

## Mrs. Nickel Pickle

By Mayling Simpson

Growing up in Ohio in the 1950s, my small town had a wonderful place called Culpepper's General Store. It was on the corner of a block of brick buildings built in the 1800s, in the middle of the oldest part of town, on US Route 40. To the left of the front door was a counter with a cash register. The two isles down the middle displayed canned and dry goods and on the far left were large deep wooden bins containing fresh fruits and vegetables. My family had a small apple farm, and every summer Mr. Culpepper bought our apples. At the back of the store was a glass refrigerated case of meats, cold cuts and cheese. A long soda fountain with shiny stainless steel stools topped with red leather cushions occupied the right wall of the room. We kids would gather at the soda fountain after school and have a 6-ounce Coco-Cola from a glass bottle for five cents. I can still picture it, girls in our skirts and blouses, white bobby socks and black and white saddle-oxford laced shoes, and boys in slacks, button-down collar shirts and saddle-oxford shoes.

Mr. Culpepper, a slightly built man with a receding hairline, manned the cash register and the soda fountain. He enjoyed chatting with the kids and listening to their stories of teachers, sports, band practice, and who likes who. Mrs. Culpepper would generally stay at the back, tending the refrigerated case and reading a book. She had two round wooden bar stools back there, one that she sat on and the other for a visitor. On top of the refrigerated case was a large jar of giant dill pickles. Mrs. Culpepper charged kids a nickel for a pickle, which she wrapped in a piece of waxed paper. As a result, we used to call her Mrs. Nickel Pickle. For me, as a ten-year-old, it did not seem to matter much whether her name was a pepper or a pickle. We kids called her Mrs. Nickel Pickle with great endearment, because she charged adults ten cents for a pickle.

I loved Mrs. Nickel Pickle for other reasons also. She was full of advice for the confused and comfort for the abused. She was probably not very old, but with her slightly graying brown hair worn in a bun, her printed cotton dresses with a lace collar, her white apron, her heavy beige stockings and her sturdy brown laced shoes, she looked old to us kids. Old enough, at least, to be wise to the world and her word was worth listening to. She had a sweet face and a slim figure. When she talked to us kids, it was with love and compassion. I often left the soda fountain and drifted toward the back of the store with my coke to talk with Mrs. Nickel Pickle.

Mr. and Mrs. Culpepper did not have any children. One day when I asked her why, she told me that the Good Lord did not give her any. Then she leaned over like she was going to whisper a big secret in my ear.

She said, "I think I know why he did not give me any children."

“Why?” I asked wide-eyed.

“Because,” she said, “He wanted me to love all children. If I had my own children, I would be so busy with them, cooking, washing clothes, cleaning house, and taking them to lessons, that I wouldn’t have time for all of you children who come in every day for your cokes and pickles.”

So the Good Lord reserves certain adults to be parents to all kids, I thought to myself. What a good idea. “I was once a child,” said Mrs. Nickel Pickle with a smile. I had not thought about that before, and it came as a sort of surprise. I could not begin to imagine Mrs. Nickel Pickle as a child.

“My mother died when I was very young. My father’s aunt took me in because my father said he could not raise a young child. She was a spinster, you know, a woman who never got married and never had children. She was the most interesting person I ever knew,” said Mrs. Nickel Pickle.

“Tell me about her,” I asked.

Mrs. Nickel Pickle looked smilingly into my eyes, realizing how interested I was.

With dreaminess in her voice she continued. "My great aunt was tall and slim. She always wore lovely dresses and jewelry and looked elegant until the day she died. She had a large library, and she read and wrote poetry. She had many wonderful books in her house, including all the classics, and she read to me every night. When I went to school, my teachers would be amazed at the books I had read and things my aunt had taught me," said Mrs. Nickel Pickle.

“But most importantly,” she continued, “my aunt was an artist and a musician. She had studied art in New York and Paris. She also played the piano and the violin. To support herself, she gave music lessons at her apartment, so I was always meeting new children and learning music as well. She taught me all the nice manners of society and made sure I had pretty clothes. While some of the other kids would tease me that I was an orphan, I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.”

Sitting on the small round wood stool beside the refrigerated case, I tried to imagine myself being raised by a wonderful great aunt who knew everything. I could not imagine it really. My life was so different. We lived on a small farm near the middle of town. My father kept our apple orchard and worked as a carpenter, while my mother taught third grade. With four children, my mother was always tired and trying to make ends meet. Now I had three women to compare: my mother, Mrs. Nickel Pickle, and Mrs. Nickel Pickle’s great aunt. Who did I want to be like when I grew up? Would I really ever have a choice, I wondered.

So I asked Mrs. Nickel Pickle why she got married and ended up in a general store rather than being an artist and pianist like her great aunt. At ten years old, this seemed to me to be a giant mystery. How does our fate come about?

“Well,” said Mrs. Nickel Pickle, “when I was 18, my great aunt died. She left me her art supplies, piano and violin, and a small bank account. The landlord allowed me to stay one month after my aunt’s death and then said I had to leave, as I had no way to pay the rent. My father had been in touch with me off and on for years, so after my aunt’s death he took me back into his home, a trailer in a large trailer park on the outskirts of Columbus. This was a completely different world for me. Trailers were parked very close to each other in several long lines like a giant pack of Oreo Cookies. It was noisy day and night. People would shout at each other from their windows, “make that dog shut up,” or “cut the lights,” or “clean up your mess!” Sometimes the language was foul and I knew my aunt would never have approved. I had to sleep on the sofa in the living room. There was no room for a piano so I sold it before moving in with him. I dreamed that the piano money would pay for college, and I would study whatever interested me. My great aunt always said: “Follow your dreams.”

“My father soon grew tired of me.” A certain sadness entered Mrs. Nickel Pickles’ expression. “He said that his income as a welder was small and he could not keep me long. Now that I was out of high school I needed to get married to someone who could support me. He told me that the piano money would not be enough to go to college. I became very confused. It seemed I had no family and no direction. I cried at the drop of a pin. While my great aunt had shown me how life could be, we had not spent enough time talking about my future and how I would live when she passed on. My aunt was an optimist. Once I asked her what kind of funeral she wanted when she died, and she said ‘What funeral? I will not think about dying – ever!’ So when she died, I was not prepared, at all.”

I readjusted my seat on the wooden stool, thinking about Mrs. Nickel Pickle having no one in the world who cared about her, not even her own father. It seemed so sad.

“Then Johnny Culpepper showed up in my life.” Mrs. Nickel Pickle’s expression now looked romantic. A slight smile appeared as she glanced downward. “My daddy and I were driving through rural Ohio when we stopped here to get a coke. Working behind the soda bar was my Johnny. Oh, he was so cute and so sweet. Johnny and I looked at each other and it was love at first sight. This did not go unnoticed by my daddy who immediately saw me in a wedding dress. The next week, daddy went back to that store to meet Johnny again and his parents. It turned out that his parents wanted to retire and turn the store over to Johnny, their only child, but they felt he should marry first to have someone to help him,” said Mrs. Nickel Pickle.

“My daddy invited Johnny and his parents to meet us in a nice restaurant in Columbus, to get to know each other,” she continued. “Johnny’s parents were religious and very kind, and I liked them. When they learned I played the piano and violin, they suggested that I apply at their Presbyterian Church to be the pianist. The pay was not much, they said, but I would meet a lot of people and could be a music teacher. What did I know? I was 18 and my father was pushing me into Johnny’s arms. I got the pianist job and two months later I was married to Johnny, who was only 21 himself. As time went by, my hope of going to college faded. I paint, play the piano and violin and give lessons to a few children. Mostly I still dream of living like my great aunt. Don’t you do as I did, child. Live your dream and don’t marry young.”

I decided that Mrs. Nickel Pickle was very wise. I determined that very day to follow my dream. I would become a doctor. Nobody would marry me off, not even to a nice handsome guy. I slid off the stool, kissed Mrs. Nickel Pickle on the cheek, and bounced back to the soda bar with new wisdom and confidence.

When I was 14, my family moved to another state. At 26, doing my medical residency, I received a call from an old friend in Ohio saying that Mrs. Culpepper had passed away. The funeral would be held in three days. Could I come? Suddenly I felt badly that in all the intervening years I had never been back to see Mrs. Nickel Pickle. I had never written her a letter to tell her how she had influenced my life. I decided I should at least go to the funeral.

Wearing my best black wool suit and black hat over my long brown hair, I went to the funeral. The service was packed, especially with young people. All were talking about how Mrs. Culpepper had guided their lives, given them pearls of wisdom, helped them through family crises, listened when no one else would. I wept as I listened to them. I wept for myself for never saying to her “Thank you for telling me your story.”