I DON'T REMEMBER WHEN I LEARNED MY MATERNAL GRANDFATHER'S FIRST NAME. I KNEW HIM AS THE MAN WITH THE WIDE-BRIMMED HAT AND CIGAR FROM A PICTURE MY GRANDMOTHER KEPT. IT WAS A MOST IMPRESSIVE PICTURE. HE LEANED ON THE SIDE OF A FANCY AUTOMOBILE, LOOKING VERY DASHING WITH A SMALL MOUSTACHE. HE LOOKED HAPPY THEN.
As I grew older, I learned more about him. Cars were his first love. He also loved ice cream, and valued education. He and my grandmother met in college, a place they called “Tech.” But he enlisted in the Great War and neither finished their studies. Afterwards, they married and moved west. He practiced architecture.

The Depression set in, but still he found steady, creative work: a dream job, designing stores for the Isaly Dairy Company. They were his most productive years. But things changed....

As a child growing up in the early sixties, my family was typical: mom, dad, two kids, and various pets. In 1962, another family member joined us — our maternal grandmother, Betsey. I had just turned 3, and my brother Lance was almost 6. We were excited about our “new addition.” What we couldn’t have imagined was how much richer our lives would become because of her presence.

She was born Betsey Williams in Youngstown, Ohio, on May 11, 1896. Her birthday often fell on Mother’s Day, making for a number of very special celebrations in our home. She and my grandfather — Clyde Jacob Schuemacher, or “Schues” — never owned their own home, a fact that frequently reminds me of how different life was during their years.

Her parents were among the first generation of Welsh immigrants to settle in Youngstown in the 1860s and work in the mines. Her Grandma Rowland hadn’t planned to live in America; she came here on her honeymoon, only to learn her husband had no intention of returning to the old country.

Our memories of Gram are closely tied to our love of her music. She was an accomplished pianist who chose a family life over that of a concert musician. Her studies at Westminster in Ohio and Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh served her well. She loved Padewerski and told us of her excitement when a concert tour in the teens brought him to Pittsburgh.

In the meantime, Schues was making his way in the world southwest of her, in Columbus, Ohio. His mother’s parents were Henry and Alice Canode, of Danish heritage. A couple “not blessed with children of their own,” they awoke one morning to find a baby girl, wrapped in blankets, sleeping on their doorstep. They considered their prayers answered, and named her Ella. Ella later married Elfred F. Schuemacher, a first generation American of German/Swiss ancestry. Elfred was a grocer and manufacturer. He and Ella had Clyde in 1894, and a daughter, Vera, several years later.

Music was also part of Schues’s life from a young age. He often told his children of summer afternoons when his grandma entertained friends on her front porch. Inevitably, his family would make a Sunday afternoon visit, and almost always, she would ask, “Clydie, Clydie, oh do play your violin for the ladies!” His appreciation for music would surface again in his early twenties, when architectural studies would bring him to Pittsburgh.

Schues worked odd jobs including messenger and seal clerk for several railroad companies that traversed Columbus. By 1907, automobiles were making their way into city life. So taken was he by this new mode of transportation that, at age 13, his uncle gave him his first car! A couple of months later, his picture appeared in the Ohio State Journal; he was at the wheel of a Cadillac — his Cadillac! The headline read, “Clyde J. Schuemacher, one of Ohio’s youngest and most enthusiastic drivers.”

He began selling cars; his earnings helped fund his studies at the Ohio Mechanical Institute. In September 1915, he transferred to Carnegie Tech to take up architecture.

Carnegie Tech’s school of architecture was, and is, housed in the...
College of Fine Arts building, a most impressive structure. It also houses the schools of Art and Music. Betsey’s training as an organ major took place there as well. My mom remembers his telling of their first meeting in 1915:

His studies were on the third floor of the Fine Arts building. After finishing his work one day, he began his way down the three flights of stairs. When he reached the second floor landing, he paused; the sound coming from that floor was so pleasing, he remained still and continued to listen. He followed it down the hallway to one of the small practice rooms.

There, through a small glass window, he could see the source: a petite, dewy-eyed, transfer student from Westminster College, Betsey Williams — a “Dresden Doll” my dad would say — practicing at the piano.

He later introduced himself. “I was taken by her lovely brown eyes” he told his children.

As a member of the Beta Theta Phi fraternity, he took part in organizing the Beaux Arts Ball: planning the decorations and designing costumes for he and Betsey. Schues loved to take pictures, and left us with a scrapbook from his days at Tech.

Clyde and Betsey also enjoyed walking on Flagstaff Hill. On one of their walks, he proposed to her. She accepted.

In an October 1917 letter to his parents, Schues reported:

They started military drill here at Tech from 8 to 9 every morning. Just the idea of getting the fellows so they can march and know the different steps and stuff like that. I think it’s a good thing to know about. Gee I hope we don’t get mixed up in this war so terribly bad.

We did so shortly, and by February 1918, Schues had enlisted. He was sent to San Diego and Berkeley, Calif., for flight training, and was made a lieutenant. Gram dropped out of Tech to sell war bonds.

On September 25, 1918, Lt. Schuemacher departed from Hoboken, N.J., aboard the SS Great Northern, headed for Brest, France. He was assigned to a stateroom at the bow of the ship with two other officers. In his journal, he recounts that two days later, he was moved to a compartment “more to the middle of the ship. I took sick with the Influenza and sea-sickness. Between the two, I was sure a sick man.”

At 3 a.m. on October 2, a Brazilian freighter rammed the ship:

It tore a big hole in our starboard (right) side about 10 ft. square just above the waterline at the same compartment to which I had been assigned first. It had killed 7 non-commissioned officers in this compartment. They brought the dead into the hospital, one Sgt. with his head cut clear off his body. It was surely a terrible sight. On deck several soldiers were thrown into the sea by the impact when we were struck. These men were never found. I was informed I could go back to my bed as we would not sink.

He remained sick for three months, never flying for the cause. He recorded his experiences almost daily in his diary. On Tuesday, October 8, 1918, he wrote:

At 8:30 p.m., we pulled into the depot at Nantes, France, where we were to change trains.... At this time, the Red Cross got hold of another flyer and myself — took our temperatures and an ambulance took us to Base Hospital #34 at Nantes. I was put to
bed immediately, in the influenza part of the officer’s ward. While I was in this hospital, several officers died of pneumonia. This hospital had mostly men that had been wounded at the front.

Finally, on November 11, he wrote “The armistice was this day signed and the wonderful display of joy was universal.” On December 18, he boarded a ship for home. He landed safely at Newport News, Va., on New Year’s Eve day.

Neither Schues nor Betsey had finished their course work, so he began making plans to finish up at Tech. Then Grandma Rowland informed Clyde that another suitor was interested in her granddaughter and he’d better make up his mind about their future. He knew Grandma R. liked him; he was the only person she allowed drive her horse and buggy. But he also knew she was serious, so he forsook his studies and found work with the engineering firm of Hugill and Finklehor in Sioux Falls, S.D.

On October 1, 1919, Schues and Betsey married in Youngstown and left for Sioux Falls. Within a year or two, Hugill moved on and the firm became Schuemacher and Finklehor. The two designed private homes and received a large commission for a local high school. Schues continued to fly, keeping up both his flying and maintenance licenses.

In spring 1924, Finklehor left town, leaving Schues with their debt. There were enough funds to cover the bills but little left over. Clyde and Betsey moved back to Youngstown and that November welcomed my mother, Vera Ann Schuemacher, into the world. Four years later, a son Richard (our Uncle Dick) followed.

Schues was a licensed architect in South Dakota, Florida, and North Carolina, but licensure in Ohio required a four-year degree, and he was a year short, so he pursued architectural projects in the south for several years before returning again to Youngstown. While he had two notable commissions (an estate for an oil tycoon in Hubbard, Ohio, and an addition to St. Elizabeth’s Hospital), business was slow.

He took a job as manager of nearby Bernard Airport and began giving flying lessons. One of his students, a successful businessman, was looking to expand into Western Pennsylvania. The two became friends, and soon, that student, Sam Isaly, offered Schues a job designing the company’s dairy stores for the Pittsburgh branch. The partnership lasted roughly from 1929 to 1937.

As he was back in his realm, Schues immersed himself in his work. He and Sam visited Isaly’s stores throughout Ohio, and they returned with a long list of problems. Schues’s strongest dissatisfaction was with how the products were displayed. What they found, he wrote (as quoted by Brian Butko in Klondikes, Chipped Ham, & Skyscraper Cones), “was pretty sad — dark half cases, dark wall refrigerators with the glass doors painted so that people could not see inside, dark oiled floors, no ventilators.” Sam directed him to design a store to address these problems: a “natural merchandiser … the smartest store on the street and different from anything else.”

At the end of six weeks, Schues reported back to Sam. He recommended well-lit stores with a clean, streamlined look. He wanted full-length, glass-fronted display cases, and unobstructed views from the storefront windows. He wanted the stores to have a uniform décor, with white Vitrolite glass façades.

Again from Butko: “Pittsburgh’s inaugural store in Homewood served as a ‘laboratory’ for two months. Refinements that emerged included stainless steel countertops, rounded white buttermilk tanks, and aluminum chairs made by Pittsburgh-based Alcoa. Air
conditioning was tried and soon spread chain-wide. The company spent $1.5 million over five years: even franchises were redone at no charge. While the Depression was closing other businesses, Isaly's reported that every store's sales gained 20 to 42 percent.”

Our mother recalls many family trips to the Pittsburgh area while her father supervised the construction of the new stores:

We would go if we didn't have school, or on a weekend. He especially liked to visit the sites when no one was around; he could take his time while inspecting the construction. He was meticulous about his work. The outlying communities I remember visiting include Zelienople, Aliquippa, Beaver Falls, Butler, Meadville, and Mercer. He spoke a lot about the stores in New Castle. I remember the names Duquesne, Hazelwood, McKeesport, and McKees Rocks. There were many locations in the city as well. I especially remember his having to buy hip-waders so he could visit stores under construction during the big flood of 1936.

Isaly's plant on the Boulevard of the Allies would supply the products to the company’s stores. Schues desperately wanted this commission too, but did not get it. A firm specializing in dairy plants got the job, but still, he was hurt.

Schues also enjoyed gardening, building things for his children, and reciting their favorite poems. My mom remembers the Friday evenings in winter when their dad would make fudge:

We got to sample the balls from the water glass test. After he put it in the pan, the fudge would go out back to cool. Pretty soon it was time to enjoy. It was a special family time. Then there was the Isaly's ice cream. Dad would bring home bricks from the plant, usually the Rainbow. If he didn't, Dick and I could walk to the Isaly's on Glenwood Ave., just up from our elementary school, to get them. Strawberry was my mother's favorite and we all liked chocolate and vanilla. I think the bricks were about a quart and they were jiffy-packed. We only had an icebox at that time; what you could keep cold depended on your ice supply. We would only buy enough for one evening. It was this way until mother got her first refrigerator, about 1940.

Sam and Schues socialized together, along with Betsey and Sam's first wife, Ann. The two couples played bridge as a foursome and went dancing together. Mom particularly remembers one occasion, the Isaly's Masquerade Party: “Betsey and Schues went as bricks of ice cream, with their heads emerging from the blocks! Sam and Ann went straight to the party so my mom didn't get to see their costumes.”

Betsey also traveled with Ann Isaly (and sometimes young Ann) on shopping trips to Halle's in Cleveland. Mrs. Isaly loved to shop, sometimes enjoying her husband's good fortune to excess, according to mother.

Mom also remembers Sam:

He was a very jovial man. When we visited dad at the office, Sam would pat me on the head, and shake hands with Dick. He always remembered our names. Dad’s office was next to Sam’s on the second floor of the plant. In dad’s office there was a big drafting board. I do remember being very impressed with Sam's desk. It was dark wood, very large and beauti-
fully polished. I also remember Dick and I walking into the freezers and thinking how big they were!

By 1937, the Boulevard was supplying 60 stores; most were probably constructed under Schues's direction. His last work for the company was probably that year, when he and Sam designed the interior for the planned remodeling of the Youngstown plant.

But he left before the reconstruction was finished.

In my grandfather's war diary, he mentions drinking beer in French cafés and doubting it was strong enough to intoxicate. But by the time he started working for Sam in 1929, his drinking had become a problem. It was of great concern to Betsey; when intoxicated, he was verbally abusive. Mom remembers one family
visit to the Youngstown plant when her dad opened Sam’s desk drawer, saying “here’s where we keep the whiskey.” It may have been an attempt to convince Gram that drinking was just part of the job.

Whether Schues’s drinking led to his termination is speculation. Whether Gram knew is unclear as well. According to mom, she never spoke of it.

Working for Sam was the high point of my grandfather’s career. He struggled for fulfilling work both before and after. After leaving Sam’s employ, he worked on a public housing project in Youngstown, but he wasn’t pleased: he couldn’t be creative, he had to keep the costs low, he complained of eyestrain. He got another job in Pittsburgh, again with a dairy company. He stayed weekdays at the Webster Hotel. A year later, he opened his own ice cream store in Indiana. A market analysis showed promise, but the business failed.

After his daughter — my mom — graduated from high school in 1942, Schues, Betsey, and Uncle Dick moved to Westfield, N.J. Through a fraternity brother, he landed a managerial position in a local company, but he lasted at most three months. Employee resistance to an “outsider” was too great. He apologized to his friend and bowed out. From there, according to Uncle Dick, he took a job at Grumman Aircraft inspecting military airplane engines:

He wanted desperately to get back into the Air Force but at his age, coupled with much faster planes, they said no. But the aircraft manufacturers needed good, experienced people to inspect the engines before they were put into action, so dad signed on for the remainder of the war.

After the war, he switched jobs again, to Royal Lace Paper Company in Brooklyn, requiring a 40-minute train ride. He spent his last 14 years working as the plant manager. Mom remembers his feeling connected to the workers and saying he enjoyed the work, though he was still drinking. Having smoked heavily his adult life, he died in 1956 of lung cancer. He held on long enough for his children to be with him, and passed on peacefully.

I’ve made many trips from Pittsburgh to Youngstown to explore my family’s history. I’ve driven by the homesteads countless times and turned back the clock in my mind to recreate lives I never knew. We visit three cemeteries every June to weed, plant annuals, and reflect. I love visiting the Carnegie Mellon campus, especially the Fine Arts building, knowing this was where my grandparents’ paths first crossed. I get chills when I go near Flagstaff Hill where they took their romantic walks.

Mom’s brother Dick and his wife Viviana lived in New Jersey too, so I’ve been to Westfield many times. I recognized store names from Gram’s storytelling. I visited the Carleton Apartments where Gram and Schues lived. I saw the train station a block away where Schues commuted to and from Brooklyn.

In reflection, I’m amazed I’m writing this tale. Amazed and thankful I can write this tale. My brother Lance and I give thanks for the 15 years Grandma Betsey lived with us: for her love, her gentle presence, her music, and her smile. And we give special thanks for her connecting us to our past; to Wales and South Dakota, to Sam Isaly and Pittsburgh; and without question, to a man she called Schues. Though he was the love of her life, life with him was not easy. Yet we know more of ourselves because of what she shared of him.
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On a number of occasions while visiting me, mom has told me Schues would be pleased that I've made my home in Pittsburgh. It's where he felt at home, and it suits me too, more than I sometimes realize.

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