

The Trunk - "A Woman's Life is Rediscovered"

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A Woman's Life is Rediscovered
Mary Holsenbeck

The following story is one of extraordinary coincidence. The events that took place on March 29, 2004 at the library on the campus of Texas Women's University (TWU) in Denton, Texas were the culmination of a story of the journey of an old trunk containing treasures of a famous WASP (Woman Air Force Service Pilot). The trunk took thirty years to find its way home and take its rightful place in history.

The story begins in 1974 with Glenn Wagner, who worked at a paint and body shop in Farmers Branch, Texas. One day a garbage truck pulled into a bay for service. On top of the garbage was a battered old trunk. A co-worker of Glenn's climbed into the garbage to inspect the trunk and see if anything inside would be of value. All he saw were old letters and photos. The only thing of interest to him was a pair of dice. He grabbed them and asked if anyone else wanted to look inside. Glenn stated he would like to have the trunk out of curiosity. Such is the beginning of this extraordinary tale.

Glenn Wagner took the trunk home. It contained an assortment of documents yellowed with age, old photographs, letters and various journals. Upon further examination, he discovered that the contents belonged to a woman who had been a pilot. He assumed the trunk had been discarded after her death. He attempted to locate family members through the phone book without success. As Glenn became more familiar with the contents, he developed a heart-felt connection to this mystery woman. Having possession of mementos belonging to his Naval aviator father, he understood that this trunk represented someone's life, and although the contents might be meaningless to most people, they had been treasured by someone at one time. So Glenn kept the trunk, even after he married and moved several times.

Through the years, he would occasionally take the trunk down from his attic and look at the contents again to try to piece together a story of the woman to whom it had belonged. He could never bring himself to throw it out.

Fast forward to 2003.

Glenn's aunt, Ardesta Wilson, was recuperating from surgery at her home in Dallas. Glenn, trying to think of something to cheer her during the healing process, decided to show her the trunk. She had heard him talk about it, but she had never actually seen it. As she looked through the contents, there was nothing of particular interest to her. However, during a conversation about the trunk with her friend, Freda Henry, Ardesta mentioned that the woman who had owned it had been a pilot.

Freda suggested that her sister, Mary Holsenbeck, take a look at the trunk because Mary was an aviation enthusiast with a special interest in women in aviation. Mary and Ardesta met for lunch at Freda's home, and as the contents of the trunk were brought out, Mary immediately recognized that the woman was not just a pilot but had been a special pilot--a WASP from World War II.

"I was excited and curious at the same time," Mary said. She took the trunk home to further inspect its contents, hoping to discover more about this woman and possibly locate her family.

"The next day I went through every photograph, letter, document, everything," Mary said. She discovered that the woman's name was Faith Buchner. She was born and raised in Chicago, her father was a dentist, and at some point she had lived in Dallas and was married to a man named John Richards.

Mary called Nanette Malher, Webmaster for BubbaGirl.com, and told her the story about the trunk and its journey to that point. Mary wanted to put the story on the web site in hopes that someone would recognize Faith Buchner and provide more information. Nanette immediately searched the Internet for "Faith Buchner" and came up with several pages of information. One of the articles found contained her obituary dated September 2002. The obituary mentioned that she had acquired the nickname "Bucky" while at a airforce base in Greenwood, Mississippi.

"When I saw the name Bucky with her married name Richards, the connection clicked and I was astonished to realize that I had met this woman," Mary said. "The name Faith Buchner didn't mean anything to me, but Bucky Richards sure did."

In 1999, Mary was at the International Forest of Friendship in Atchison, Kansas, where famous aviators are inducted each year. The annual event began in honor of Amelia Earhart. Mary was there to attend the induction of a friend (American Airlines Pilot LA Gibson) and spent three days visiting with a group of WASP and remembered Bucky in particular. Ironically, Bucky was also being inducted that year. Mary remembered taking a group photograph of these women. She raced to her photo album and found the photograph. Sure enough, Bucky was right there in the group.

Amazed at this new-found revelation, Mary contacted her friend Wally Funk. Wally had known Bucky Richards for many years and couldn't believe Mary was in possession of her treasures. When Wally came to Mary's house to inspect the contents of the trunk, included were letters dated 1941 to 1942 and addressed to Bucky from someone named "Dora" with no last name. Dora was discussing her flying ratings and talking about trying to get enough hours to get into the WASP program. Mary asked Wally if it were possible to find out whether Dora ever became a WASP.

"Well yes," Wally said. "I can tell you she did. She's Dora Strother, she lives in Fort Worth and I just spoke with her last week!"

The story had now gone beyond irony; it was now about destiny.

Wally contacted Dawn Letson, Director of the Woman's Collection at the TWU Blagg-Huey Library, because she knew they had a WASP Museum. Dawn also knew Bucky very well and contacted Nancy Hoing, Bucky's daughter, who lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and suggested she speak with Mary.

Nancy called Mary and listened with disbelief as the story of the lost trunk unfolded. When Mary described the contents, Nancy was overwhelmed. All of the old photos, letters and documents were the nucleus of Nancy's heritage. These things were more precious to her family than anyone could have imagined. Not only were Bucky's childhood mementos included, but there were invaluable keepsakes that belonged to her parents and grandparents, including family trees, travel journals, one-of-a-kind photos, family Bibles and yearbooks. Nancy immediately made arrangements to travel to Dallas to retrieve the lost treasures. It was decided that Nancy would donate Bucky's aviation artifacts to the WASP Museum, along with some personal memorabilia. The other family-related items would be returned to their respective places. Bucky's parents were physicians and educators and had items in other museums.

On March 29, 2004, at the TWU Library, the saga of the lost trunk concluded with a gathering of all parties connected to this incredible story. Mary introduced Nancy to Glenn Wagner, as well as to his aunt, Ardesta Wilson, her friend and Mary's sister, Freda Henry and her husband Richard. There was much laughter and many tears. Glenn, Nancy and Mary all told their respective stories to fit the pieces together. Nancy made a donation of \$1,000 to the WASP Museum in honor of Glenn. She told stories of her famous mother and how she was the 74th woman in the world to get a helicopter rating and obtained a glider rating at age 74. Bucky had been a tireless advocate for a change in the civilian status of WASP in order for them to have military benefits. She was also a personal mentor to such notables as Eileen Collins, the first female pilot and commander of the space shuttle. Bucky had flown 16 different types of aircraft, including the B-17, during WWII. Richard Henry had been a tail gunner on the B-17 in England. He paid a special tribute to Bucky.

"They supplied the planes that we flew, and I'm here today because of her," Richard said.

Nancy said that when her mother died, her obituary ran in 305 newspapers around the world.

Naturally, everyone had questions for Nancy, but the one most asked was "How did something of such value get thrown out with the trash?"

Nancy said that in 1973, her mother had started a major construction project on the back of their house. The garage became the storage place for all the tools, lumber and refuse from the tearing down of walls that had yet to be taken to the dump, and also, unfortunately, for the trunk. Nancy said she believed it was simply picked up by accident with the rest of the trash and thrown out by the workers.

"For a while, we didn't miss it," Nancy said. "But there came a time when we realized we no longer had it."

Nancy hosted lunch for everyone and a special toast was made to Bucky as all raised their glasses in her memory. "I can't remember a time when so many people came together as strangers and left as friends," Mary said. "The group chemistry was indescribable and the hugging went on forever when everyone met, as well as when they all parted. It is incredible how much emotion and camaraderie that old trunk generated."

The story had a different meaning for each person involved. To Glenn, it was the story of Nancy finding her mother's lost treasures.

"This is not my mother's story," said Nancy. "This is the story of Glenn and his determination to find the owner of this trunk. The 'last' sentence of the story is about who it belonged to."

To Mary Holsenbeck, it was about the privilege of being involved in something bigger than herself and the incredible power of what coincidence can produce.

"That trunk could have belonged to anyone," Mary said. "Instead, it belonged to a famous aviator whose life has impacted us all."

Mary Holsenbeck is the founder of BubbaGirl®.com. She is a personal coach and owns her own PR firm based in Dallas,

Texas.