

In a past newsletter I documented a number of island residents' unusual first names — names such as Epherena, Emelis, Leevella, Hiteous, and Maltby.

Now and then a visitor will ask about another unusual name carved into a grave marker on Howard Street — Kunigunde.

My mother, Kunigunde Guth, was born to Hungarian immigrants on March 17, 1914 in Allentown, Pennsylvania. She died October 20, 1989 on Ocracoke Island and lies in the Howard graveyard under the shade of live oak trees, yaupon, and myrtle.

Kunigunde Guth, 1946:



In 1927 my father, Lawton, was sixteen years old and, like most of the young men from the island, left home to work in Philadelphia on the dredges and tugboats on the Delaware River. Years before, Perry Howard had secured a job there with the American Dredging Company. Over the years various relatives and neighbors joined him “up north.” By the time my father was a teenager a steady stream of O’cockers had left home for the big city, and were living in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware.

My mother’s family were German speaking Hungarians. At twelve years old my grandfather, Josef Guth who was born in the town of Pusztavam, learned the butcher’s trade in the small village of Kecsked, west of Budapest. There he met my grandmother, Julianna, when he was a young man.

Joszeif Guth (on left) in Kecsked:



Because his family was “Evangelical” (Lutheran) and hers Roman Catholic their families

forbade them from marrying. However, as so often happens in such situations, they had a child when Julianna was barely sixteen years old. She immediately left Kecsked and joined other family and friends across the Atlantic Ocean, in New York City. Her parents kept and raised her newborn son, Josef, Jr.

Julianna Pohlmuller (fourth from right) & Family:



On seeing New York for the first time she wrote home describing the day's laundry hung from the many clotheslines strung between tenements. The city is "mit Lumpfen verhängt," she wrote. The city is strung together with rags!

Josef, Sr. followed Julianna within two years, as WWI was escalating. Hoping to emigrate before being conscripted and in order to elude the authorities he hid under train benches behind women's long dresses. Eventually he reached the seacoast where he boarded a vessel bound for America.

The ship had barely left the dock when the captain made an announcement. He was seeking a butcher. Because Josef could speak no English he had to ask a shipmate to translate. Within minutes, however, he had a job aboard the ship. As Josef explained the situation, "Der Butcher var drunk. He don't showed up."

Shortly after arriving in New York Julianna and Josef were married. They had two more children, Kunigunde and Helena. It was nine years before Josef, Jr. joined the rest of his family in the United States.

In a few years the Guths followed other Hungarian immigrants to Allentown, Pennsylvania. When my mother was a teenager, however, my grandfather moved his family once again, from Allentown to Philadelphia where he set up his own butcher shop.

Joszeif Guth, Butcher, in Allentown, Pa.:



(Click on photo for larger image)

It was there that my mother and father met, at a dance. Though before leaving Ocracoke my father had never heard of anything but the traditional island square dance my mother introduced him to the polka and other old-world dances. He was an immediate convert. They danced, continued to see each other, and eventually married.

My mother was a “city girl,” my father, of course, from the island, but they soon moved to a small working class suburb outside of Philadelphia, where they raised their two boys.

Neither my father nor my mother had a high school education, but they always encouraged my brother and me to do our best. A quiet, kind, and unpretentious woman, my mother understood the value of honesty, genuineness, and steadfastness.

Mother agreed to spend every summer’s vacation on Ocracoke. The journey from Philadelphia to the island was long then (two days driving to Atlantic, NC, plus another four hours across the sound on the mailboat).

In 1950, when I was 6 years old, Frazier Peele from Hatteras Island started the first ferry service across Hatteras Inlet. His vessel was two wooden skiffs tied together with planks nailed across the top. It held three vehicles (two side by side, the third slid around sideways by the strongest men nearby) and had no railing. Frazier was a jolly man with a red face and an oversized belly. He wore an old straw hat and smoked cigarettes non-stop. He sat next to the engine which seemed always to be emitting copious amounts of gasoline fumes.

We no sooner left the shore (there was no dock, just planks laid onto the sand for a ramp) when the men got out of their cars and two of them leaned against our 1948 Plymouth. In the middle of the inlet, rolling with the sizeable ocean swells, my mother and I looked out the car windows to see the blue-green water so very uncomfortably close. Needless to say, we were both relieved to finally bump up against the sandy shore on the north end of Ocracoke (although for a six year old it was quite the adventure!).

Of course at that time there was no paved road to the village. Frazier would only make the trip across the inlet at low tide. This allowed his passengers to drive the fourteen miles of

hard-packed sand between the high & low water line. If at least one of the three vehicles made it to the village they could notify the Coast Guard of any of the others that had gotten stuck.

My mother was a good sport. She may not have wanted quite so much adventure, but she seldom complained.

My island grandparents' simple home in the village not only had no indoor plumbing; the kitchen was a separate building behind the main house. Chickens and horses shared the sandy lot that was sprinkled with sand spurs and "pickle pear" cactuses. The house was hot by midday (though it caught a pleasant breeze almost every evening), and at times the mosquitoes were as thick as tourists on the strand at Myrtle Beach. We pumped drinking water from the cistern by hand and poured it through cheesecloth to strain out the "wrigglers" (mosquito larvae). I never heard my mother complain.

When my father retired and announced that he was planning to move back home to Ocracoke (no surprise, since we had built a house on the island in the mid-1950's), my mother worried that she wouldn't have a network of friends and neighbors here. Although she had visited the island for decades, she had lived in the same suburban neighborhood for 25 years and knew she would miss friends and the convenience of a nearby city. With some hesitation she agreed to the move.

My mother adapted well to island life. Though more retiring than my father, she quickly nurtured friendships and involved herself in community and church activities. When I moved home with my family she was delighted. She counted time with her grandchildren precious. And she enjoyed stopping by the Village Craftsmen to help out at the counter and to chat with customers.

Employees remember mother as a quiet, kind woman who almost always wore a simple cotton house dress. Pockets were essential, for she always carried a handkerchief, something she had done since she was a young girl.

In Pennsylvania her father operated his butcher business and my mother would frequently deliver meat to customer's doors. On one occasion a rather wealthy woman invited her to step into her parlor. It was my mother's first introduction to an oriental rug, and she fell in love. She decided then and there that one day she would own such a carpet.

Years later, after Sam Jones died (Sam was a Hyde County native and wealthy industrialist, who married an island woman), his family sold most of the furnishings from the several

large homes he had built on the island.

My mother walked through the “Castle” and looked at every one of the many oriental rugs that were for sale. Sam’s son-in-law later commented that he couldn’t imagine that my mother would actually make a purchase, but he dutifully showed her every carpet in the house.

At the end of their tour through the many rooms, my mother took him back to the rug of her choice, pointed to it and said firmly, “I’ll take that one.” It was \$1000.00. My mother reached into the pocket of her house dress (sometimes she’d keep more than hankies in her pockets) and pulled out \$500.00. “I’ll be right back with the other \$500.00,” she said. And she was.

My father had recently purchased a new outboard motor for his skiff and my mother explained that she felt it was her turn to splurge. As it turned out, she was rather fussy, and the fringe on the carpet bothered her because she had trouble keeping it tidy. Eventually she gave the rug to me. But she had realized one of her childhood dreams.

In truth, my mother was wealthy in ways far more significant than could be demonstrated by an oriental rug. And she realized that, too.

My mother and father traveled some after his retirement, but mostly they stayed put on Ocracoke. They tended a small garden (mostly tomatoes), made excursions with their wooden skiff into Pamlico Sound for clams or fish, kept their modest home neat & tidy, sat on their porch swing in the late afternoon, and almost daily drove down by the visitor center to watch the sunset.

Mostly, however, they enjoyed spending time with their grandchildren.

Kunigunde Guth Howard, ca. 1987:



Ocracoke Island is a long way from Pusztavam and Kecsked in Hungary. But Ocracoke

became my mother's adopted home, full of family, love, and laughter. She died in October of 1989, at home in her own bed, surrounded by her sons, grandchildren, family, and friends. Hers was a full life....and a good life. We miss her.