

The Brother I Never Knew

I've been working on our family genealogy (on and off) since 2007. My main interest was my mother's side, the Hanson's. After a few years I decided to help my sister with our dad's side, the Harrington's. She was concentrating on my dad's maternal line, the Tumuth's. So I started looking for his paternal line, the Harrington's.

I knew my dad had been married twice before marrying my mom. I always knew about his 2nd wife Betty because she was my half-brother Herbie's mom. She died before he married my mom. I even have pictures of her.

His first wife was a different story. All I'd ever been told was that they married young and it didn't last so finding out about her wasn't a big deal to me.

I went to the library in Grand Rapids to see if I could find out any more on my grandparents. I knew my dad grew up there and that they lived there before moving to Muskegon in the 40's. While looking through the 1936 city directory, I came across my dad's name. It wasn't just his name, it was also the name of his first wife, "Vera O Harrington". Now that I at least had her first name I decided to add her to my tree on Ancestry. I wrote to my dad's only living sibling, my aunt Kaye, to see if she remembered Vera and possibly her last name. She didn't know the last name but remembered that they had married right out of high school and it didn't last long. My dad was a musician and wasn't home much. She said Vera was a nice girl but didn't like being home alone all the time with him teaching music in the day and playing guitar in the clubs at night.

That was all I was going to get on Vera, or so I thought. One day while looking over the "all hints" section for my tree, I saw there was a hint for Vera O. I checked out the hint and it was a death record for "baby boy Harrington". It listed my dad as the father and Vera Webster as the mother. So now I had her maiden name - Webster. I added it and the baby to my family tree.

Later, there was an Ancestry hint for my dad that ended up being their divorce record. They were married 18 Oct 1935, the divorce was granted 19 Jul 1939, and the number of children was "0". Ok, so now I'm done with Vera.

When the 1940 US Census came out I was busy reviewing all the new hints that showed up for my family. There she was again, Vera Harrington with another hint. I wasn't going to check it out but then decided to give it a look. In 1940, Carol Bell is the head of the household with Vera Harrington (divorced) as her niece and Dennis L Harrington as Carol's grandnephew. My first thought was that Vera had gotten pregnant after the divorce but didn't marry the baby's father so he ended up with "Harrington" as his last name. Some time went by before I thought about Vera and her baby again. I don't know

what made me think about it but I took a look at that census again. Dennis was 3 months old at the time. The questions were to be answered as if asked on April 1. Go back 3 months and it's about January 1. Time to do the math: they were divorced July 1939. He was born 5 or 6 months later. That would mean that Vera was actually pregnant when they got divorced. Now my brain was buzzing! Did my dad know she was pregnant when they divorced? Did Vera even realize she was pregnant? Did she ever tell my dad? Was he such a rat that he abandoned them? I know he never told my mom because she would have told us we had another brother out there. Wow! I have to find Dennis!

On and off for a couple of years I followed leads on "Dennis L Harrington" using Ancestry, Family Search, and Google but ultimately, they were dead ends. What if he was already deceased? He would be about 78 years old by now. Then in 2018, Ancestry comes up with another hint for Vera. This time it's the "Western Michigan Newspaper death index". I click on it and it says: Vera Inderbitzen, death about 2008, Grand Rapids Press Obit". I entered the information into Google search and part of her obituary showed up. I saw the part that said "her children Dennis and Debra Inderbitzen....". No wonder I couldn't find Dennis, he had taken Vera's husband's last name.

I was on the search again but all my searches came up with dead ends. Finally, I decided to check Facebook. I've found old friends on Facebook, why not Dennis. I found a page for a "Dennis Inderbitzen" but it only showed 3 friends and no recent posts. Knowing that Dennis was older, I checked out the 3 friends and found the oldest one. I messaged her. Her name was Gladys. I told her I was trying to get ahold of Dennis and was wondering if he ever gets on Facebook. She answered back that his ex-wife had set up the page for him and he never uses it. I told her my name is Frances Harrington and I'm trying to find Dennis because I think he might be my brother and did she know how to reach him? She wrote back that he was indeed my brother and she knew that because she was his younger sister. I gave her my email address and phone number and asked if she'd pass them on to him. The next day she emailed me and said that he was surprised and excited and would be calling me later.

That night Dennis called me. We talked for about an hour. He turned out to be a very nice guy. He had no idea he had other siblings. He knew nothing about our dad until he was 14 and needed his birth certificate for a work permit. My dad's name was in the father's box. His mom finally told him she had been married before and Herbert Harrington was his biological father. She said he was not a nice man and would never talk about it again. He asked his grandmother but all she would say was that he drank a lot and never wanted children. So he left it alone. He has no idea if our dad ever knew about him or not. He also told me he was born in December 1939 and was actually premature by a couple of months. That would mean that Vera was only about 8 weeks along when they divorced.

Dennis was living in Grand Rapids again so we agreed to meet in a week at Olive Garden. We had a nice visit. A few weeks later I had him over to meet some more of his new family. Now we talk to each other about once a month.

I found out later that my dad married Betty only a week after his divorce from Vera. I can see now why she was so bitter. If she didn't realize she was pregnant until after the divorce and found out he married only a week later (which meant he was obviously cheating on her) maybe she was so hurt and angry that she decided to never tell him. We'll never know. I'd like to think he never knew about Dennis. But that still doesn't excuse his mistreatment of Vera.

The year 2018 was hard for me. My brother Herbie died in May. My twin brother Bill died in September. The only good thing that year was finding "the brother I never knew".

Written by Frances Harrington