

What a Time We Had



Bernice Lieberum
Tells Stories from Her Life

A Long Courtship

A girlfriend of mine, Lorraine, first introduced me to Herb. She said, “You’ve got to meet this guy, he’s a real butter and eggs man.” That meant he had a lot of dough, which was as far as could be from the truth, but I liked him right away anyway.

Herb had left his family when he was about 16 and gone off to make his own way. He got married when he was about 19 or 20 to a gal named Mildred. That was in Cleveland. She was no good, though, that marriage didn’t last more than a year or so. He’d be coming up the hill to their house at the end of the work day and he’d meet another guy on his way down.

Before I met him, he’d been working in Venezuela as an electrician for an oil company that was building a refinery down there. It was pretty rugged living conditions: he said they had to make a little oil moat around each of the legs of their beds to keep big bugs from crawling up. He made a bundle of money there and sent most of it back home to an American bank. Then, the day after he came back, the banks went broke, and he couldn’t get a penny of it out.

Herb and I wanted to get married, but with the economy being so unsettled, we had to wait. Jobs were tight, and Herb was out of work for a long time. For a while, he stayed with his Aunt Mary in McKeesport, and he’d write me a letter every day. When he came back to Chicago, he had to take whatever jobs he could find. I remember at one point Pa was working in one of the gambling joints run by the Mafia. He got Herb a job in one of the big hotels, running the elevator. Herb would come off the job and tell me about all the famous people he took up and down — Sophie Tucker, Jimmie Durante, and the like.

After we'd been courting for four years, Herb finally got a good job at Youngstown Sheet and Tube, and we could get married. I went with him to buy the ring. It cost \$20: a white-gold band with eight diamonds, and I thought I was Fort Knox. I made my wedding dress myself: rust-red and form fitting, it was really hot stuff. Aunt Mel didn't express an opinion. But it was much more practical than a white gown, I wore it to office Christmas parties for years afterwards.

We had a Catholic wedding, but because Herb wasn't Catholic, we couldn't have it in the church, so we had it in the sacristy. We were married by Uncle Jim's nephew, who was a priest. It was a small wedding, just my friend Gertrude, Herb's friend Bill George and Aunt Mel. I can't remember if Mom and Pop came — I think Pop did, but he had to go to work right afterward. (He was a night watchman for the schools at that time.) Afterwards, we all had turkey dinner at Aunt Mel's and then went to our new apartment. Aunt Mel didn't come, she was feeling pretty glum about me leaving her so she wasn't really in the mood for celebrating.

Anyway, Herb had been living at the apartment and had fixed it all up, but we got there and everything was a mess. The chairs were turned upside down, there were cups on the checkerboard floor. . . Turns out Herb's friends had bribed the janitor to let them in before we got there. All of a sudden they all piled in — Surprise! — and then the real party began. That was Sunday evening, and we were supposed to go back to work the next day. But it snowed, so we got an unexpected one-day honeymoon.

We paid \$25 a month rent for that first apartment. Herb fixed it up quite a bit, with help from Bill George's stepfather, who would work for beer. Rita was born while we were living there. It was a tiny little place — when Aunt



Bernice and Herb, 1930



Herb, Rita and Bernice

feeding other women's babies — anything to relieve that pain.

Well, we got through that and then she got diarrhea from some strawberries that they fed me. The nurses weren't cleaning her well enough so she got a deep sore on her little bottom. It took me weeks to get that cleaned up after we got home. If that had been today, somebody would have been sued. I couldn't give her a bath for a month, I had to swab her with cotton balls and oil. It felt so good when I could finally put her in the bathtub and give her a good scrub.

Herb worried because she slept so much when we first brought her home. We used to flick our fingers to sting the bottom of her feet to get her to wake up when it was time for her to eat.

Mel would come to stay with us there, she would have to sleep in bed with us. I was the monkey in the middle.

The apartment was on the third floor, and Herb felt awful about me lugging Rita up those stairs, especially as I got bigger with Carol. Then, just about the time Carol was to be born, Herb's mother died. She left us \$1,000, and with a little help from Aunt Mel, we were able to buy a little place on Sheffield Avenue in Hammond. That house cost a grand total of \$2,500, and in the shape it was in when we bought it, it wasn't worth much more.

Whenever we'd save up a little money, we'd fix it up. Herb took out the walls between the three bedrooms and made them into two nice big rooms. We built a rec room downstairs with a bar, a beautiful thing with lights all around the bottom and up above. The parties we had down there! By the time we got ready to leave that house, after about 10 years, it was a mansion. We sold it for nearly \$9,000 to the people across the street.

Rita the Rascal

Rita was born at Mercy Hospital in Chicago. She was the only girl on the ward, with 17 boys. People joked that with the war coming on, we'd be needing all those boys. Sick joke, I guess.

She was a real rascal. For the first couple of days, she just wouldn't take the breast. They put all kinds of things on me to make it more enticing to her but she didn't want any part of it. I don't know what she thought she was holding out for — steak or something? Here I was loaded with milk, and the nurses would say "If only we could give that to some of these other babies who aren't getting enough." I'll tell you, after a day or so, I was ready to start



Aunt Mel and the girls

Everyone's heard the story of the time Rita wriggled her way through the bars of her crib. Herb was working nights and I had my mom with me visiting. Rita was fussing in there and I was trying to ignore her in the hopes that she'd go to sleep. Well the fussing didn't stop, in fact it seemed to be getting more and more intense, so finally I went in there. Here she had managed to push her legs, her bottom, her whole body between the bars, and she was hanging in mid-air, with her head stuck on the other side. I was frantic -- while Mom held her up, I ran and got a little hacksaw blade and cut through one of the bars. I think they put those bars closer together nowadays.

Back then, the rule was "nine months in the belly, nine days in the hospital." This was hardest when Carol was born because Rita wasn't allowed to visit (she was 18 months old). Herb would bring her and stand outside the hospital to wave. Aunt Mel came to stay with them to take care of Rita, which I appreciated, except for one thing. Before I went to the hospital, I had Rita trained to go to bed and fall asleep. Well, Aunt Mel got her back into the habit of being rocked to sleep at night, so when I came home, I had two babies to rock to sleep!

The Family is Complete

Carol was so eager to be born, the doctor almost missed it. We couldn't make it to the hospital where Rita had been born -- the doctor thought it was too far -- so we went to South Shore hospital. The nurses got me all ready and tucked me away in the delivery room, and every once in a while one of them would come in and check me. Well I guess at some point they kind of forgot about me, and I was moaning away by myself in there for a long time, and then one of the

infections he'd gotten swimming in Lake Erie.) So while we were certainly aware of everything that was going on over there, we weren't too terribly affected by it. There was rationing, but we were always comfortable. You got your coupons for the number of people in your household, so we got them for four even though two of us were kids who didn't eat much.

During those war years, everybody kept a can on the back of the stove where they'd put bacon drippings and other kinds of fat. Every so often the kids would go around the neighborhood collecting them. They'd get a lot of laughs out of it: they'd say, "Hey Lady, you got a fat can?" I don't know what the government did with that stuff, but it had something to do with ammunition.

Working for the Union

When we were first married and when the girls were young, Herb worked for Youngstown doing shift work. He didn't seem to mind the odd schedule too much: when he had days off he'd work on the house, and he could sometimes catch a few hours sleep during his night shifts if it wasn't too busy.

About that time, the first unions were getting organized, and Herb was right there at the start of it. I remember that big Memorial Day riot. Herb was one of the people they called in to try and settle things down. Jim Bryson had been visiting when the call came in, and he went over to the plant with him. It was bedlam. The management had brought in a bunch of thugs, and people were fighting everywhere. Men were lying around all busted up and bleeding. But that was how the whole union movement got started, with people doing whatever they had to do to draw attention to their issues.

nurses happened in, looked under the sheet and shouted "Get the doctor, QUICK!" He came running in, still buckling up his pants from the nap he'd been taking, and he just caught the baby as she came sliding out. I kept the bills from those deliveries; the total cost of the nine days in the hospital was \$100.

Those baby years were wonderful. The girls were like a couple of little dolls, dressed alike in the clothes I made them. I was sorry when they started school, it had been so much fun to have them with me. But even after they got to school age, I kept a close eye on them. We had the best backyard in the neighborhood, and when they got together with friends, they'd usually come over to our place. I was pretty active with the PTA; in fact I was due to be president the year that we went to Denver.

Herb was exempt from the draft because of his hearing problem. (He'd developed that as a child, from ear



Bernice and a Northern Pike, 4 lbs, 26 inches long