

Cheryll Viteri: Life and Legacy

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Chapter 1

Parents: Gail and Mary Lee

Mary Lee Vrooman spent most of her early life living in Detroit, Michigan, since her father was a worker at the Detroit Edison Company. Her uncle owned a small restaurant downtown and Mary Lee worked as a waitress there. Mary Lee had simple goals for her life. “When she was in fourth grade, the nuns at her school asked her what she wanted to do,” Cheryll said in an interview. “She said she wanted to grow up, get married, and have twelve kids.”

While working a shift at her uncle’s restaurant, a group of airmen arrived to dine. Mary Lee made eye contact with a young, handsome gentleman who insisted on a date before he left. “They always said it was love at first sight,” Cheryll said, smiling. They went on that promised date the following day and the two knew they were meant to be together. Only one problem remained: the year was 1943, and the United States was at war. The handsome young patron, Gail Wohletz, was set to deploy from Iowa as a navigator for the Allies.

Gail wanted to marry Mary Lee, and he wanted to

marry her before he left for war. His friends in the force joked that he was taking the relationship too seriously after only knowing his beloved for a short while, but he knew Mary Lee was the one for him. What's more, he wanted to ensure the war didn't derail their relationship. Indeed, Mary Lee would not allow the war to hinder the goal she had set for herself in the fourth grade. She quit school and followed Gail to Iowa, and before he left, the two were wed. A year and a half later, the war ended, and the reunited couple began their life together, and would soon make progress on Mary Lee's second goal.

Gail had always been a country boy at heart, while Mary Lee had spent her life living in a growing Detroit following the automotive revolution. After reuniting, the couple initially moved to Gail's home state of Pennsylvania to begin their postwar life. It was here that they gave birth to their first child, Cheryll Anne Wohletz, on July 5th, 1946. Shortly after, in 1947, a golden opportunity came to the small family during the postwar economic boom. Mary Lee's father was able to help Gail secure a job at the Detroit Edison Company as an estimator, and the family moved back to the Motor City once again.

Early Childhood

Cheryll was only six months old when her family moved from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and moved in with her maternal grandparents in Hamtramck, Michigan, a small Wayne County town just outside of Detroit. They lived only a

short time in Hamtramck as their family was quickly growing, with the Wohletz family soon adding Cheryll's younger sister Marilyn to their ranks. Fortunately for the family, 1947 saw Michigan grant special charter township status to certain towns, which made land ownership more affordable for returning veterans. As a World War Two veteran, Gail was a beneficiary of this legislature. Redford, Michigan became such a charter township, and the family moved into the Detroit suburb thereafter, just two houses down from Mary Lee's sister Frances, an aunt Cheryll would always love and consider an important figure during her upbringing.

Redford set Cheryll up for an idyllic, classic childhood in mid-century America. Detroit was entering its zenith as an economic powerhouse, and her father was a hardworking and well-compensated employee at a major company. Her mother took the role of homemaker, the norm for a suburban mother in the 1950s. Cheryll would spend many of her days outdoors, playing games with the neighbors and her younger siblings. Her father would often play games or take walks with the children after work. The family grew a garden in the backyard, giving the young children a few chores, and the parents would bake bread together in the evenings. Gail and Mary Lee continued to grow in their relationship. It was around this time that Gail created the moniker "Lucky" for his wife. "He always called her Lucky, I think because he felt lucky to have her," Cheryll added.

Cheryll would spend most of her summers playing outside on the lawn with her siblings and the neighbors,

including her childhood best friend, a young girl also named Francis, though she would always be “Francie” to Cheryll. They often played marbles with the neighboring boys, winning their share of cat-eyes and boulders. They jumped rope and played Cowboys and Indians, taking inspiration from watching *The Lone Ranger*. Cheryll, as well as the rest of the girls in the neighborhood, rode their bicycles to get from one place to another, their mothers rarely giving heed to the children’s whereabouts so long as they were home for dinner.

The winters were more of a challenge for these children whose mother denied them time in front of the television. Indeed, Mary Lee often had to be creative when thinking up activities for her children to partake in and keep them busy. One winter day she told Cheryll about an indoor swimming pool in a neighboring high school that was a quick walk away. Cheryll and Francie leapt at the opportunity to do something different from usual, and after bundling up, they set out for this mysterious oasis. Finally, after thirty minutes or so of walking through the frigid cold, they found the high school. They were let in by the janitor and hopped into the water. Even though the water was heated, it was still far too cold to swim in for the young girls, so they soon got out, bundled back up, and headed back home. However, the snow had begun coming down harder, and the young girls had to navigate their way home through a snowstorm. Finally they arrived, having walked for about an hour with little reward. Nevertheless, Mary Lee was satisfied with her suggestion, as it had helped her to

achieve her goal: to create an adventure for her daughter and give Cheryll a healthy opportunity to unleash some of her abundant energy — “healthy” being subjective, as both girls came down with colds following their winter hike.

Early School Life

When she started school at St Agatha’s Catholic School, Cheryll was an intelligent and well-behaved student. It took a while to get adjusted to school – “I cried bloody murder my first day” – but she soon got along well with the other students and benefitted from having Francie in her class. Because of her tendency to stay quiet and her ability to stay out of trouble, teachers afforded her the same privileges that they gave all students who were able to stay on the straight and narrow. She was able to sit in the back of the class where her teachers didn’t have to keep a close eye on her; additionally, in the second grade, when she had her favorite childhood teacher Sister Rose Elizabeth, she had the ultimate privilege of sitting by the door. This gave her the respected responsibility of opening and closing the door for those who visited the classroom during the day. From early on, Cheryll had a taste for reading books, which helped her in her classroom. While she was always an A or B student, she had a special affinity for English class and excelled at writing.

Yet Cheryll’s dedication towards following rules didn’t always keep her out of trouble. Throughout Cheryll’s time attending St Agatha’s, she was made to walk to and from

school every morning and afternoon, regardless of the day or weather. It was only a few blocks away, but it could be an arduous trek for a young girl, especially during the cold Michigan winters, so Cheryll often walked with her friends Francie and Pam to help her through them. During one walk in particular in the second grade, Cheryll and the two girls arrived at school only to realize that they were late and the doors had been locked. Francie, who was only six years old, had the idea to spend the day in the neighboring forest and walk home when school let out, hoping that their parents would be none the wiser. Yet as the day pressed on, and the girls enjoyed their play time in the woods, Pam started to feel the urge to use the restroom and could hold it no longer. After refusing to relieve herself behind the bush, she ran home. Shortly thereafter, a large search party consisting of all the mothers of the neighborhood was sweeping across the woods to find the truant girls. When Mary Lee finally found Cheryll, she grabbed her by the ear and marched her back to school, which was by now letting out for the day. Sister Rose, though kind and concerned, scolded Cheryll upon seeing her, and sentenced her to six weeks of studying the catechism and doing addition tables. "In those days we called it *playing hooky*. I would not be playing hooky again after that."

Along with playing hooky, there were a few other moments of childlike deviousness from Cheryll. On one occasion, she brought a live garter snake in for show and tell. Yet rather than leading to negative consequences, this left her classmates enthralled, especially the boys, who all

wanted to play with it. Cheryll also spoke of an “impish” stage of her childhood, during which she poured salt into the sugar container the day Gail’s boss came over for dinner. “My mom never mentioned it. She must have been embarrassed because she was an excellent cook and always wanted everything to be perfect,” Cheryll said. Then she added, “My dad’s boss never came back after that.”

Another positive development during Cheryll’s childhood was the “adoption” of a neighboring family. Across the street from the Wohletz family lived Mary Koch, the small town’s leading canvasser of town gossip. Tragically, as a young mother, she lost her husband. In response, the Wohletz family decided to look after Mary and her sons Ralph and Skip. The Wohletz family would invite them to family events, and Gail would fix her car or do odd jobs around the house. They remained family friends, even after the Wohletz family eventually moved on from Redford, and Ralph, who was Cheryll’s age, was one of Cheryll’s closest friends as a child.

Yet overall, Cheryll’s home life remained what she could only describe as “normal.” Her mother was having more and more children, giving birth to three boys named James, David, and Mark, which in turn gave Cheryll more responsibilities at home. In addition to pulling weeds in the garden, she would have to help wash dishes, clean the house, and sometimes even do some cooking. On Thursdays, Mary Lee would receive Gail’s check in the mail and on occasion, Cheryll would have the opportunity to help her mother with the grocery shopping. On rare occasions,

her mother would send her to the local grocery store to buy milk and bread, where a loaf of bread was seventeen cents, and a gallon of milk was twenty-five cents.

The Wohletz family was a happy family. Mary Lee, though often overwhelmed with so many children, was a caring mother who took the time to make a suitable household for her family. She would even go the extra mile to do things like making dessert nightly from scratch, and stitch together Halloween costumes for each one of her children in the fall. Gail, in contrast, was relaxed and easy-going, and would pack all of his children into his car and drive them around the countryside without heed to seatbelt or safety. He would involve his children in his hobbies, teaching them bits of carpentry while he stood over his work bench in the evenings.

However, most of Cheryll's time in Redford was given to play. Cheryll and Francie both considered themselves tomboys because much of their playtime was spent outdoors playing sports and other games. They would go to the nearby baseball diamond to practice their swing, or, once they got big enough, to the basketball court to shoot some hoops. They continued to play marbles with the boys the next block over and held their own. Her early years, until she was twelve years old, were a series of fond memories: summer evenings jumping rope, playing blackjack, and running around playing tag with her friends.

Preteen and Teenage Years

Unfortunately, this ideal childhood would not last forever for Cheryll. In the seventh grade, school life worsened, and for no other reason than her becoming the victim of senseless and harsh bullying. There was a group of young boys who targeted Cheryll and tormented her with insults, name-calling, and hitting. A boy who sat behind her in class would pelt her with punches all class long. While in the bathroom one day, a group of girls came to her defense, and told her they saw what was happening, and encouraged her to fight back. So when she returned to class, and the hits inevitably continued, Cheryll turned around and slapped the assailant across his face. Angered, the boy and his accomplices threatened to track her down on her walk home and beat her up. So Cheryll began taking a longer, alternative route home that day, and continued to take that route each day for the rest of the year.

Schools were not as tuned into the issue of bullying during the late 1950s, and so inaction was typically the response from staff. Further, Cheryll's quiet nature, which was getting meeker by the day, prevented her from pushing the issue with her teachers. Cheryll's mother was simply too busy to give Cheryll the attention this problem required. With the care she provided for all her children, she had little attention to spare for her oldest, most independent daughter. Finally, after reaching a boiling point, Cheryll confronted her mother about the issue and asked for a solution. Her mother's response? That she knew these boys, and that they were the children of her father's friends. Surely they weren't as bad as Cheryll imagined.

Things went from bad to worse over the next two years as Cheryll continued to slink further away from the attention of others in order to avoid further bullying. While she wished to be a cheerleader, she avoided hobbies that brought attention to herself. Beyond the bullying, she was also continuing to develop an increasingly shy and reserved personality. "I would have liked to act in plays and sing in the choir, but those things made me too nervous. I was worried that people would laugh and make fun of me." Instead, she joined the chess club, something a little more characteristic of the wary teenager.

Then, to top things off, a surprising change happened, and Cheryll's parents became smitten with a vacation town that the family had visited and decided to make a home there. When Cheryll was in the ninth grade, the family moved to Walled Lake, Michigan, and left Cheryll in Redford to finish her freshman year. She was able to live with Francie and Francie's family, but Cheryll got terribly homesick and missed her parents and siblings. For the remainder of the school year, her home life was unstable, as she lived with Francie during the week, then made the trek to Walled Lake for weekends, where she had family but no friends. Come summer, Cheryll was finally able to move to Walled Lake with her family, but then had to say goodbye to Francie, Ralph, and the life she knew in Redford. Saying goodbye to Francie was particularly painful, as the two had been neighbors and best friends for about a decade. "I lived far away and it was hard to see her," Cheryll said. "We didn't see each other much after

that. The last time I saw her was soon after getting married. I guess she found a boyfriend in Colorado, moved there with him and fell off the map. Nobody I knew saw her after that. I just hope she did well.”

Walled Lake

Although the move to Walled Lake meant sacrifice, in the end it was one that was worthwhile in terms of Cheryll’s mental health and overall wellbeing. “The bullying stopped. Nobody knew who I was,” she noted, pointing out that she had been in the same small class with the same children since the first grade at St. Agatha’s in Redford. She continued to keep to herself and was not involved in school clubs and events outside of chess, but she could have peace of mind while she continued to excel in her studies. Her new high school, Walled Lake High School, was bigger and had far more students, and this gave her a chance to blend in and remain mostly anonymous among her peers.

Over the next two years, life went back to being normal for Cheryll. She began babysitting in the tenth grade, since she had gained a vast amount of experience from caring for her siblings – at this point there were nine of them, now including the additions of Denise, Joanne, Mary, John, and Michelle. She also got a job at the drive-in movie theatre, where she was renowned as the expert popcorn maker. The drive-in allowed Cheryll to revel in the normal teenage activities of the 1960s; for instance, she recalled

being in a crowd of hysterical teenage girls one night fawning over the Beatles during a screening of *A Hard Day's Night*. Although she was never one to participate in the obsession with rock stars such as the Beatles, the Beach Boys, or Elvis Presley, she enjoyed their music and was enjoying the culture they created for American teenagers.

She continued to thrive as a student. She was always a strong English student, but while at her new high school, she took an interest in another subject. Her school required each student to take a class in a foreign language. Cheryll didn't have much experience with languages, but while still in Redford, she had helped her brother, who had become an altar boy, memorize some Latin phrases to help him complete Mass. So in high school, she chose to continue with Latin and enjoyed the elegance of the language. Little did she know at the time, however, how much learning the root of the Romance languages would benefit her in the future.

Perhaps the fondest memories Cheryll had of her final years of high school were with her church's Teen Club. The Wohletz family, always steady adherents of the Catholic faith, had begun attending St Williams Catholic Church after moving to Walled Lake. A few parents of teenagers Cheryll's age organized a group to take the teenagers out on fun, safe, and family-friendly outings. Many times this included hikes in the area, square dance outings, or trips to the roller-rink. On one special occasion, the group of about a dozen teens had the opportunity to take a ferry out to Bobo Island, the Canadian amusement park island in the Detroit River

that was later closed and abandoned in 1993. In the 1960s, it was a teenage paradise, and Cheryll and her friends had free rein on the island as long as they got back to the return ferry later in the afternoon. That, however, turned out to be a more difficult demand than initially thought. "My friend and I were having a great time riding the little train around there, and I guess we just lost track of time." They returned late to the rendezvous point, only to realize the last ferry had departed and the group had gone. After a few frantic phone calls home, the pair of girls found that the group leader had been waiting and searching for the girls. They were able to hitch a ride with the employees headed back to Detroit, where their perturbed chaperone was waiting for them. This situation was only exacerbated when, on the return trip, Cheryll couldn't remember how to get to her relatively new home when it came time to give the directions.

There was an orchard near Cheryll's Walled Lake home that she and the siblings would visit, and when the farmers weren't present, they would pick apples, pears, and peaches. The younger siblings would collect snakes, frogs, and other small, slithering creatures, and bring them home to put in boxes. In one bizarre story that goes down in family lore, one of Cheryll's uncles was over visiting, and was liberal in his consumption of alcohol that day. He found the box of snakes and disappeared into the bathroom. An hour later, when Gail went to look for him, he found his brother-in-law asleep in the bathtub with snakes crawling about his body. The children found this hilarious, but the less-than-impressed mothers put an end to any snakes ever being

brought inside the home again.

But the orchard was also the scene of a significant moment in Cheryll's early life. On one of her many visits, she noticed a barn being built by a strapping young man. She convinced her young siblings to go with her and meet the fellow, and she would spend summer afternoons watching him work. At one point, when she found herself alone, the man sat beside her and unexpectedly planted a kiss on Cheryll's lips – her first. Surprised, Cheryll said nothing, but instead stood up, turned around, and frantically ran home. She would see the man on occasion after the episode, but never developed a romantic relationship with him. Still, the man whose name Cheryll has since forgotten left a strong impression on the enamored teen. "I guess you could say he was my first love."

Her high school days went on without much issue. In the twelfth grade she had developed a group of girlfriends, and she also had her church's teen group. She attended the high school dances with her group of girls, but they tended to stick with one another and dance on their own. She continued to be a good student. At one point, a recruiter for the US Navy came to speak at the classroom, saying that they were hiring secretaries in Washington for those who did well on an exam. Feeling confident in her skills, and with her mother's blessing, Cheryll did the exam and submitted it, hoping she'd later get an acceptance letter in the mail.

At one point that year, her mother had given birth to her eleventh and final child, Daniel. As was common by that point, Cheryll took off a week from school to help her mother

with chores around the house, as well as to care for the nine other siblings who still needed attention. Mary Lee, whose goal it had been as a child to have twelve children, was tiring from the physical and psychological toll of having a child nearly every other year since being married. She was thirty-nine at this point, but being a devout Catholic, abstained from using birth control. But Mary Lee's friend took her to their parish's bishop after Mary Lee had had the eleventh child. She explained that Mary Lee had given birth to all those children, and feared at her age she could still have a few more. The priest affirmed her concerns. "I'm not exactly sure what happened that day. All I know is, the priest said she'd had enough children, and that she never had another child after that day," Cheryll said.

Finally at the end of the year, Cheryll had the opportunity to go to prom. She was hoping to be asked by a boy in her class, but as the day approached, she received no such invitation. Her shyness and anonymity, which she often cherished since coming to Walled Lake, was certainly a hindrance on this occasion. When she spoke to her mother about her concerns, her mother told her that she should ask Ralph to accompany her, her old neighbor from Redford with whom the family still kept in touch. But Cheryll never did end up doing so, whether because she was too shy or too proud. "I think that is my one major regret from those times. I think it would have been fun to go with him."

As her final year in high school was coming to a close, Cheryll still wasn't giving much thought to her future. She had not applied to any colleges nor looked into any

long-term employment options. She was not involved in a romantic relationship and so had no immediate prospects of becoming a stay-at-home mother like her own mother. And this wasn't a path Mary Lee would recommend to her daughter anyway.

“She always told me to have an adventure. She always said, ‘No, don't be like me and get married really young and spend your whole life raising kids.’” But Cheryll was the eldest sibling, and she hadn't been given any examples of what life after high school could look like. She would have to be the trailblazer for the Wohletz family, choosing her own unique path. Fortunately, as summer approached a letter arrived in the mail, and few could have imagined the path that letter would open up for her.

