

Anna Gertrude Quinn Coogan

Born 20 October 1901. Died 23 March 1993, Pittsburgh, PA. Age, 91

Prepared by Gertrude Ann Coogan Johnson

January 2004

My Earliest Recollection

The earliest remembrance I have of Mother goes back to when I was about two years old. At that time, my playpen was on the back porch of the old Gerritt St house and she placed me in the pen for the afternoon. Quite often, Mom placed me there under the watchful eye of Pop Quinn who, in good weather, sat on the porch to read his paper and to “have a smoke”.



Mom stood at about 5' 6", had very dark hair with a widow's peak, and clear fair skin. She generally wore her hair pulled back but at other times and with the styles, she had side curls. I would say she carried a good weight but could not be described as a fat person weighting about 180 pounds. Gertrude dressed well, wore stylish shoes and when going out for an evening - put on attractive accessories.

One experience I recall vividly, about 1941, time when Mother and I went to Stamford to see our relatives there and Aunt Dee Dee in particular. For the most part, we stayed at the home of Mildred “Millie” Deeley.

The other recollections I have of my mother was that she was always working. She was an outstanding housekeeper so that cleaning washing, cooking, sewing, shopping at the store took up almost her entire day. Since we were seven in the house, there was much to do and this she did with great gusto and energy —every day. She made jams and jellies, canned beans, chard and peaches as well as pickles, relish, chili sauce and piccalilli. Housekeeping was her profession and she was proud of it. Everything she did was done efficiently.

Another remembrance I have of Mother was that of her taking me out for music lessons on Saturday morning. This involved her driving me out to St. Anselm's convent, Swissvale, where she would sit while I played for an hour under the direction of Sister Angeline, S.C. Afterwards, we would go shopping. Later at home on a daily basis, I had to practice at the old piano in the back hall and Mother would sit with me and make me play until I got the music right. I dreaded these sessions.

Early Education

As did her sisters, Gertrude attended Holy Rosary Elementary and High School under the Sisters of Saint Joseph. One always got the impression that Mother was a bright person given the fact that she could figure out situations and people quickly. She was good at spotting a loser and on more than one occasion advised her husband to that effect. Her judgment was shrewd

Anna Gertrude Quinn Coogan

In all probability, Gertrude followed the business course in high school since upon graduation she went to work in the office of an automobile sales company in East Liberty. They thought so much of her work that upon her marriage they presented her with a fine mantel clock that struck a Westminster chime.

However, she told Jimmy in later years that immediate employment was not her first choice upon graduation. Apparently, the Sisters had encouraged her to accept a scholarship to Trinity College in Washington, D.C. after which she had hoped to go into nursing. Her father nixed the idea and told her to go to work helping to support the family.

Another indication that Mom was gifted showed itself later in life when she became involved in various organizations whether as secretary or treasurer for the different associations to which she belonged. Among these were the Ammendale Mothers' Club where she took responsibility as president; and there was the St. Elizabeth's Senior Citizens where she served as treasurer for a number of years. In between, she took offices in the Ladies Auxiliary of the American Legion while Jack was active in that organization. Repeatedly she was called upon to be chair for the weekly parish card parties that were formidable assignments. As an astute financial manager, she began the purchase of General Motors stock as early as 1926 and watched its growth daily. Later, she made other stock purchases and managed the family's finances with an observant eye. That they were able to squeak through the Great Depression is attributable in no small measure to her careful management of household expenses.

Jack Coogan adds this. Mother taught me what the stock market was all about. I opened an account at Moore, Leonard, and Lynch after she introduced me to her broker. In later life, we would have many discussions on the pros and cons of many investments. I gave her subscription to the *Wall Street Journal* that she read from one end to the other. After she went to the Baptist Home, she had the balance of the subscription sent to Bill's house and he took it in to her. I told her they could deliver it to the Home but she said, "No because I don't want the people here to think I have money". When we got regular jobs, Mom said we had to pay room and board at the rate of one-third of our take home pay. After I began working at USS, I said we should negotiate the board rate. We had a good time doing that and finally settled on a maximum rate of \$100/mo. She kept an accurate record in her little black book on how much each of us paid and she saw to it that we got it all back in the end.



Jack Coogan, circa 1927

Anna Gertrude Quinn Coogan

Enter: John Patrick Coogan

As a working girl, Gertrude (she never used her true first name Anna) enjoyed going out for dances. At one of these in Wilkinsburg, she met a certain Jack Coogan, attracted to him not only by his good looks and outgoing personality but also by his ability as a dancer. There was great compatibility between these two: both played cards, enjoyed picnics, had sizeable



families, were of the same Catholic religion, had Irish roots and seemed to have the same ideas about starting a family of their own. After a courtship of some two years, they married on September 8, 1926 by a young curate and family friend Father Leo Pastorius at Holy Rosary Church. Attending this party were Frank Coogan and Mary Ellen Quinn as witnesses. This happy scene was reenacted some 40 years later when at an anniversary celebration they all came together once again.

Something else I remember about our mother was that she was always a good neighbor to those who lived next door and nearby. At 1205 Murtland Ave., there was Mrs. Rosswog (who, she said, was the best neighbor she ever had) and the O'Shea's who lived at 1203. Later, when we lived on Gerritt, she was a great confidant to Mary Schubert who, with the responsibility for an elderly mother-in-law and seven children, did not always know which way to turn.

These two women had a warm relationship buttressed by the exchange of cakes and pies over the back fence. This friendship continued long after the Schubert household broke up and Mary took up residence with daughter Isabel.

Then there were the Vacco's who took the Boggs' house. Mrs. V. was a young mother and would frequently talk over her concerns with Gertrude where she knew she could get good advice. And those times when she went shopping on Lang or Homewood avenues. She would stop to talk to ever so many people along the way, most of whom she had known since her own school years. If there was a death or sickness in the neighborhood Mom would be among those who would offer not only sympathy but also a side dish was also often tendered for use after the wake.

Early Married Years 1926-1938

If there was any jubilation evident in this young couple, it was soon dispelled by the Great Depression. At first, Jack and Gertie (as Jack referred to her when he did not call her "Sweetheart") took an apartment in the Greenfield section of Pittsburgh; after Jackie was born, they rented a six-room house on Washington Blvd. By this time, the Kopper's Company had taken on Jack as a draftsman and this provided a reasonable income. With the Crash, he was laid off and had to take a variety of jobs wherever he could find them.

Anna Gertrude Quinn Coogan

One of the things that helped the family get through the Depression was the room rent paid by an older Italian gentleman by name of Mr. Nardulli. He used our back bedroom on Washington Blvd in the early Thirties. When we moved to Hermitage St. and to Murtland Ave. he came with us. He left each morning before 6 A.M. to serve as security guard at his nephew's construction company and returned by 7:30 in the evening. Daddy taught us to say, "Com' esta?" to him and he would reply "Bene, bene". Nardulli left us on the move to Gerritt St.

These were universally hard times for everyone and worry was great since no one knew how long the Depression would last or where the next dollar would come from. Nevertheless, they did with as little as they could to keep things going even though this meant jobs other than those to be found in the drafting room. The Hermitage St. house lacked central heat so that in winter coal stoves had to be set up in the cellar and dining room in the hope that warmth would spread to the upstairs. Even as difficult as these years were others in the family could recall that there were always good times in the form of family parties to celebrate birthdays, baptisms or holidays. Sometimes the party was nothing more than a good game of Hearts around the dining room table where it was observed that not everyone was honest in their declaration of cards thrown down.

By 1940, Jack had been able to get back to his first love – engineering. Jones & Laughlin Steel and later Carnegie Illinois at the Edgar Thompson plant, Braddock, took him on. With my birth in 1938, the house had become too small to accommodate four kids. Besides, with May Quinn's marriage to John Finley in 1937, Pop Quinn could hardly manage the eight-room house on Gerritt St. Therefore, it was decided that the Coogans would move which they did in the spring of 1938.

This marked a new beginning for everyone. It was understood that we would pay rent to Pop but we were to have free run of the house and garage. In addition, we took full advantage of our newfound liberty. Nevertheless, with the increased space there was the extra work of keeping house. In those days, all Pittsburgh used soft coal for fuel and it was dirty. Walls, curtains, sidewalks, windows – everything was fouled by smoke and soot. What was clean one week was dirty the next. Gertrude Coogan would not let it get ahead of her.

Washday (generally Monday) was a chore since this was long before automatic machinery. This meant that the whole load had to be pushed through wringers, rinsed in several tubs of water, sheets had to be boiled on a hotplate and everything had to be hung to dry. In between times, you got four kids off to school, prepared for their lunch (always taken at home) and got the evening meal ready. Then there was the ironing. With five men in the house and three on the altar, there were dozens of shirts and surpluses to be starched and ironed. The rounds were endless and yet it was done without complaint. This is what was expected of a good mother in those days.

In a way, I enjoyed washdays in the years before I went to school. I would be in the cellar with Mom playing with my dolls and laughing at our crazy dog, Jacques, who used to entertain himself by chasing his stubby tail around and around in the corner. On one attempt, he missed the tail and nipped Mom on the leg. For that, he was treated to a swift slam with a wet broom and ushered out the door.

Anna Gertrude Quinn Coogan

Even with little free time, Mother managed to keep her turn with women bridge club that met monthly at various members' homes. Then there were frequent visits from relatives and friends. We especially enjoyed having Betz, May or Tess (or all three) come from Washington for a holiday. Less frequently, there were visits from our Stamford cousins when we heard stories about the older generation up there as well as about younger cousins whom we knew less well but could at least identify by name. It seems to me that Mom was always busy. When she was especially pushed she used to purse her lips and blow out little puffs of air. Then we knew she was on a roll! Mom's life was made all the more difficult as she was plagued by severe gall bladder attacks that would put her down for days at a time. When this happened, it was our turn at the stove and sink. We were always glad to see her up and about again in a few days.

The Heart of the Family

The first image that comes to mind whenever I think of Mom is that she was the center, the heart, not only of our family but of the extended family as well. If anything was going on it was usually at our house and there was always food and good times to go along with them.

It was interesting to watch Poppa Quinn during these days. He was always with us but somehow never interfered in family business or arguments - and we had our share of those. When anyone came in, they always stopped to chat with "Mr. Quinn". Depending on who else was around, he either conversed with them or went back to his radio and paper. He and Mom had a special relationship. This probably went back to the days after Annie Quinn passed away in 1915 while the girls were still young. It was during those years that Gertrude stepped forward to take responsibility given to her by Pop.

Years later, this relationship took another turn when Gertrude became his true caretaker. She monitored everything he did to make sure that, with declining years; he did not undertake household odd jobs that he should not have done. Not infrequently he would ask if she was going out; if he didn't want to go along in order to stop by Sears or American Standard for some plumbing need, he would wait until she was in the car and then get into some forbidden



Original Wedding Party, 40 years later

project such as trimming the trees, painting the roof, take down screens or even replace a pipe. With her return, there would be the inevitable confrontation and we would hear: "Hells bells, what did you have to do that for, you could have killed yourself". To which he would either give no answer or simply say, "Oh, shut up will you, it was nothing". Still in all, Papa and Mom had a great relationship that spoke volumes to us as kids. It was a first class lesson in filial love.

Anna Gertrude Quinn Coogan

Something Jim remembers about Mom was her deep devotion as a Catholic. This was shown by her lifelong faithfulness to everything that related to the church. The changes brought on by Vatican II did not seem to faze her a bit - she took them in stride. Unless she was very sick, she always went to Sunday Mass. In her later years, she would drive by to pick up a lady friend (Dorothy). And then, there were the many prayers she said on her own: Saint Joseph (need for work), Saint Jude (desperate cases), the prayer of Saint Francis, St. Therese, St. Anne, Prayer to the Blessed Mother and our Lady of Perpetual Help and several others that she kept on the kitchen table. To judge by their worn look these were not for show. Her piety was not ostentatious but very real, a true anchor in good times or bad.

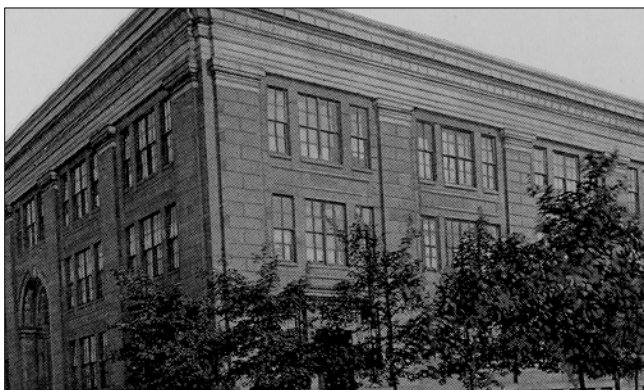
One of the most difficult burdens Mom had to carry during these years was that of caring for her sister Tess who, at 37, had had a severe stroke. This caused a paralysis of the left side meaning that she could not walk, dress, bathe, and at times not even feed herself. Mother took on this nursing responsibility without a thought and for nearly two years gave Tess every care that a good nurse might have done. In addition, Mom and the family had to supply Tess with the moral and emotional support she badly needed to cope with the depression that accompanied the stroke. Therefore, she was with her when death came on February 28, 1945.

The one thing both Mom and Daddy stressed was education. One would never even think not to do home study and success in school was of paramount importance even when it was not forthcoming. On the matter of higher education, there was no question that we would have it even though neither of them enjoyed that opportunity. Jack, who joined the Navy just after graduating from high school in 1945, took the first step in this direction. There he had a chance to train in electronics and with the end of the war and enlistment; he went on to engineering at Pitt through the GI Bill.

When Bill completed high school in 1946, he also went into the University of Pittsburgh's School of Engineering and Jimmy followed an undergraduate program at the same school in 1948. This meant high tuition costs and while by comparison they were nowhere near what it costs today it must be remembered that salaries weren't either. To help, the boys worked when they could.

Things Begin to Change, 1949-1956

Our family was quite stable up until now. Daddy had moved along in his work with United States Steel and would soon be named drawing room supervisor at the Homestead Steel Works. As the youngest member of the group and therefore the "baby of the family", I could only watch as changes began to occur.



School Attended by Two Generations

Anna Gertrude Quinn Coogan

The first major shift came when Jim announced the he would join the Christian Brothers. We were all surprised at his decision. In addition, although he teased me unmercifully, I felt sad about his leaving. While she did not say anything to discourage him, Mom was saddened by Jimmy's leaving. Maybe it was as much the realization that her kids were growing up and the empty nest syndrome began to kick in. Shortly thereafter, Bill was called into the Army to serve in the Korean War.

Jack finished at Pitt in 1949 and got into the engineering department at Homestead. By then he was dating Joan Cyphers and they married in 1953. Bill, upon his return from the Army went back to school to complete his degree and in engineering. By then he met Margie Itzel and with his college degree completed, they married in 1955. This reduced the household considerably and changed the focus of our lives as the grandchildren came along.

By now, Poppa Quinn was in his late eighties and had begun to show a decline. His passing came quickly on February 26, 1956 because of uremia and prostate cancer. Also, at about this time, significant social change had begun to set in at the Homewood-Brushton neighborhood. It was not the same. Older properties were going up for sale, racial and religious compositions began to shift. With Pop's death, the house was left to the Quinn girls. For all of their married years, Gertrude and Jack could never afford to buy their own home. Rather than take on responsibility for the Gerritt St. house it was sold with proceeds being divided equally among May, Betz and Gertrude. Since May and Betz had either married or because they enjoyed reasonable government salaries, they declined to take the money that was coming to them. It is believed that, in view of the care Jack and Gertrude had given to Pop and Tess, they did not take their share of the proceeds from the sale of 922.

It is difficult to say whether Mom was nostalgic about leaving the old house since I cannot recall her ever speaking about it. Still, she must have had second thoughts on giving up the home where she and her sisters were born, where her mother had died, the scene of ever so many family gatherings and celebrations and where endless numbers of friends had been given hospitality. On the other hand, the old place had its limitations having suffered the wear and tear of nearly 60 years of hard use. Once, years later, when Jim asked Mom about her feelings when making this move and if she ever thought of the old place she said, "I didn't feel badly about moving from Gerritt St. but whenever I dream about home - that is the image I see."

Mom and Dad had put money away in the hope of being able to buy their own place sometime. When the opportunity presented itself, they moved quickly. With only me left to put through school, and since I was already at Duquesne University, Mom and Dad looked around for a new house. Jackie was then living in the South Hills and Bill was moving in that direction. After a search, they settled on take a newly built but recently vacated house at 211 Thomas Dr., Whitehall. After 30 years of marriage, they finally had a place they could call their own.

Anna Gertrude Quinn Coogan

This move represented an enormous transition not only because it came in at \$29,500, which they could just about afford with a mortgage, but also because it represented an uprooting from the City of Pittsburgh, their old parish plus taking up a totally different way of life in

suburbia. Mom worried about the cost and asked Jim if he thought they were being extravagant! Whether they were or not they were delighted to have a warm, comfortable home where the plumbing worked, the roof did not leak, and an inside garage. There was also a yard where one could grow flowers and vegetables. This was the greatest! All of their saving and hard work had paid off! Because of it, they were immensely proud and happy.

The Golden Years 1957-1973

It appears as though Mom took all of these changes in stride. She promptly went about the purchase of new furniture, met new neighbors, reoriented herself to different shopping districts, and, in general, began to relax. The gallbladder trouble she had been having together with a stomach ulcer was cleared up by surgery. As a result, she enjoyed best health that she had had in a many years without having to worry about anything or anyone. In 1963, US Steel decided that Jack should retire so in celebration Mom and Dad took a trip to Europe to visit with me where I was working with the Army Dependents Schools. They also went to Scotland. Dad observed that it was nearly 60 years to the day that he, Frank and their mother had left the old country to join James Francis Coogan who had come over two years before and was living in Fayette City, Pennsylvania. While in Wishaw, near Glasgow, he recognized many of the buildings he had known as a small child. There was also the opportunity to meet members of the Feehan Family, cousins on his mother's (Callahan) side of the clan. This was the trip of a lifetime. Now, secure in retirement, their children grown up and educated, Gertrude and Jack could truly enjoy the fruit of their labors.



Holy Rosary Church

It was at about this time they took up with the newly formed Senior Citizens group at their parish of St. Elizabeth. Always a great tenor singer, my father was quickly identified as “entertainment director” for their many trips and parties. They formed a new circle of friends, visited them in their homes, and regularly had them into theirs. This idyllic situation went on for several years but eventually Daddy's health began to weaken. Since May Finley was also retired, she came up to Pittsburgh for several weeks if only to give Gertie companionship at a critical time. Once again, Mom showed her interest in nursing and gave Dad every imaginable attention. His death, when it came on June 6, 1973, represented a great loss for they had been together for 47 years during which they shared many joys and hardships. We wondered how Mom would take her new life. We did not have to wait long to find out.

Anna Gertrude Quinn Coogan

When asked if she had any special interest to occupy her time she said that she planned to do volunteer work at Saint Joseph's Hospital, then located on the South Side. The Sisters of St. Joseph, whom she had had in school, conducted it and not a few of the older Sisters still remembered the names of those whom Gertrude had in school. Very readily, she made herself available every Thursday to wheel patients into x-ray, take them to labs for testing and to do whatever else it was that volunteers were asked to do.

It was during this time that she mentioned how, as a young girl, she had wanted to go into nursing and now was as good a time as any to come closer to a life-long ambition. Since her own health was good, she was ever grateful that she could help others and thank God to be spared the suffering witnessed in so many of the patients she assisted. Mom stayed with this "second career" until she was well into her mid-80s and after the hospital moved nearer to her at the Jefferson Hospital location. Feeling that volunteers were now replaced by paid employees she decided to resign even admitting that she had to quit before they found out how old she really was since discontinuance was expected at 80 years of age. , "If they find out how old I am," she said", I'll get fired."

By now, Elizabeth had given up her place in Virginia and taken an apartment at the Bruceton in Pleasant Hills. These two strong-minded sisters agreed that they should not live together but they met often and kept in touch by phone sometimes several times a day. They roomed together on the many outings made by the Senior Citizens. Trips to the Atlantic City Casinos were particularly enjoyable.

As Mother approached 85, we wanted to have a party to celebrate the occasion. She would have none of it – she would throw a party of her own! Dinner was scheduled at a nearby restaurant and it was a grand evening enjoyed by both family and friends.

At about this time Mother had to doctor for a diabetic condition. This was later complicated by a viral infection that affected the heart valves causing her to become short of breath and to lose weight. This congestive condition gradually worsened further heightened by a hysterectomy operation. She never fully recovered from this setback. After a second hospitalization, the doctor told us that she could no longer live alone and that we should consider placement in an assisted living facility. At this time, too her hearing had become greatly affected and macular degeneration made it virtually impossible for her to read or to watch television with any clarity.

It was extremely difficult to break this news to Mom as she loved her home and felt very badly about the prospect of leaving it. In the end, she went directly from the hospital to the Baptist Home, Castle Shannon, in July 1989. She was a resident there for nearly two years.

At first, it was very hard for her to accede to her health needs. This together with the fact that she never again saw her home caused her to be deeply depressed – for a few weeks. Then her spirits rebounded. The Home gave her a small apartment where she could place a few pieces of her old furniture. Naturally gregarious, she became acquainted with a large number of the other residents and even assisted them with walkers and wheel chairs when she herself was

Anna Gertrude Quinn Coogan

the one who could have asked for help. Every chance she was found her in the chapel at the Baptist services and again for the Catholic masses. One day she told Jim that she sometimes deliberately misses an occasional Baptist service so they would not think she was converting to their religion. The woman minister chuckled at this and said, "The day your mother turns Baptist, I'm going to become a Catholic!"

We owe a great debt of gratitude to Bill and Marge for the care they gave Mom in her final years of need. Aside from visiting several times a week Bill looked after the Thomas Drive Property, and arranged for its sale within a few months. This had been a great concern for Mother who feared that, with a recession on, the place would be vacant and a liability. In fact, it was on the market for only two days.

Still of sound mind, Bill took her to the realtor's office to sign over the property. She thanked the purchasing family very sweetly and wished for them the same happiness she had enjoyed at 211 Thomas Drive. Once back in the car she told Bill, "Get to the bank and deposit this check before they change their mind!" If owning a house was the achievement of a lifetime, its sale and the security it represented to Gertrude was no less a satisfaction. Now could she truly relax.

Despite slowly declining strength, Mom continued to maintain a keen sense of mental alertness. She kept informed about her investments, participated in all of the home's activities, and went out to see the family at every opportunity. One of the highlights of these years was her 90th birthday when everyone gathered again to make the occasion complete. She never lost interest in any member of her family, even down to the youngest.

On her final day, Mom attended the funeral of a very close friend, someone with whom she had played cards for several years. Afterwards she, Bill and Elizabeth had lunch at the apartment and later went to dinner at the Olive Garden. "Make sure I am back by 7:00 o'clock, we have bingo tonight," she told Bill. Moreover, she made the games even winning two of them. Back in her room a short time later, she called for the nurse and complained about not feeling well. It must be noted how on her own her own initiative some time earlier she signed a statement requesting that in the event of a major heart attack or congestive failure she was not to be revived but be allowed to die of natural causes. She got her wish by slipping away quietly on March 23, 1993 after a long and fruitful life at the age of 91 years and six months.

Funeral arrangements were simple. Not only were her children present but also grandchildren and great grandchildren as well. The Mass of Resurrection was celebrated at the parish of St. Elizabeth where she had been a member for 34 years. Burial took place at the Calvary Cemetery, Section MA, Lot 81, Grave #17, where she was placed alongside Jack and her sister May, later to be joined there by her sister Elizabeth.