7. Zeph and Maud

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Zeph and Maud

According to family lore, Zeph bought his first pair of Levi's at age seventeen from a clerk named James Cash Penney at the Golden Rule store in Evanston, Wyoming. (Two years later, Penney opened what would become the flagship J.C. Penney store in Kemmerer, Wyoming.) How Zeph had ended up here from that narrow canyon in Carbon County, Utah, I will never know. Perhaps he caught a train in Scofield and headed directly to Wyoming, or perhaps he arrived there on the twisted path of the wanderer he was bent on becoming. In Wyoming, he found a job in a mine, the only job for which he had any training. This purchase of jeans was his first step into a manhood where he worked his own rooms and drew his own pay.

Wyoming was only the first stop in Zeph's period of *tramp mining*—a term applied to temporary workers in the early twentieth century who would move from state to state, and from mine to mine. They would earn a makeshift living, camping in shacks and descending down a particular mine shaft until "elsewhere" called. After a year in Wyoming, Zeph moved north to Washington State, where he worked seams of coal only thirty inches high, lying on his side the way his Welsh predecessors had done. He lived in a boardinghouse run by landladies who must have taken to the quiet and polite eighteen-year-old with a bit of tragedy behind the blue eyes he had inherited from his mother. Every day they asked what he would like in his lunch. Pie or cake was always his response. They never tired of spoiling him, or he of eating dessert, a hankering he would pass on to his son Bobby, my grandpa.

Coal mining had become a major American endeavor. By the turn of the century, with a seemingly inexhaustible amount of inhospitable mountain ranges, poor immigrants, and enterprising spirits, the United States

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was extracting more than one hundred million short tons of coal a year over the amount produced in the British Isles. Most mining was taking place along the Appalachians and in the Midwest. Pennsylvanian miners produced more than all the rest of the states combined to feed the factories in the East. In the West, mining had much to do with the symbiotic relationship between coal and rail. Tracks were laid to reach mines, and mines extracted steam coal for the trains, each justifying the existence of the other. Colorado became a significant producer of coal, but instead of seeking work in more established mines, Zeph continued his pursuit of a still more distant and remote coalfield.

Coal was mined in the stretch of the Rockies between the provinces of British Colombia and Alberta from 1880 to 1950 until petroleum was discovered (now Canada's coal is largely imported from the United States). The industry reached its height before the First World War, and this is when Zeph crossed the border to work in the Canadian coal mines. There is considerable distance between the Rockies in Utah and the Rockies in Alberta, and Zeph communicated with his mother by letter. On May 22, 1902, Mine No. 2 exploded in Coal Creek, Alberta, killing 128. It had been just over two years since Margaret had lost her two oldest sons, and her memory of waiting in the cold May rain for Evan Jr. and Frederick to be carried out of the Winter Quarters mine would have been fresh. Zeph was not involved in the Coal Creek accident, but he sent no word to his mother for months.

During these years that Zeph bounced from mine to mine across state and national borders, he took up smoking cigars and drinking coffee, two habits forbidden by the LDS religion, although he later discarded them before his marriage. Zeph stayed away from more destructive pursuits—the saloons and the women his fellow miners frequented—but his cups of coffee and cigars might have represented the rebellion behind all his drifting. Years later, when my grandfather Robert had to give up college for a while, Zeph told him that he had always wanted to be a doctor. Possibly, as Zeph left Scofield, he dreamed of a distant coalfield in which he would have the break he needed to pay his way through school.

Before he turned twenty, Zephaniah returned to his family and mined alongside his brothers. They had pooled their money to buy a farm for their father in Cleveland, Utah, which was in Emery County, bordering Carbon County. After a life underground, Evan would be a farmer. A miner's eye for topsoil was evidently not equal to that of a man who had worked all his life on the land; once irrigated, Evan's farm coughed up alkali. Another attempt at departing from the family occupation had ended in failure. The farm that could not support a profitable crop at least allowed them to grow orchards and raise hens and bees. The move seemed to suit Margaret. She was cherished not only for her role as

the nurse alongside the town doctor when a flu epidemic broke out in Cleveland in 1918, but also for her constant acts of kindness. Baskets were filled with fruit, eggs, honey, and baked goods and sent out on the arm of her granddaughter for the elderly and lonely in their community, the farm providing enough at least for Margaret's charity. She died on her land at age seventy-six, slumped under the crab apple tree with an apron full of apples for jelly.

Zephaniah inherited some of his mother's disposition and was usually gentle. He never was hot tempered like his father, but he could be stern in his own way. He wouldn't tolerate the drunkenness of some of his brothers, who accepted the lot of their lives more recklessly. He was the most respected member among his family, careful in his behavior and also his dress. Light on his feet on the dance floor and easy on the eyes, at twenty-one he was the most sought-after bachelor in Cleveland.

Lily Maud Rencher, after finishing her normal degree at BYU Academy, taught school for a year in St. George and then moved to the small town of Cleveland to educate the children of farmers and miners. Miss Rencher—called Maud—was a large woman. Her Swedish, Irish, and Welsh background had not blessed her with beauty. At school she had been a student body officer, and in the words of one of her professors, expressed to my grandfather later: "She was kind of—a big girl, but wow could she speak." Maud took the train from Provo, her few dresses packed in a suitcase. Provo was a small town at the time, and Maud had grown up in a farming community. Even so, there must have just been a hint of romanticism in her mind as she struck out into the wild because in the undeveloped West at that time, mining communities were wild. Confident in her charms, she knew she would endear herself to Cleveland, but perhaps not to its most eligible man, whom she fixed her eye on one night at the one of the local dances.

"Who's the snappy-looking man in the black sateen shirt?" she asked her friends as they clustered in a corner, sizing up the room, pinching their cheeks for color, and smoothing their dresses.

"Oh, that's Zeph Thomas. Everybody's looking to catch him. He's the oldest and most eligible bachelor in town. You don't have a chance with him."

Maud reveled in challenges and told her friends that he would walk her home that night, sealing the deal with a bet.

"I know something about you." These were Maud's first words to Zeph, who had probably only taken polite notice of the new schoolteacher until her bold words jolted him to attention. Zeph was 5'7" tall; she was two inches shorter and doubtless a bit wider. She also had freckles—something my grandfather once told me, noticing the sprinkling of little brown dots on my five-year-old nose.

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Zeph and Maud Thomas circa 1920

"What do you know about me?" Zeph asked, surely leaning forward a little and peering at her.

"Oh, something rather interesting," she teased.

The rest of the night Zeph followed her around, trying to pry out her secret, one she must have told him years later: Maud had decided that Zeph would fall in love with her that night. She was her father's favorite and was accustomed to being circled about by listeners Once he heard her speak, she knew Zeph would not forget her easily. Maud taught in Cleveland for three years, during which there is no record of Zeph and Maud's courtship. A prolific letter writer, Maud must have shared the details with her friends and her family. None of these letters have survived, and for some unknown reason, Maud and Zeph never shared these experiences with their posterity. Three years after Maud and Zeph first

danced, Maud returned to BYU alone for a course in public speaking and then accepted a post in Bunkerville, Nevada, over three hundred miles away from Cleveland.

Here, in a small outpost of the descendants of LDS pioneers, Maud taught school for another three years. The summers were so hot that the whole town would leave their homes and shops and lie in the irrigation ditches to cool off. Under the dry sun of Bunkerville, Maud fell in love with Joseph Walker, a coworker who was preparing to attend medical school. They became engaged, but Maud finally broke it off because she did not believe he was spiritually minded. At the age of thirty, she returned to Utah. Now twenty-eight, Zeph worked in the Sunnyside mine as a boss driver, supervising the movement of coal from room to room as it was shuttled along the tracks by the mules. During Maud's three-year absence, Zeph and Maud must have kept in touch, developing the relationship they had begun seven years previously at a community dance. When Maud arrived, Zeph met her in Salt Lake City, and they married on June 10, 1911.

After their wedding, Maud joined Zeph in Sunnyside, where, in addition to the mining operation, there were 713 coke ovens. These were built of brick, shared sidewalls, and stretched out in long lines. A railroad car above them would dump eight tons of coal into each oven through an opening in the top. In an airless chamber at one thousand degrees Celsius, the coal would heat until all of its smoke, tar, and water was burned out, leaving a gray and porous substance ideal for smelting iron. At this point, the coke was ready to be pulled. The operator of the oven would unbrick a door the size of a kitchen cabinet, spray the coke with water, and drag it out load by load, finally transporting it by wheelbarrow to the trains. It was a hot and tedious job. An experienced worker only pulled two ovens of coke per day.

In Sunnyside, Maud gave birth to William, who was followed by Robert in 1918. My grandfather had only vague memories of the coke ovens of his birthplace—his mind's images no doubt clouded by the smoke from lines of tens upon hundreds.