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NEW ORLEANS COMMUNITY NEWS

Heritage of faith, durable spirit is passed down in family

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By **Marilyn Stewart**

The picture on the shelf shows a thin, drawn face etched with deep lines, the calling card of hard work and difficult years. Like all photos from that era, Sarah Hutchinson is unsmiling. Her arms crisscross her chest. Hutchinson was my great-grandmother.

I never knew her, though her story was retold to me countless times. This week as I held my mother's hand as she drew her final breath, I realized how my great-grandmother's story is intertwined with mine. Perhaps, more than I even know.

Three times in the decade following the Civil War, my great-grandmother gave birth. One by one, she buried each child, all within five years' time. How she withstood the pain of being a mother with three little ones to becoming a mother

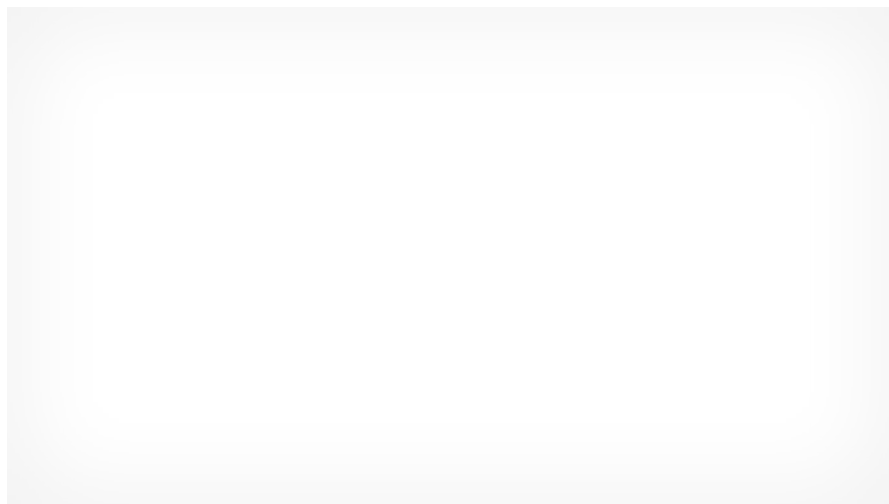


with empty arms, I can only imagine. Perhaps it was the backbreaking work it took to tend a farm and put food on the table that helped her get out of bed each morning.

I picture her out on the open Texas plain under a blazing sun, shouting her objections to heaven. Why her? Why her babies? Why? I suspect she went to her grave without a completely satisfying answer.

But that isn't the end of the story.

Four more children eventually followed, each living to adulthood. The youngest was my grandmother.



The echoes of my great-grandmother's long walk through the valley of the shadow of death perhaps shaped her daughter's heart and character more than any other event. War, the Depression, poverty, and then debilitating illness came to mark my grandmother's life, but she faced them with resilience and grace. And joy.



That durable spirit was passed down to my mother as "the story" made its imprint on her life, as well. She spoke of those three children from time to time. One tiny, hand-stitched dress remains in the family.

As my mother passed through heartache and unfulfilled dreams of her own, she did so with abiding joy and the strength of a man. I watched her pass from this life with the same beauty with which she lived.

Looking back on my mother's life I see my pioneering great-grandmother in the distance. Sarah Hutchinson's faith wasn't tested. It was put on an anvil and hammered out thin.

Faith wasn't a crutch for my great-grandmother. She had no time for that. To borrow today's terminology, faith was her operating system. When life demanded answers, she found faith to be the right processor.

The faith that was hammered out on that anvil of pain became a vessel that poured beauty into the lives of the women before me. Through it, they discovered meaning in life, in pain, in death.



Once my mother showed me a photograph of a place she lived during the Depression. The "lawn" was a patch of dry, lifeless Texas dirt. I chuckled, then realized she was serious when she said, "We swept the yard with a broom."

Beauty out of barrenness; hope from grief. That is my legacy. My mother was a gifted, highly intelligent woman who loved boundlessly. Her strength made her gentle. I hope, I pray to be just like her.

Thank you, dear friends, for reading.

Marilyn Stewart writes about people and events of the faith community in Orleans Parish. Send information three weeks in advance to marilynstewart.nola@gmail.com



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