

A path of hardship did not deter her spirit

Written by Jean Bartlett, January, 2017
(Written for the family of Marie Claire Hecker Burke)



Marie Burke, Michigan, 1940.

BURKE, MARIE CLAIRE HECKER (1897-1970)
(Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma, CA. Section L2, Row 30, Grave 53)

"Great Aunt Marie was also my godmother," Pacifican Kathleen Manning said. "My first memory of her was when I was very young, a preschooler."

Marie Claire Hecker married Kathleen Manning's Great Uncle Frank Burke in 1924. She was 27 and he was 37. (*Frank Burke was Kathleen's father's uncle.*) Both can be found in the 1930 U.S. Census, where Frank, a veteran of the First World War, notes that his father was from the town of Cashel, County Tipperary, Ireland, his mother was from Ohio and that he was employed as an accountant for the Grand Trunk Western Railroad. The couple's address was 402 West Main Street, Apt. 716, Durand, Michigan. In August of that same year, Marie would be widowed. On August 11, Frank was diagnosed with acute peritonitis. On August 15, 1930, Frank Michael Burke, age 43, died at Durand Hospital. Marie's husband was laid to rest on August 18 at Woodlawn Cemetery in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

By the time Kathleen met her great aunt, Marie lived in downtown Detroit, Michigan, in the 13-story Tuller Hotel. Located at Adams Avenue West, Bagley Street, and Park Avenue in downtown Detroit, the hotel was nicknamed: the Grand Dame of Grand Circus Park.

"It was during WWII when women could not have nylon stockings because of the war effort, so they used leg makeup," Kathleen went on to say. "Aunt Marie dolled up my three sisters and me for church by using her makeup on our legs. I remember how proud and grown up I felt – and beautiful of course! Aunt Marie had fun doing simple things and laughing is a strong memory."

Kathleen remembers her aunt was short, had dyed red hair, a great sense of humor and a big smile.

"She wasn't afraid to do things on her own. She could pick up stakes and move on if she didn't like what was happening. Perhaps this is because she had little family to turn to, only a few from her first marriage to Great Uncle Frank. She had a brief marriage later but I don't know the details other than she was unhappy while it lasted. My mother always liked her and stayed in touch."

Marie's childhood was a mystery to her relatives, primarily because Marie's childhood was a mystery to Marie. At a young age, she had been placed as a rider on the Orphan Train.



Great Aunt Marie with Frank Manning, 1945.

Beginning in the 1840s, immigrants flowed into New York City. As cultural, economic and social changes accelerated, the middle class grew as did poverty and homelessness. By the 1850s, it is estimated that 30,000 children were among the city's homeless. A young Presbyterian minister, Charles Loring Brace, believed these children had little chance for any kind of a decent future, if they survived at all. But that could change if they were taken in by a family.

In 1853, the social reformer and several other ministers created the Children's Aid Society. Brace focused his efforts on placing children "out" into what was referred to then as the "West," now known as the Midwest. He felt the Midwest offered a healthier environment, it was less crowded and that each child would be taken in by a good-hearted family. It was considered a controversial social experiment. Many thought the almshouses and orphan asylums were good enough. But Brace did not agree. For a child to succeed, he or she needed a family. So the minister began fundraising.

From 1855 to 1875, the Children's Aid Society placed an estimated 3,000 homeless children a year on trains that ran from the East Coast to the Midwest. These trains became known as the orphan trains and the Orphan Train Movement is considered by many to be the precursor to modern foster care.

Babies were easiest to place. Children over 14 were the most difficult to place simply because potential adopting families often felt that they were already too set in their ways. Once a child was selected, he or she was dressed in new clothing and given a bible. An agent of the Children's Aid Society accompanied the children out West.

The Orphan Train ran between 1854 and 1929. Well-intentioned and mostly successful in improving a child's life, it did not work for every child. Some of the adopting families wanted a workhorse and not a new family member. For other children, they had been separated from family still living on the East Coast and their heartache was immeasurable. Others landed in abusive homes. In addition, the early trains were like cattle cars. In later years, the children traveled in Pullman (sleeping) cars.



Marie's husband Frank Burke, WWI veteran.

In 1902 or 1903, Marie was put on an orphan train. She was old enough to know and to never forget that her name was Marie Claire Hecker, that she was from Allegheny, Pennsylvania, and that her father was originally from Germany and her mother was from Pennsylvania. But there was so much she didn't know and couldn't remember. At one point in her life, she told her great niece that she had hired the legendary Pinkerton Detective Agency to go find her family.

Founded by Scottish immigrant Allan Pinkerton in 1850, and still in operation – it's a subsidiary of Securitas AB – the Agency often traveled a historic rogue's gallery as it applied its motto "we never sleep." In 1861, Pinkerton was brought on board to assist President Abraham Lincoln, by Lincoln's private secretary John Nicolay, to advise and protect in response to the massive amounts of threatening letters that arrived on the newly elected president's desk immediately following his win. The agency would also be involved in chasing down the infamous train robber Butch Cassidy. Their reputation was built on their success rate for solving crimes involving banks, railroads and businesses. For Marie, however, no amount of Pinkerton skill at the time of her search, could lead to that which she wanted most, news of the family that had placed her on an orphan train.

If Marie was alive today and able to deeply research genealogy trails, particularly through detailed Internet searches, she undoubtedly would have been thrilled to learn of these uncovered treasures that surely hold the story of her birth family – and those treasures begin with a surprise. It is believed that while Marie was born on the same month and date that she knew, her birth year was not 1897 but rather 1894. The trail begins here.

In the 1900 Census, Henry J. Hecker, 43, born in Germany in April of 1857, and working as a carpenter, was married to Elizabeth Bowman Hecker. Elizabeth was born in Pennsylvania in November of 1862 and she and Henry

married in Lebanon, Pennsylvania in 1885. At the time of the Census, the couple lived in Pittsburgh Ward 37, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania and Elizabeth had given birth to 11 children, 7 living. Their eldest was Raymond, 12, born in September of 1887. Joseph, 11, was born in March of 1889; Charles, 10, was born in 1890; Marie, 6, was born in January of 1894; Herman, 3, was born in March of 1897; Adele, 1, was born in June of 1898; and Harry, 8 and a half months, was born in September of 1899. On July 30, 1902, Elizabeth Bowman Hecker died.

The older Hecker children can be found in the next census still living in Pennsylvania. Marie's whereabouts however cannot be traced, at least not at the time of this writing. (Her younger brother Herman was possibly taken in by a family or friends in Erie County, New York.) But in that 1910 Census, carpenter Harry J. Hecker, age listed as 52 and country of birth as Germany, is now living in San Francisco with his wife Amelia M. Hecker, 38, also of Germany. They have been married for 6 years. The other household members are listed as Adele Hecker, 11, and Harry Hecker, 10, both born in Pennsylvania. The family lives at 726 Edinburgh Street, in San Francisco Assembly District 33.

It is presumed that after the death of Elizabeth Bowman Hecker, Mr. Hecker was unequipped to handle so many children on his own and at some point following Elizabeth's death, the decision was made to put Marie on an orphan train for a better life out West. The age discrepancy may have been made to make Marie more attractive to the family that took her in. Nothing however, is known of that family that took her in. It may have been known by Kathleen's parent's Frank Burke Manning and Helen Margaret Gooder, but if it was, the knowledge has since been lost.

"We were too young to even think to ask questions," Kathleen, a longtime historian noted. "By the time my great aunt and I met up again in San Francisco, we just didn't think to discuss those days."



The great Marie Burke.

Marie spent 30 years working as a clerk in the railroad industry. She went to work for the Grand Trunk Western Railroad shortly after her husband's death. Headquartered in Montreal, Canada, with its corporate headquarters in London, England, the Grand Trunk Railway operated in Quebec and Ontario, Canada, and in the States it operated in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Michigan. One of its established subsidiaries was the Grand Trunk Western Railroad which operated out of Michigan, Indiana and Illinois. Marie additionally worked for the Illinois Terminal Railroad, more popularly known as the Illinois Traction.

Marie moved to San Francisco in 1955. (She also spent some time living in Portland, Oregon.) When Kathleen and her husband Bill Hall moved to San Francisco from Detroit in the mid-1960s, Marie took her great niece to places that were not only fun to shop at, but also offered great bargains – such as the Marina Safeway and Sears on Mission.

"My recollections of her are always fun and very accepting and I know my sisters all felt the same."

Marie lived at 455 Hyde Street in San Francisco at the time of her death on November 15, 1970, at the age of 73, or more likely the age of 76. Marie would surely be tickled to know she was older than she thought, or perhaps even more tickled that others finally know how old she really was. She was laid to rest at Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma, California on November 19, 1970.