

Chapter 1

Many Marys

Mary Veronica's mother was also named Mary (Mary Ann Kelly). Joseph's mother was Margaret. In honor of their maternal heritage, they baptized the child Mary Margaret. Decades later, when she was a grown woman, Mary Margaret would deliver a baby girl, whom she would christen Mary Elizabeth and call Mary Beth.

Within a few days, they brought their newborn home and settled into the demanding routine of having a baby in their midst. Mary Veronica possessed keen organizational skills and noted her daughter's growth and progress in meticulously documented photograph albums.

THE FAMILY EXPANDS

Baby sister Eileen joined the family in November, 1923. Next, in the spring of 1925, came the star-crossed Joseph, whom they nicknamed "Jo-Jo."

It was a busy household, filled with laughter and music. Joseph was always busy with chores, but was a devoted dad who created fun and adventure for his children whenever and however he could. Equally busy with her part of running the farm, Mary Veronica would take little breaks and gather her children onto the piano bench with her to play and sing happy Irish songs, Mary Margaret remembered with a smile.

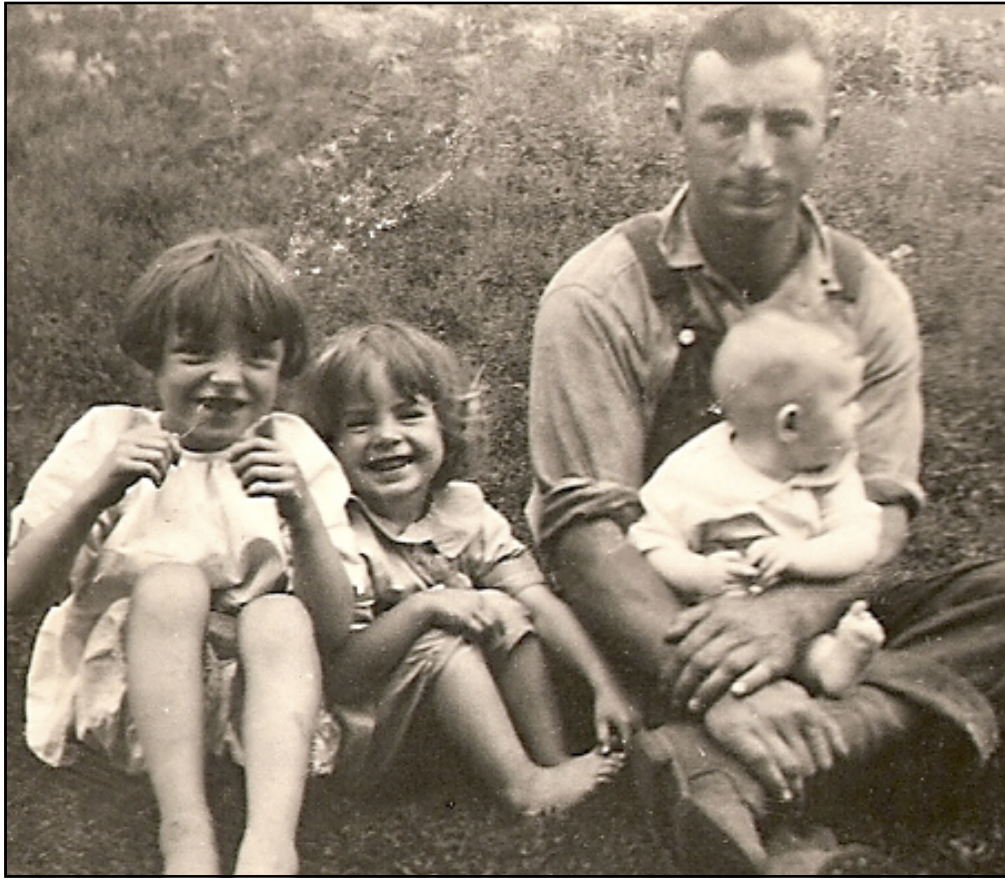


Mary Margaret, 1923.

"Mother was intelligent and fun. She was no flapper,¹

"It was a busy household, filled with laughter and music."

¹ A "flapper" was a Roaring '20s woman who "...smoked, drank, danced and voted. She cut her hair, wore make-up and went to petting parties. She was giddy and took risks." (*About.com: 20th Century History.*)



Mary Margaret, Eileen, "Daddy" and Jo-Jo. Joseph was a devoted father.

though. Just a good woman who enjoyed life." Further, Mary Veronica handled the family and farm finances with acumen.

Although she doesn't remember being pressed into labor at home, under her mother's tutelage, Mary Margaret learned how to maintain a budget and keep house. The younger Mary truly enjoyed cleaning and felt fortunate that the family got to live in nice farm houses. Her little sister, Eileen, was drawn to chasing after their dad outside and in the barn. Mary Margaret, on the other hand, was perfectly content to spend an afternoon detailing the wooden floors with a brick wrapped in an old piece of wool. By the time she was finished, the living room floor positively shone!

Frankly, little Mary had an aversion to outdoor chores – she preferred indoor tasks. In this, she found the perfect mentor in her mother, whose housekeeping proficiency nicely matched her exceptional organizational skills.

"My mother was an outstanding cook and baker," Mary Margaret said with pride. "Her homemade bread is still the talk of the family. People said it was like angel food. One of my



Jo-Jo, Mary Margaret and Eileen, in front of the family Ford, 1928.

favorite dishes was her soufflé. I just close my eyes and can imagine her running from the oven to the table with her gourmet dish before it fell. It was so light and fluffy that it'd practically burst up over the top of the pan." On occasion, Mary Veronica took cooking classes in St. Paul, where she learned the latest techniques, like applying multi

colored sprinkles on top of cupcakes - something new and different that delighted the little community, and most certainly, her children.

"On Saturdays, she'd bake and frost a cake," Mary Margaret continued. "It would always smell so good and it just about drove us kids crazy that we couldn't touch it until Sunday dinner, when we might have any number of guests drop in."

Oftentimes, family from the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul pulled up in a big old Ford and out would spill a passel of little cousins.

"Those city kids sure loved it out on the farm," Mary Margaret remembered. "There was room for them to run. It was fun taking them out to pick raspberries and strawberries.



Mary Veronica created her culinary wonders on a wood stove much like this one.

"When dinner was served, they were in heaven. Especially during the Depression, when there was a shortage of food in the Cities, but always lots of good food on our table." And the Schiltgens were happy to share.

SCRAPING ENTRAILS

In the autumn, making blood sausage was a big production on the farm. The girls helped with that chore. Mary Margaret had the odious task of cleaning and scraping the pig intestines that would later be cut into 12-inch sections and stuffed with pork, bread, succulent seasonings, ground pig meat and, of course, the blood drained from the animal.

“I can still see my dad reaching deep into the barrel, with blood up to his elbows,” Mary Margaret said. “He had to keep stirring it or the blood would coagulate.” None of this process was frightening or even revolting to the children. They grew up understanding where their food came from and the work that was involved in bringing it to the table.

When all was said and done, the family stockpiled plenty of blood sausage for months to come. How did it taste?

“It was delicious,” Mary Margaret recalled.

EARLY STEPS

The school in Coates didn’t offer kindergarten, so the September before her sixth birthday, the family packed the girl’s best clothes and favorite doll into their Model A Ford and the five of them headed up U.S. Highway 52 to Minneapolis and the home of the children’s beloved Aunt Evelyn.

Evelyn owned a four-plex where she (and later, her husband, John) resided. Mary Margaret’s maternal grandparents, the Kellys, retired from their farm in Shieldsville, lived in one of the units, too.

Sometimes, city folks did things that left little Mary Margaret bewildered. She found many of their ways downright peculiar.

“About once a week, one man came through the alley on a horse-drawn cart,” she recalled. “He’d shout out, ‘rags...raaags!’ You see, he was collecting stuff like old newspapers, pipe-cleaners, bits of tin foil, scrap metal and rags – anything people were throwing out that he could turn around and sell. Nobody did anything like that out in the country. But Aunt Evelyn explained to me that was how he earned his living, so I took it in stride with all the other new things going on around me that school year.”



“The Trio,” as Mary Veronica often labeled her three children in the photo album.

At the end of the day, the Schiltgens left their eldest in the capable care of Aunt Evelyn. It was a strange parting, but not painful. At least, not for Mary Margaret. Until that very moment, the family had always been together. Even when their parents visited friends, the children were in tow. This was the first time Mary Margaret was separated from her folks for any length of time. Yet there were no tears. Mary Margaret was setting out on an adventure!



Mary Margaret and Eileen with their dolls, probably Christmas gifts from Aunt Evelyn.

I didn't show up for lunch, my grandmother was frantic," Mary Margaret said. "You see, my aunt worked during the day, so Grandma took care of me." Eventually, the friend's mother called Grandma and Mary Margaret was dispatched home posthaste.

"From then on, I always, *always* called home if I was going to be late!" she said.

Aunt Evelyn wielded great influence over Mary Margaret. When Mary Margaret first knew her, Evelyn was single, independent, fashionable and an altogether modern woman. Her primary profession was working as a special education teacher for the Minneapolis school district. She earned extra income by renting out two of the units

"She [Mary Veronica] was ahead of her time. I was real proud of her."

Aunt Evelyn accompanied Mary Margaret to her first day of school, which was the morning session of the nearby elementary. Thereafter, the girl walked to school on her own. Everything went swimmingly that way – except for the day she stopped at a friend's house to play after school. She didn't call home. That was a bad idea.

"I didn't think to call home, and when



Mary Veronica: teacher, mother, farm wife, musician, cook, baker and financial manager. "In a lot of ways, she was a pioneer," Mary Margaret said. "She was ahead of her time. I was real proud of her."

in her building. With her discretionary income, she was able to spoil her sister's children with splendid gifts.

Mary Margaret remembers a wonderful doll and a special Peter Pan book – items her parents could not possibly have afforded.

“We never felt deprived,” Mary Margaret said. “Our parents gave us everything we needed, but there weren't a lot of flourishes. We had a radio, but we didn't really listen to it much. We made our own entertainment, embroidering kitchen towels, reading and playing with our dolls.



Mary Margaret, Eileen and Joseph Schiltgen. Their parents made work fun for their girls whenever they could.

“Also, our parents played with us as much as their full working days would allow. Dad would pull us on the milk jug sleds and mother spent time with us, reading stories, teaching us songs and such.”