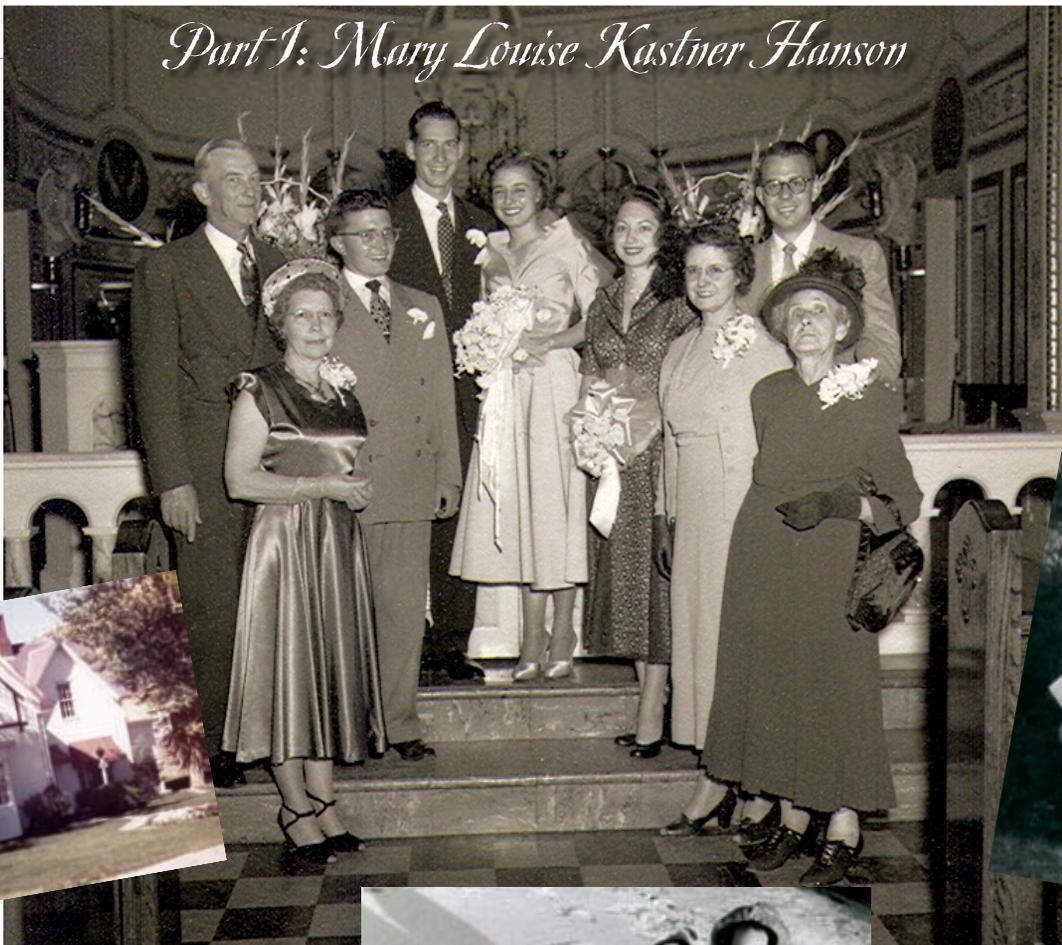


A Zest for Living

Mary Louise Hanson and the Peterson Family



Part I: Mary Louise Kastner Hanson



The wedding of Peter and Mary Louise. L to R: Ely Hanson, Mildred Mae Hanson, best man [name unknown], Peter Hanson, Mary Louise Hanson, Norma Kastner, Ellen Kastner, Stuart Kastner, Alma Peterson



The Hanson family home in Laramie

Kari, Janell, and Sherod Hanson



Mary Louise and Sherod

Early Years in Walsenburg

In the small-town setting of Walsenburg, Colorado, Norman Francis Kastner and his family were comfortably well-off and well respected. Norman was the president of the Guarantee State Bank and a valued contributor to the town's social causes. His wife, Ellen Matilda, was a handsome woman, well dressed and conscious of setting a good example. The family's three children, Stuart Paul, Loris Ann and Mary Louise, were good students and regular church-goers, thriving under their parents' strong guidance.

Norman and Ellen had met in Medicine Bow, Wyoming, where she was teaching school and he worked in a bank. Norman was from a wealthy Iowa family, while Ellen's parents were both well-educated Swedish immigrants who had prospered in the Colorado mining industry. They were married in 1922.

In Walsenburg, the family had a large house with live-in domestic staff. It was not unusual at the time for families of moderate wealth to hire young women to help with the children, meals, and cleaning. These women were often immigrants from countries like Germany, Italy and Czechoslovakia, and the Kastner children enjoyed the cultural insight—especially the exotic foods—that they introduced to the family.

The children attended St. Mary's Catholic school and church. Norman Kastner was Catholic, and though Ellen was a Methodist and never converted, she supported his wishes for the children to be educated by the nuns. Lory



Ellen, Norman, Mary Louise, Lory, and Stuart

and Mary Louise both remember what a strong impact these women had on them. For Mary Louise, the memories were mixed. She remembers one nun who was particularly harsh. After surviving her fifth grade year with Sister Maryanne, Mary Louise was devastated to learn that the nun was going to be her sixth grade teacher too. But the Kastner girls took their Catholic upbringing seriously, and at different times, each of them dreamed of becoming a nun herself.

The family owned a large Hudson, and often went for scenic drives through the rocky Colorado countryside. One favorite trip was through the LaVeda Pass, which was unpaved at the time. LaVeda is an interesting geological formation where the mountain is split with a vein of volcanic rock, and it was a favorite picnic area. On Sundays, the Kastners would often drive to Gardner, to a home restaurant where “Mrs. Mac” served wonderful chicken dinners on her sun porch. Lory still remembers the mashed potatoes and cream gravy as the best she ever ate -- next to her mom’s.

On several occasions, the family had the opportunity to rub shoulders with high society at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs. The Broadmoor was one of the first luxury resorts of the west, and it was truly glamorous. While Norman attended banking meetings in the conference facilities, the rest of the family would enjoy the lush grounds, the ice-skating palace, and the indoor swimming pool.

Norman was part-owner of the Fox Theatre in Walsenburg, which gave him another connection to the rich and famous. Once in a while, Ellen and Norman would be invited to a grand party at the home of Rick Ricketson, Rocky Mountain division manager of Fox Theatres, in the Park Hill section of Denver. There’s a favorite



Norman and Ellen, Cuba

family picture of the couple, dressed to the nines, standing with a movie star in front of a Fox Theatre in downtown Denver.

Rogene Burcham, one of Ellen's brothers' children, remembers how stylishly dressed the Kastner family was whenever they visited her family in Rawlins, Wyoming. At that time, one of the most fashionable vacation destinations was Cuba, where movie stars and other society types would go for the nightclubs, gambling, and poolside ambience. Norman and Ellen took a trip to Florida and Cuba for a banking convention, furthering the family's impression that they were doing very well indeed.

But in 1933, the Kastner family went through a crisis that spelled the end of their affluent lifestyle. Norman had been given \$25,000 by his mother to invest in Guarantee State Bank. Through some kind of trickery or embezzlement by friends of his, that money was lost. Norman was never implicated in the scandal, but he was fired from his job at the bank and was completely devastated. At first, he didn't admit to Ellen that anything was wrong. To cover up his job loss, he invited her on a spontaneous trip. The couple left their children at home with the domestic help and embarked on a scenic drive around Wyoming and Colorado. Along the way, they stopped in Rawlins to visit Ellen's family.

Rogene remembers the visit. "After they left, I heard my father talking about how strangely Norman was behaving. 'There's something wrong there,' he said to my mother, 'Norman's just not himself.'"

Finally, on the way back to Walsenburg, Norman told Ellen all about the bank crisis and the fact that he'd lost his job. The whole



Lory and Mary Louise, Walsenburg home

situation triggered some kind of mental imbalance, and Norman became more and more irrational. Eventually, Ellen had him hospitalized in a private institution in Denver. His condition did not improve, and he was placed as a resident in a veteran's hospital in Fort Lyons, Colorado.

This was at the height of the banking industry collapse, in a year when 4000 banks around the country were forced to suspend operations. Guarantee State Bank did not go under, but Norman's family was never able to recover any of the money. Ellen visited an attorney who said her case was hopeless, and that she might as well put her children up for adoption since she was in no financial position to keep them.

Ellen Goes to Work

But Ellen was not a woman to give up. President Roosevelt had recently initiated a number of programs to help people through the Great Depression. These programs were run through a system of welfare offices, and Ellen, through her connections in Walsenburg society, got a job as director of the Huerfano County welfare office. With a salary of \$150 a month, it was considered well paid, and she was very good at it. Ellen stayed in that position for about five years.

To economize, the family moved to a smaller house, without a second floor, but with two bathrooms like their other home. They still had a maid, Bessy Stilhem, to help with household chores. Mary Louise stayed in touch with Bessy throughout her life.

These were the worst years of the Great Depression, but Mary Louise, the youngest of Ellen's three children, didn't feel that the family had to make sacrifices. Lory, from the perspective of an



Mary Louise



“Mary Louise was a quiet, bookish little girl, but she had spunk. One time Ellen and the girls were visiting us and Jarda was staying there too. Jarda left her false teeth on the back of the toilet, and when she went to look for them, they were missing. Everyone was set to the task of looking for those false teeth, but they were never found. There was general suspicion that Mary Louise and Lory were somehow responsible, that accidentally or not, the teeth had been flushed down toilet, but the girls never admitted to this and it was never proven.” —Rogene Burcham

older child, remembers how frugal her mother was during this time, but says their life was far from sparse. “We were mighty lucky compared to mom’s welfare applicants,” she says.

Many people in Walsenburg worked in the coalmines outside of town, and Mary Louise was very touched by the modest homes of her school friends. There were also many Hispanics and Italians who had come to town to work in the mines and who lived in desperate poverty. Both daughters remember “hobos,” unemployed transients who would work for the family in exchange for a meal and a place to spend the night.

Ellen was an excellent cook and she knew how to make the most of what was available. She had learned to make nutritious gourmet meals while working in the homes of millionaires during her years in Aspen. The family ate a lot of vegetable-beef soup and chili, and on Sunday, there would be a piece of roast beef or a chicken. For Thanksgiving, Lory and Mary Louise remember that their mother would fatten, kill, and pluck a turkey in the garage next to the house. They got to choose what they wanted to eat for their special birthday dinners.

The family still had plenty of good times. Sometimes they’d take a week’s vacation and go out to a cabin near LaVeda owned by Lory’s godparents, the Kriers. The Kriers lived next door in a beautiful English Tudor, one of the nicest houses in town. Walsenburg was hot in the summer, and there were no pools, so the children would play in the automatic sprinklers around the Kriers’ home. Sometimes they’d drive to Martin Lake, southwest of town, or to Raton, New Mexico to cool off.

Around town, there were plenty of ways to have fun. Lory was a big fan of the movies, and the family had a free pass because of



*Front: Stuart, Rogene, and Elmer
Back: Baby Lory and Alma*

their father's connection to Fox Theatres. Mary Louise preferred to listen to mystery shows on the radio. The children all played outside games like kick-the-can, and board games like Monopoly. Every once in a while, there would be a big event, like the circus passing through town, to put everyone in a holiday mood.

Among her responsibilities for the welfare office, Ellen had to transport deaf and blind children to a special school in Denver. Sometimes Mary Louise would go along on these trips. When Ellen would stop to shop at one of the big department stores in town, Neustetters or the Denver Dry, the children would play together on the store playground.

Even in these hard times, Ellen made sure her children were exposed to the finer things in life. "Mom thought that to be a cultured person, you should develop some musical talent," Lory says. She and Stuart both played the French horn, and all three children were taught piano. Stuart was the most accomplished, winning a "Bank Night" competition playing Turkey in the Straw, with a live turkey joining him on stage. He also had a beautiful voice.

Occasionally, Ellen would take the children to visit Norman in the hospital. Mary Louise remembers being told that the reason he could not come home was that he had a bleeding stomach ulcer. She always wondered why they had to go through two sets of locked doors to visit him.

No one seems to know exactly what Norman's condition was. Rogene speculates that he may have been manic-depressive, because she remembers times when he was very excitable. He had been a Marine in the trenches in France during World War I, and today we might label his illness as post-traumatic stress. The constant wetness in the trenches left him with terrible foot



*Front: Mary Louise, Stuart, and Lory
Back: Hugo and Ellen*

problems. When he was in the hospital, he'd sometimes cry out, thinking he was still back in the war zone.

The Move to Rawlins

In 1939, Ellen was forced out of her public welfare manager's job. The political leadership in Walsenburg had changed from Democrat to Republican, and those in charge thought that a man should have the position. With no savings, she was obliged to leave Walsenburg and move to Rawlins, where her mother and siblings were living. Her sister, Jarda, managed a large ranch just out of town. Her brother Hugo was a dentist in Rawlins, and her mother, Alma, owned a moderate-sized house, the upper part of which she rented for income.

That first summer, Ellen and her children lived out on Jarda's ranch near Walcott Junction. Her husband, Andy Nelson, had died, and she was having trouble finding and keeping hired help. So Ellen agreed to come do the cooking, with Mary Louise as her assistant. Lory moved in with Jarda at her Walcott home. Stuart, who was in his last years of high school, had stayed behind in Walsenburg, living with the family of a friend.

It was a difficult time for everyone. Jarda was a bitter, complaining woman, and the children couldn't seem to do anything right. One time, as Mary Louise sat reading, Jarda started ranting to Ellen. Mary Louise put her fingers in her ears to concentrate on her book—and got in terrible trouble. As the summer wore on, Lory got sick and moved into Rawlins, where she lived with her Uncle Hugo's family.

Alma sensed that this living situation would not work for the long term, and she invited Ellen's family to live in the upstairs of



A young Mary Louise

"She and I became acquainted in the summer of 1944 when we were both working at the Strand Theater in Rawlins. I was a silly 14-year-old and Mary Louise, at 15 and always mature for her years, was a great role model for me all through high school."

—Maxine Williams Bormuth