on it. In the blue stripe it had in white letters spelling *U.S. Navy*. It was special. I don't know how he brought it back but he did; he stole it from the U.S. Navy.

Like most of our neighbors, we were quite poor. My mother didn't have a washing machine, not even a wringer. She had to wash using a basin and a washboard. That she resented. There was a clothesline out the back window in my room to hang clothes up. In the winter time the sheets would come in all frozen and stiff.

We had a gas refrigerator and relied on coal, which was delivered to the house, for heat. It wasn't warm inside. We had the old fashioned kind of radiators, but the coal furnace in the basement didn't put out a lot of heat. Still, there's an advantage to growing up in a cold house: it makes you sturdier.

We didn't have a TV at that time but we had radio. My mother would be ironing and listening to it, and I'd sit and listen along with her to Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Fanny Brice and my favorite, the Lone Ranger.

On our block, there were 12 to 14 single family houses, all two-story, wood-frame houses like ours and all close together. There was a driveway between some and the ones that didn't have a driveway were really close.

In the summer months, people would be out on their stoops. We'd sit out and the neighbors would sit out and we chatted with each other through those hot, sticky Bronx evenings. I remember one young woman who talked endlessly about her boyfriend and her engagement.

The neighbors across the street were Italian. They were an older couple, about my grandparents' age and every so often the wife would get really mad at her husband. She'd chase him out of the house with a knife, screaming at him all the while. I don't think she ever hurt him and it provided entertainment for the rest of us.

Down the block there was a French couple. My mother always felt that they had an arranged marriage because she was much younger than he and there didn't seem to be much love

between them. My mother suspected she was having an affair. She was a very nice woman, though.

There was a Norwegian family, the Italian family, then us, the Irish Americans. I can't remember the others but it was a real mixture in that one block, that one little cosmos. There were some down the street who weren't particularly friendly. They weren't nasty but they just didn't socialize with anyone. In the last house there were Seventh Day Adventists and they kept trying to convert us.

One day, my mother said, "You can drop off your literature and on Sunday I'll get literature from the Catholic Church and I'll drop it off at your place."

That stopped their visits.

People think of the Bronx as a rough place, but I don't recall any crime at all in the area. The worst thing that happened was the milkman was making his deliveries and his truck flipped over on its side and he was pinned under it and badly hurt. I don't know how badly because my mother kept me away from anything like that. That was good of her, because I've never been able to stand any kind of violence or gore. But that accident was about the worst thing I can remember in the neighborhood.

### **Kids' life**

The world seemed safer in those days and city kids spent a lot more time alone outdoors. We had a backyard with a few bushes. Neither of my parents was into gardening so it looked a little scruffy. I planted a peach pit and it grew into a tree. We even got peaches off it. It took a while to get there but it did. Call it *A Peach Tree Grows in the Bronx*, sequel to a *Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

My sister and I would play in the back yard, in the dirt building things the same way that kids at the beach build things from sand. When I was eight or nine years old, I decided to put on a play and I got the kids from the neighborhood to be the audience. We hung a sheet up on the clothesline. I was having a great time and I asked the other kids how they liked it and they all told me it was awful.

When I was nine and ten, I was crazy about Roy Rogers. I'd go to this movie theatre about 7 or 8 blocks from where I lived, in the business area underneath the El. I'd walk there by myself on Saturday afternoons when they'd have children's movies. All the kids would be there alone with no adults in sight.

We were pretty poor and I didn't have a lot of fancy toys. The kids in the neighborhood played together outdoors a lot. In winter, we'd go sledding on our old red Flyer. I lived on a quiet street, not much traffic and it had a hill. When we'd get a good snow, we'd sled down the road. Sometimes the parents would be around in case a car was coming to get the kids out of the way. It was a community kind of thing. There was no ice skating right in my part of the Bronx, but we'd build snowmen and have snowball fights.

When the weather improved, we played street games like "Salugi". Only people from the Bronx—not even New York City, just the Bronx—would know these words. Salugi was also called Monkey in the Middle; you have two people on either end and the person in the middle is trying to get the ball as it's tossed.

And then there was "Potsy" which was a hopscotch type of game. We girls played that quite often, with chalk on the sidewalk or the driveway between the two houses. We played a lot of ball games though I never learned how to throw. I've always thrown like a girl.

Jumping rope was big. We jumped rope right into our teens. I did little Double Dutch but not enough that I ever got very good at it. I enjoyed being physically active. Roller skating was

another big summertime activity. My skates were the four wheel kind you strapped to your shoes I'd zoom around on the streets and glide through the school yard that was five or six blocks away.

I was a tomboy. By the time I was ten, eleven, twelve, I started learning how to climb trees. There was a boy down the street I was friendly with. He, along with another boy, taught me how to climb trees. I'd climb them in the lot next door or in empty lots nearby. We played different games there like cowboys and Indians, police and gangster, good guys and bad guys.

But even though I was a tomboy, I couldn't take any violence. I remember seeing Randolph Scott movies. He was a handsome actor in the 40s, who starred in westerns. He was the good cowboy. But whenever he was in a fistfight or anything like that, that night I'd have nightmares. Then I'd want to crawl into bed with my parents but they wouldn't let me.

When I was about 11, my mother signed me up for swimming lessons because I loved the water. She'd tried a little to teach me to swim when we were off camping so I knew how to float. But she felt I needed to know more so we went up to the YMCA (or the "M" as we called it) and signed up for lessons. The first time we went, I was all enthusiastic. But when I got in, I found that even the shallow end was too deep to stand up in.

I tried to do what the instructor said, but suddenly I was in over my head, gasping water in my mouth and lungs. It burned me and I was very upset and didn't want to go back.

When my mother picked me up and we got on the trolley, I pushed out my bottom lip and declared, "I'm not going back."

She looked at me but didn't say anything.

So the next week comes along and she said, "Get ready for your swimming lesson."

I glared at her. "I don't want to go."

She didn't argue with me or try to coax me but we went to the "M" anyway.

When we got there, she must have had a quiet word with the instructor, who was a lovely woman, because that day, the instructor let me stay by the side of the pool. She swam around with me holding onto her back like dolphins do with their young.

Little by little I regained my enthusiasm and began to learn to swim.

A couple of weeks later, my mother said, "I really don't have the time to take you to the "M". You're big enough to go by yourself." And she handed me 25 cents. Round trip bus fare was 10 cents, so I had 15 cents left over.

After my lessons, I walked the half a mile to the bus stop. No bus was coming so I figured I'd have time to take a look at the comic books at nearby news stand. I looked at the money in my pocket and figured I could buy four new comic books at 5 cents apiece. I paid the man just as the bus arrived. Then I hopped on and became aware of the flaw in my calculation.

"Wait!" I shouted. I dashed down the steps, dashed back to the newsstand, handed back one of the comic books. "I need a nickel back!"

The bus driver and the passengers were laughing as I jumped back on the bus and paid my fare.

By the next summer, when we made our usual trip to Jones Beach, I could swim pretty well. Jones Beach was a very nice State Park on Long Island. At that time, it was always kept spotless. We'd go out there every single Saturday all summer long. It was on the Atlantic Ocean and it

had surf and I learned how to figure out the waves, how to ride them, dive through them. The North Atlantic is very, very cold. But when you're a kid, you can stand the most amazing things. I would be in the water turning blue and finally my mother would have to drag me out of the water because she was afraid I would get sick. But I wouldn't want to come out because I loved it so much.

For years, I'd wanted a bike. When I was 11 or 12, I found one in the Sears Catalog, or Montgomery Wards that wasn't too expensive.

I showed it to my parents but they said, "No, we can't afford a bike."

Although I knew we were very hard up, I told them again how much I wanted a bike.

My mom said, "We're sorry. We can't get you a bike. What else would you like?"

Well, I was pretty disappointed. Eventually I told them I would like ice skates.

When I came down on Christmas morning there was the bike sitting under the tree. It was a blue bike, a one-speed girl's bike like they had back then. I was absolutely stunned and so happy.

Later, my parents told me I was so shocked I couldn't speak.

I was only allowed to ride on the sidewalks and I had to be careful about crossing streets. I'd zip along to the schoolyard and ride around there. When I got older, I put a basket on it and I'd ride to the library, which was probably a mile away, and pick up six books and then ride home and read my six books in the two weeks and ride them back. I did that all summer because I was a big reader.

My first books were *Peter and Polly in Winter*, *Peter and Polly in Spring*, and in *Fall*, and in *Summer*. Later I got into the Laura Ingalls Wilder *Little House* books. I loved them and any kind of book about the settling of the West. I was fascinated with covered wagons and all of that stuff. Also from an early age, I wanted to write. I tried some little stories, but I had no confidence in myself and my family discouraged me. It wasn't till I was 17 that I tried again and got a story published in a lovely magazine "American Girl". I wrote a first person story about my first time water skiing. And I got it published.

My desire to lead a life totally different from what I knew started very young and was fed by the books I read. I was horse crazy and my room was decorated with all kinds of horse statues. That was one gift I did get for birthdays and Christmas—different horse statues. (How I wish I had them now. They'd probably be worth a fortune!)

Of course, I dreamed of going West. To me it represented freedom, wide open spaces, naturalness. Whenever I'd have a crush on a boy at school, I'd imagine he was a horseman or a wild life photographer. In my dreams, the two of us would ride the open ranges, photographing animals. For a child, it seemed like such an uncomplicated life, and because I wasn't very happy in my home life, these dreams were a way of escaping to something very different from the city.

Starting in 1950 we began to go camping at a wonderful state park in New York. The trip was my father's idea and I loved it. . It was a long, long, long ride up there because it was all two lane highways, there were no interstates and I was just so excited about it I could barely sit still. This was the early days of family camping and it wasn't all that popular a thing to do in those days but it appealed to my dreams of living close to nature.

We had this big tent and we all slept on cots. We'd camp by a lake and go swimming every day. We had the woods and nature and I've always loved nature. My mother didn't like it because it wasn't much of a vacation for her. She still had to shop for food and cook and we'd

all be would be off doing something fun. By the time I was 13 we expanded our horizons and went camping in New Hampshire. My father and I climbed Mt. Chicora. It's not the highest mountain but it took us all day and we got home after dark.

My mother didn't like me to spend time with my father. She didn't want me to have a relationship with him. He and I would get along okay, though there was always a stiffness between us. Still, we'd be off on a daytrip like that and we'd have fun because we were both interested in the same thing. We'd talk. He'd point out rocks and trees. So we would have a nice day but when I came back my mother would punish me in a real subtle way. I soon came to understand that it was bad to like him. And since he was never around much, and my mother was, I chose to be close to her. Even when I was young, it was clear to me that if I had a relationship with my father, my mother wouldn't love me anymore. That was her message for everything. If I didn't do what she wanted, she wouldn't love me. That scarred me badly.

Perhaps if my mother hadn't acted that way, my father and I could have had some kind of relationship. I'm much more like him than I was her. He had a variety of interests and liked the outdoors. He was curious by nature and he was very good at certain things. I think we could have had a relationship.

Later on in life I told my father that I felt my mother was largely responsible for him and me not having had a relationship. It was really good for him to hear that. He'd always felt that I was totally on her side and I was really against him so when I told him that it made him feel good. I was glad I was able to do that.

When I was in junior high, I remember a teacher asking us to draw the house we pictured ourselves in as an old person. Naturally, I drew a log cabin. In fact, I drew a house very similar to the one I live in today, except it was made of logs. And in the picture, I had animals, just as I do today. Other than the animals, I was alone.

Much later, when I left New York and moved west, I lived in a tipi. Ironically, I found that, in the West, in Colorado where I was living, I was considered a real weirdo for living like that. But when I went back to New York and told New Yorkers that they were totally fascinated with it. I think New Yorkers are basically very accepting. Unfortunately, the one person who wasn't very accepting of me, or my dreams, was my mother.

### Rita and Frank

My mother, Rita Virginia McCann, was born in Manhattan on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1918. She grew up in the Depression and like many people of her era, she was very resourceful. She made all her own clothes and ours and she did a beautiful job. But, I think she resented not having money so it was doubly unfortunate that she ever met my father.

My father was Francis Paul Chambers. He was born on June 8, 1917. Although Rita didn't really like Frank (as my father was known) she went on several dates with him. I wish she'd never told me how they came to marry. It happened like this: The two of them were driving up to his parents' place in New York State, They stopped and were necking and he forced himself on her. Several weeks later, she discovered she was pregnant with me. He was crazy about her and so they got married.

It must have been very, very difficult for her. She felt she was married to a man she considered to be the world's biggest loser. There was no love lost between my mother and I, but still, when I imagine, being a young woman of 23 or 24 and being to this man who is really hopeless in so many ways, well, it must have been awful. And it got even more so when we discovered my sister was mentally handicapped.

In many ways I feel for my father too. I believe, had his IQ been tested, it probably would have been just into the normal range. He really wasn't very bright but he had a gift with machinery. He was like a mechanical healer; he could heal a machine by laying his hands on it.

In the 1930s, when he was 15 or 16 he wanted desperately to go, he wanted to a school in St. Louis where he could have learned to be an airplane mechanic. This was a new kind of career in the depression, in the early 30s. His parents wouldn't let him go because his father wanted him to be a lawyer. I feel such sadness for my father because that ruined his life. He was always trying to meet that impossible standard and he was always trying to be this big wig and yet he would have done so well as an airplane mechanic. It was an industry that was just starting; it would have been the ultimate place for him.

His life would have been so much better if that had happened. Instead he quit school around tenth grade and spent his life barely scraping by. He had a real authority problem and his authoritarian father was very much like my mother. He married someone just like his father.

He went from job to job to job. He tried to be a salesman and that was an absolute failure. He would get fired or laid off, or asked to leave. Or he'd get mad at somebody and take off. He ended up being a bit of a draftsman.

My mother couldn't work for years because of my sister, which didn't help our financial situation and added to the tension at home. Family mealtime was often when it flared up. We always ate in the kitchen at a table that was pushed against the wall. My father sat at one end, I was next to him, Anne next to me, and my mother at the other end. Each night, or so it seemed, he would start to badger Anne and me. He called it teasing but it was quite cruel. He would start talking about something that he knew Anne or I didn't like, or was upsetting to us, and go on and on. He would bring my sister to tears and anger me so that for years I was unable to breathe properly when I ate.

Finally, my mother would throw up her hands and say she was leaving all of us because of how we behaved. In looking back on this it is hard to believe it happened every night but that is the way I remember it. Of course, a lot of my father's bad behavior was a way of getting at my mother who treated him like shit.

On the holidays, we would go first to my mother's family. She had three brothers. They got married later so my cousins all ten years younger than me. We'd spend part of the holiday with them and part with my father's family. I liked my mother's family the best. Looking back, I think this was because my mother didn't approve of my father's family. She was what you might call "lace curtain Irish" and she thought of his family as "shanty Irish" and not good enough for her.

On Sundays, we'd often go to my Grandmother's apartment in Washington Heights for Sunday dinner. We'd take the subway to her fifth floor walk up and we'd be starving by the time we got there. As she opened the door, we'd cry, "Eat! Eat! Eat!" When Anne was little she'd ask, "Are we going to Eat! Eat! Eat!'s house?"

Grandmother served the usual roast and potatoes; she wasn't a great cook but I always looked forward to it. Sometimes my uncles would be there and I liked spending time with them. They were fun and kind to me and Anne. My father's family, on the other hand, were very cold people. They had four boys and a girl. Both my grandparent and uncles were abusive to the girl. Not surprisingly, she left home at 16, got married and had eight boys.

## Anne

My sister Anne was such a beautiful child, it didn't occur to us that there might be something wrong with her. She started speaking late and had her own language; I was the only person who could understand her. My parents would look at me and ask "What is she saying?" and I would translate.

I was a small kid but from an early age, I was her protector. We would be playing outside and she might be a little away from me and I would see someone come toward her and I'd run over there and say, "You leave her alone." Then I'd stand there, just to make sure.

Sometimes the kids would pick on her a little bit because she was different. The Seventh Day Adventist family had an infant, not quite a year old. It was in a little walker thing with wheels. This kid paddled his walker out the front door and down the front steps and they blamed my sister. They said she pushed him. Of course, I defended her to them, and went to get my mother. My mother was very, very good about taking our side and believing what we said.

I was an honest child. I was not a liar, and she was knew that and trusted me. But my poor sister, things like that would happen. So I had to be her defender and translator.

Anne and I had our fights as all kids have their fights but basically we always got along. We were close when we were really little because there's only 16 months between us. But by the time I was four and started going to kindergarten, the differences between us became more apparent. I always been very quick, walking by 9 months, talking early. I was smart and she was much slower.

When Anne was about three, my mother took her to a pediatrician. He told my mother not to make comparisons. "You're not going to have two children who are that fast. Anne's just a little slower."

There was no strong sign of her retardation until she was about eight and then it started to show. We later came to believe Anne's condition might have been caused the RH negative factor which damaged her brain. At any rate, she didn't start school until she was eight or nine and then she only started because the truant officer came and asked why she wasn't in school.

She was bussed to special classes. By then, my mother knew she was retarded but she didn't know what to do about it. There's was just not much knowledge about that back then. As well, there was a lot of shame associated with having a handicapped child in those days. If someone saw a retarded child, they would ask, "What's wrong with you, what's wrong with your whole family?"

It was President Kennedy who brought retardation out into the open because of a child in his family. After that there was more acceptance of it. But at that time, my mother didn't really know what to do. And being a very vain woman, a woman who cared so much about what others thought, she was very uncomfortable with Anne's condition,

Certainly my father's family, who lived next door didn't want to have anything to do with my sister. They were ashamed of her. Everyone was ashamed of her, except me. But when I was in my early teens and had friends over I asked my mother to keep my sister away from us. One of the big things for teenagers in those days was to play charades She would have disrupted us and she couldn't have joined in.

So, I suppose I was a little uncomfortable with her in one way. But at other times I'd be with a group of her friends from school and I was comfortable with them. Today, I can meet a retarded person on the street and they will automatically start to come to me because I think they feel I understand. A lot of people don't understand and are afraid of them because they look different.

I feel my mother held Anne back. She kept both of us very dependent on her because she needed her children to need her. She had a husband who paid her no attention. He was always off somewhere. He worked and lived with us but on weekends he would take off on one of his hobbies.

Then when my sister was 16, my mother made what I feel was a terrible, tragic decision. She put Anne into an institution at that time. I just cry for my sister when I think of her live there. She was in that place for about ten years until the time they started the group homes. My sister is an introvert like me; she likes to have her own space. And there she was living in a big dorm. At that time, I was 17 and not so aware of what was going on, but it was terribly hard on both my mother and my sister.

Once my sister went into care, my mother tried a couple of different jobs and she ended up being an office manager. She was very organized and good at all sorts of administrative work. She didn't take dictation and she was never a very good typist although she did touch type. So she became an office manager for a small company and she was there for years. She was very frugal with her money and saved and saved. Then she divorced my father.

She went to Mexico because New York didn't have divorce at that time. My father moved to upstate New York to a little town somewhat Albany. He developed a bit of an adventurous streak and became extremely interested in geology. Like me, he was an autodidact, a person who learns things from books. He retained information well. He taught himself a lot about geology and he started this little mail-order used book business. He did that on his own and he did okay. He was really interested in flying so he built a little Ultralite airplane for himself and learned to fly it. He had a pretty nice life up there.

## Church

Every Sunday, I had to go to church. I liked it, though when I look back on it, it seems a bit strange now, especially the rituals and the confessional for 6 year olds. What can a 6 year old kid do? I suppose dumping a pail of sand on a kid's head might be a sin!

I had to wear skirts. At that time, girls didn't wear pants. We didn't have much in the way of special clothes. I was big on saddle shoes and socks as a kid, so that's what I wore. Of course, being a Catholic Church, I had to wear a hat.

We belonged to the St. Francis of Rome parish. The whole family would be there. We would walk into the church and genuflect—put one knee to the floor while making the sign of the cross on our faces. Then we'd sit at one of the hard wooden pews with the knee-killing kneelers at our feet. The smell of incense would fill the air and all around us were the statues of the saints and the crucifix, the figure of Christ on the Cross.

Mass would start and go on for a while. The priest completes the rituals. I still like the rituals of the Church but as a 6 year old I was bored. My mind would wander. As the years passed, I grew even more uninterested. In the Catholic Church you don't read the bible. They have the gospels every Sunday, 52 gospels a year and they just repeat them year after year. So you get to know them. And you kneel until your knees throbbed then stand up and sit down for the sermon. The priest would talk and talk. Somewhere in there you would go up and receive communion, but only if your soul was clean. You could not receive communion if you had a sin on it.

In the Church, you do your first confession the day before you do your first communion. The First Communion is when you received the body and blood of Jesus Christ. You put your head back and close your eyes and receive the wafer.

So I'd go to confession and tell the priest what I'd done...argued with my sister, perhaps. But what I confessed to depended on which priest I got. We had two priests, Father Hackett and Father Flynn.

Father Flynn was this young priest who would play basketball with the boys and ran the Catholic youth group. He was really neat, but he was an absolute madman in the confessional.

So some poor kid, maybe an 11 or 12 year old who'd started having thoughts about sex, would go in there and we'd hear Father Flynn screaming, "How many times," all over the church. Because of course, you weren't even allowed to *think* about sex!

So what would happen is you'd have the two priests and you'd have all the kids lined up outside of Father Hackett's booth and nobody outside of Father Flynn's. So every so often Father Flynn would peek his head outside of his little place. He'd would crook his finger and call the next kid in. I think somehow I escaped him though if I did go to him I probably didn't tell him everything. I didn't want him yelling at me.

I remember Father Hackett. My mother decided to get my sister religious instruction. Father Hackett said he would see us in his rectory office on a weekday afternoon. I was in charge of taking my sister up there. My sister would leave home fine but then I would practically have to drag her up there. She didn't want to go. But once we were there she was just as sweet and nice and good as could be. She wasn't afraid.

I will never feel bad about the Catholic church because of Father Hackett. He was such a wonderful man. He was a true man of the cloth, as they say. He just had this kind wonderful way about him.

The three of us were sitting there and I remember him saying, "What is the greatest gift God could give you?"

I sat and thought and thought. Finally I said, "A horse."

And he laughed. I forget what the correct answer was now, but I'll never forget what a wonderful person he was.

Finally my mother told him about how hard it was to make Anne go to see him.

He said, "If she really doesn't want to come up, you shouldn't force her."

The Catholic belief was that she has never reached the age of reason. She is pure. She cannot commit a sin. So there was no need for it.

It was from him I learned about compassion, kindness, and understanding. So the Catholic experience wasn't bad. I didn't break away until I was 21. In fact, I went long after my parents stopped going. I was into it. I don't remember what caused me to break away. I guess finally started questioning too much and I didn't like the answers I was getting. I thought there was too much hypocrisy.

### **School**

It was such a big Catholic neighborhood that they had no room so I went to the public school. My mother was actually happy because she went to Catholic school all her life and really wasn't anxious for me to go to Catholic school. She didn't like the nuns. Nuns can really be sadistic, frustrated women.

The Catholic kids were let out of school early on Tuesday afternoon to go to catechism classes as well as after mass on Sunday, from the age of five on. It was an important part of my life, but when I left the church I went from being Catholic to being an atheist for years. It was a reaction to the indoctrination.

The school I went to from Kindergarten to Grade 6 was about a half mile from my house. When I was little my mother walked me there as did my paternal grandfather at times. Pop was nice to me and would talk to me without seeming condescending. What I remember most about him is his scratchy whiskers when he hugged me.

This is so key to my character. I was going to school to Kindergarten for the first time and I said to my mother, "You won't have to read to me, I'm going to school tomorrow and now I'll know how to read." So typical.

I was looking forward to school. I can remember other kids crying and screaming and not wanting to go but I wasn't like that at all. I wanted to go. But then, when I was finally there, I didn't like it. I think I was bored. My mother had my IQ measured when I was in grade school and it was 139. Looking back, I think I needed a creative setting and because all the learning was rote, I spent much of my time daydreaming.

At report card time, my lack of attention would show. My mother would pull my hair and scream at me for getting bad grades. I don't know if I am naturally unmotivated or her treatment brought on my underachieving throughout my school and working life. In the end, I passed but not by much.

I didn't have any special friends although I was friendly with the Jewish girl whom the other kids didn't particularly like. Sticking up for the underdog is a pattern that started early in my life. I would go to this girl's house on Saturdays sometimes and it smelled horrible. I wanted to hold my breath the entire time I was there. Yet, I liked her and her family. They were very good people.

One of the best things about school was the class trips, particularly the one to the Statue of Liberty we took in fourth grade. The teacher asked if any parents could go and I volunteered my mother. She was good about it and agreed. I told my mother I wanted her to look nice. I don't know why I said that because she always looked nice. Appearance was everything to her.

The class took the El and subway down to Battery Park then the ferry to Liberty Island. Once there the class went inside Lady Liberty and took an elevator up a little way before we started climbing the stairs to her crown. Even in the 40s the torch was closed to the public. One of my

classmates froze on the stairs, terrified of heights, and had to be helped and coaxed down. I loved it and loved the view of New York Harbor. On other trips we went to the Museum of Natural History, the Museum of New York City and the Museum of the American Indian. In this way, I came to know the neighborhoods of New York a little more.

## Life in New York

I was 13 when I started Junior High. Like millions of New York kids, I had to travel a ways to get to school. I took the El, the elevated subway to school. This is how I came to realize the city is made up of dozens of little villages full of all sorts of people.

The big effect NY had on me, and millions like me, is that I was exposed to so much that very little fazed me. In my 20s, I remember being downtown in Manhattan with a friend who really didn't know the city. One was from England and the other was from Westchester. We had just arrived in the City and were walking around when they began to point and squeal

“Did you see that?”

“Look at him!”

I never noticed the things that struck them as bizarre—an oddly dressed person or something like that. NY has such incredible freedom and I didn't realize it until I left and tried to live in little towns and I ran into all these narrow minded people who were so unaccepting of differences. In NY you can be whomever you want, do whatever you want and nobody bats an eye.

Beginning in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade my best friend and I would take the El that becomes the subway down to Central Park and go skating at the Wohlman Rink. And we did that all winter long. We were 13 or 14 years old and we went alone. It wasn't unusual for that place and time. We were

street smart. We knew what dangers were out there, what to go near and what to avoid. We never had a problem.

My mother taught me how to carry myself and how not to be an easy mark. It's all about walking straight, walking with a purpose, holding purses in a certain way, being aware of what's around you and behind you. And yet all of this is subtle but what it comes down to is never showing fear.

I learned that in an early age. Never show fear. A couple of times in my late teens or early 20s, I'd go alone to the horse show in Madison Square Garden when it was on 8<sup>th</sup> avenue and 49<sup>th</sup> street. That's not the greatest neighborhood, and I'd have to walk across town to get there. I can remember a couple of times some guy starting toward me and I'd get a look on my face and he'd turn around and walk the other way. I've done that a few times. It's a look that says, mess with me and you're going to have trouble. It's a good thing to have.

### First Date

I can remember my first date because it was a riot. The boy's name was Ralph and he lived in another part of the Bronx. He was part of a big Italian American family. His father drove him and he came into our house. My parent made an effort to be nice to him by remarking on his class ring but his hand shook when he was showing it he was so nervous. And I was nervous.

We were juniors and I think I'd met him at school. I liked him. He was a nice Italian looking boy, was about my height, with short, dark hair. At that time all the boys wore short hair.

We went to the Paradise Theatre and saw "The Rainmaker" with Katherine Hepburn We never once looked at the movie; we necked the whole time. Nothing more than kissing, though and certainly no touching. Then we went out once or twice again.

Then, my mother ended it. This happened again and again once I started to date. Whenever I wanted to go out with somebody she would subtly start to manipulate me. In Ralph's case, she told me I wouldn't like being married to Ralph because then I'd be part of a big Italian family, and I understood this was a bad thing, though I didn't know why.

## Horse Fever

I've always loved horses. I saw my first rodeo when I was only six or seven. I'd been excited to go but when I saw them roping calves I had to leave. I had nightmares after that about them were hurting the animals.

When I was nine, my mother spotted an ad in the newspaper. It said Roy Rogers, Dale Evans and Gabby Hayes were going to be at Gimbels Department Store. She knew I was crazy about Roy Rogers. This was before television but we had Roy Rogers on the radio and in pictures and comic books. She kept me out of school that day and we went downtown somewhere around Herald Square on 34<sup>th</sup> Street, and we waited on a line for four hours. The line started outside, then went inside and snaked up the stairs.

Four hours we waited. When we finally got into the room, I was disappointed to see Trigger wasn't there. But then I saw Roy and Dale and Gabby Hayes, inside a little corral. My mother said when I saw Roy Rogers I turned beet red, which would be typical of me, excited and shy as I was.

I don't know how tall Roy Rogers was, but he seemed enormous to me. Roy's hand was bandaged but he shook hands with every single child and said "Howdy Partner" to each and every one of us. Four hours of little hands to shake.

I was in seventh heaven.

Gabby Hayes and Dale Evans also shook hands too.

When I was in high school, I gave the rodeo a second chance. I went with my friend Sarah. She and I were very different but we were best friends for years. Her father was from Scotland and he was an alcoholic and her mother was from Wales, so Sarah was first generation American. We were very good friends for 40 years.

She's the one I'd go skating with at the Wohlman Rink, the one I shared my passion for horses and cowboys with. The rodeo came to Madison Square Garden. A group of us wanted to go but Sarah didn't have the money. She was as poor--or even poorer--than me, but I could make a dollar scream for mercy; I was such a good saver that I had enough money for her ticket too. She resisted that for a long time until she understood that I really wanted to go with her. So I bought us tickets and we went to the rodeo. I liked the cowboys, but it was the horses I loved.

I started riding when I was 13. My father took me. We went to a stable in the Bronx where you could hire horses. There were trails nearby to ride on. The first time, I had all kinds of problems with my horse. He wouldn't do what I wanted him to do and of course my father didn't know how to help. The horse wasn't dangerous; he was just being a horse. Now, I loved horses and I didn't want to give up. So I took a book out of the library and I learned how to ride out of the book.

I've always been good at learning things by myself. I taught myself how to ride a bicycle. These were the things a parent should have taught me, but my father was always off somewhere and my mother was tied up with my sister. So I wanted to learn how to ride a bicycle. I was at a friend's house and the other kids were playing. They had a bicycle there and I stayed all afternoon in the back yard and I taught myself how to ride. This suited me; I've always liked being off on my own, learning things.

When I had saved up some money, I went back to the stable. The owner of the stable watched me ride and made a comment about how good I was doing. He asked me “Where did you take lessons?” When I told him I learned it from a book, he was amazed.

Every year, I’d go to the horse show in Madison Square Garden. I’d get the cheapest, standing room only ticket and I’d stand there for hours watching all day and all night. There would be hunters and jumpers. Later when I worked at Miller Harness Company, I met all the the U.S. Equestrian Team, and and some of the British equestrians too. It was a big thrill.

Life with horses was my dream. It went all the way back to what I told Father Hackett: a horse would be the greatest gift I could get. I told him that someday I wanted to ride a horse in Madison Square Garden. That was a big dream. Of course I never did that. Still I really loved the horses.

### Life Lesson

You can do a lot more than you realize you can. It’s just like wanting to write the article on building my house. Here I am in my 60s and I had no idea how to build a house or how to do it - I had books - and I asked a lot of questions. And I guess that’s one thing I’d like to tell people. A lot of people don’t do stuff. They just say, Oh I can’t do that. Yes you can. This is how you do it. And I think in Canyon Solitude there was a lot of emphasis to show that breaking away from the bad background and also be true to yourself. Living my earliest childhood dreams. Don’t allow someone else to tell you who you are. That kind of thing. I think that’s an important message for anybody.