

# **COOKIE**

**7th from the top  
4th from the bottom**

**MEMOIRS OF  
JOAN COOK**

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For those who like to know such things,  
the names of the ten Cook siblings  
on the front cover are as follows:

In birth order from right to left:

Mary  
Dave  
Jim  
Bill  
Martha  
Bob  
Joan  
Irma  
John  
Paul

At reunions we line up in birth order for  
our annual photo shoot! There have been  
many such pictures taken over the years.  
The one on the cover was taken in 1980 in  
Rootstown, Ohio, at my brother Bob's home.

*A grateful thanks to my friend and  
colleague Sally Grammer for so carefully  
editing my manuscript. A shout out to her  
husband Bill, who also found a few errors.*



## **BY WAY OF EXPLANATION**

During one of my self-exploration phases, I took a class on getting in touch with my inner child ala Ray Bradshaw. One of the assignments was to write the story of my life in fairy tale form. The following is the result of my effort to summarize my life in the form of a personal myth – or fairy tale. I was 60.

Once upon a time in the kingdom of Kent there lived a poor man and his family on a dirt road in the country. Many children were given to this man and his young wife. It was a dark time for the entire kingdom, and the man had to work hard to provide food and clothing for his growing family. The food was simple and repetitious and the clothes were mostly hand-me-downs but the children never went hungry or cold. The man and woman loved each other and their children, and the days and years passed quickly and the children kept arriving from "the other side" until there were ten in all.

The 7th child - a girl - from a very early age was very responsible and always finished her work before playing. She was quite serious by nature and liked very much to please others. When she was 11 a terrible war broke out in the world and two of her brothers went to help fight and a sister went to nurse the wounded. This was very hard

on the woman who prayed and worried every day for her children who were away helping with the war.

One day the war was over and the children all came home. The boy who had gone off to war when he was only 18 was never the same after he returned, and some say he is still suffering the effects of the experience.

A few years after the war the woman got very sick and the serious, responsible girl - who was 15 at the time - was sent to a warm, dry part of the country with her sick mother to see if that would help the woman get well. While they were away from home the woman got even worse and almost died. The responsible daughter became even more serious because this was such a difficult time and she was very frightened and felt very much alone. The oldest daughter came to help for a while but the poor father had to stay home and earn money to pay all the bills. The woman got a little better so she and the serious daughter went back home. Several months later the woman died and the man and all the children were very sad. The youngest boy was only 6 years old at the time. The poor father began to drink a lot and life got worse for the children who were still at home.

The responsible girl didn't know what to do the following year when she finished school so she joined a group of women who wore long black dresses and prayed and taught children to read and write. She didn't see her brothers and sisters or her father very often and she continued to grow more serious and more responsible.

One day she learned that her father was very sick so she went to see him for the last time. He died a short time after she returned to her work. None of the man's children was with him when he died - a lonely and sad man.

After many years of teaching children, the serious

daughter decided it was time to leave the group of women because she had changed many of her ideas about life. She moved to another part of the country near the mountains and began a new phase of her life.

After several years she met a man who wanted her to marry him. At first she thought she didn't want any more responsibility, but the man made her laugh so she decided to marry him.

Recently she has discovered she has someone inside her who can help her play and be spontaneous and not so serious - so someday soon she can write a happy ending to this serious tale.

So there you have it. My life in a nutshell. It is now 23 years later and many other significant events have taken place in my life. This memoir is my attempt to flesh out my fairy tale and bring these reflections into the present time to see who this "serious, responsible" girl has become and what she has done with her life.





## DEDICATION

I dedicate these memoirs to the countless persons who have influenced me in my journey through life. Many of them, I feel certain, have no idea of the part they have played in my growth. Some I have never met face to face for some are authors. I have always been moved by the written word. It seems that just the right book came into my life at a critical time when I needed that author's message. "When the student is ready, the teacher appears."

I do not wish to downplay the effect that face to face words and interactions have had. They have been numerous and significant. My birth family first and foremost. My parents, Raymond and Helen Bradley Cook, whose love for each other and for life gave me my siblings and my appreciation of an honest and straightforward approach to life. My six brothers, Dave, Jim, Bill, Bob, John, and Paul and my three sisters, Mary Eileen, Martha and Irma, have been such a part of me that I could not know myself without each one's unique contribution. I've had a classroom on life available to me in my immediate family.

I have been equally rich in the number and quality of

friends who have graced my life beyond telling. I will name only two – for the list is long. Sheila Gurnett Warner, whose entrance into my life began in 1971 and has continued to this day. Her Irish wit, remarkable vocabulary, constant love and encouragement have nourished my soul and heart like few others.

Harriet Colman Shorb has been a soul-half kind of friend for many years. She has seen me through some very difficult transition times in my life. Harriet has personified the saying, “Friends ought to be like bread and brownies in your life – both staple and dessert.” Her recent departure to the world beyond has left a void I will not attempt to fill - honoring the space she held in my life.

## INTRODUCTION

My favorite spot in the whole world is a mountainside overlooking Echo Lake on the road to Mt Evans just west of Denver. I call it Bethlehem. I discovered "Bethlehem" in mid June of 1973. I had just left the convent and moved to Colorado with Sheila Gurnett – previously known as Sister Sean. On our second trip to the mountains we found ourselves on the road to Mt Evans. We pulled off to look at Echo Lake from above and stayed the rest of the day. I remember the feel of the warm sun and the cool, fresh mountain air. To this day, that combination of warm sun and cool air can restore my soul like nothing else – especially if I am in the mountains or beside a creek.

There was still snow in the pines below us. We were above timberline – a phrase I had newly learned. Having grown up in Ohio and Illinois, I had no concept of timberline. That day as we sat on our blanket on that mountainside we alternately read, marveled at the scene stretched before us, drank in the fresh mountain air, laughed and wept at such beauty – and such folly. Had we actually left the convent and moved to the mountains – without jobs and no place to stay? I was 42, Sheila was 35.

Why did we name this place Bethlehem? The book we were reading was Sam Keen's *To A Dancing God* (a gift from a friend who had left the convent two years before I did). A paragraph from that book burned itself indelibly in my mind that day.

*"Every man has his Bethlehem where new possibilities and hopes are born, where his history is invaded by novelty and the potency for new action. At such times the tyranny of the past and the terror of the future give way before a new time of open possibility – the vibrant present."*

I was at just such a point in my life. My own personal Bethlehem. The "tyranny of the past and the terror of the future" had indeed given way to a "new time of open possibility." It was in reality, "the vibrant present." I have since come to realize that I have experienced five Bethlehems in my life. That is the subject of this writing – my five personal "Bethlehems."

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## **1ST BETHLEHEM – I AM BORN AND GROW UP IN A LARGE FAMILY**

*My recollections of growing up are just that – recollections – and in no particular order. They are more or less random thoughts that come to the surface as I think back on what it was like growing up in a large family in the 30's and 40's in north central Ohio.*

The only house I lived in while growing up was a two-story house built by my father and his brothers-in-law. It was the house where I was born on December 12th in 1930, the 7th of ten children to Raymond and Helen Cook. It was a simple house with rectangular rooms. No split-level or “L” shaped rooms in those days. My favorite room was the kitchen because my mom made the best bread. The smell was even better than the taste. With a large family we had a boys’ bedroom, a girls’ bedroom and my parents’ bedroom. The current baby slept in our parents’ room – and it seemed there was always a baby.

If I remember correctly, I was in fifth grade before we

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got indoor plumbing. Before that we used the outhouse and "thunder mugs" during the night in the winter. There are stories about one of my brothers peeing in another's shoe in the dark of the night. Deliberate or accident??

We took baths on Saturday night in a big galvanized tub in the kitchen. My mother heated water from the spring and several of us used the same water. We kept our food cold in an ice box. In the winter we also used a window box over the kitchen sink. We did have a hand pump in the kitchen for cooking water.

Our house was on Horning Road, a washboard kind of dirt road just outside the city limits of Kent, Ohio. The road was so named because several Horning families had large farms down the road from us. One of the Horning men drove the school bus that we rode to school every day. Our grandmother Cook lived just up the road and we frequently walked there to visit her. Grandma and Grandpa Bradley had died before I was born so I never knew them. Grandpa Cook died when I was five. The only grandparent I really remember was my dad's mother, who lived to age 90. Grandma Cook - Christine - was a quiet and somewhat aloof woman. At least that is what I recall. Her parents (the Barzans) came to America from Bavaria. I'm not sure of the route they took when they first arrived, but they ended up in Cleveland. William Cook and his family came to Cleveland from Ireland by way of Canada. Cleveland is where Christine met and married William Cook and that is where my dad was born and lived until he was about 19. That was when the family moved from Cleveland to "the country" for Grandpa's lungs.

I got sidetracked from talking about Grandma. I think



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her family must have come from money in Germany. I say that because I always had the impression that our Cleveland relatives felt themselves better than their country kin from Kent. There is a picture of my Grandma when she was 16 in which she is dressed very elegantly and looks like royalty. I remember being absolutely fascinated by Grandma when I saw her sneak up on a fly and catch it in her hand. She was an excellent seamstress and made our First Communion dresses for us.

Every evening we all sat down to a home cooked meal prepared by my mother. We helped set the table and pour the milk, usually while listening to Jack Armstrong or the Lone Ranger on the radio. Though the food was simple, usually from our garden and the hen house, I never remember being hungry when the meal was finished. Our dinner table was a democratic event. Each of us had a say – though not in the family decisions, as my father was quite autocratic. I always felt like I could speak up about things that had happened at school or play – even when I was quite young. I believe the sharing of stories and food at our dinner table each night is partly responsible for the strong bond I feel with my brothers and sisters.

How I loved coming home from school or in from play to the delicious aroma of bread baking in our kitchen. Now I realize what a security it was to have my mother there in the kitchen making all sorts of good things for us. The memory of that particular combination of my mother's personal warmth and the warmth of the kitchen still calms my inner fears when I bring it to mind. In later life I bought a bread maker (God forbid that I make bread from scratch!) so I could experience the wonderful smell in my own home. To this day

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the sense of smell can trigger memories faster and stronger than any other sense.

The bread was always white - no healthy whole wheat available at that time - at least in our family. The bread was used, of course, for lunches during our school days. Funny now when I remember feeling a bit envious when I saw the store bought and machine-sliced bread that many of my classmates had in their lunches. That home made bread often made up our summer lunches. We broke up the bread in a large bowl, poured some of our own farm fresh milk over it, sprinkled a generous amount of sugar on top and dug in. It was difficult during WWII to get the sugar for our bread and milk (and other things) because of the rationing.

Besides home made bread, my mother made delicious cakes and cookies. We used the rich sweet cream from our cow to make whipped cream frosting for the cakes. Powdered sugar frosting was pretty much unknown to us. Even today at age 81, when I am looking for some "comfort food," I frequently go for a hearty piece of bread - preferably a homemade style. Though I must admit, it's been a very long time since I've had a bowl of bread and milk and sugar.

Though my dad was born and raised a city boy, he had several successful gardens. We needed them to feed our ever-growing family. We had a small apple orchard and a cow and chickens. At different times we also had a pig and a goat. Of course there were dogs and cats - which never were allowed in the house. "People live in houses, animals live outdoors or in the barn," was a phrase we often heard. For many years, several of my brothers would not have pets in their

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homes. The girls have long since been tamed by our pets, even allowing them on our beds! Dad would have a fit!

My sister Irma was 18 months younger than I and was tall for her age so we were sometimes mistaken for twins. My mother's sister, Aunt Eunice, made dresses for us from the same material and pattern. That added to the misperception from strangers that we were twins. Being so close in age we were almost always together and the bond between us grew as we did. Even today with Irma in Ohio and me in Colorado we talk almost daily. Good thing there is an unlimited long distance phone plan. Irma's health is not good right now and the thought of life without her makes my heart stop momentarily.

My brother Bob is just 18 months older than I, so he and Irma and I became the three musketeers as we were growing up. There were five years between Bob and our older brothers and he so wanted to be part of their group. It didn't happen and he had to be content to pal around with Irma and me. Bob was just one grade ahead of me so every other year we were in the same classroom at St Patrick's, the small local Catholic grade school. (There were two grades in a room.) In high school my boyfriend and I would sometimes double date with Bob and his girlfriend. Bob married Allene Klinco and they had nine children whom they raised in Rootstown, Ohio. Their home became the site for many happy and noisy Cook family reunions over the years.

When I think back now I wonder how my mother coped with her growing brood. I was the 7th child and born just 18 months after my brother Bob when the depression

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was going strong in 1930. Irma came just 18 months after me with two more in 1936 and 1941. I can only guess what a personal toll bearing ten children in 23 years must have taken on my mother's health.

We were eating Sunday dinner in early December of 1941 when the phone rang. It was my brother Bill calling from California with news that he had just joined the Marines. War had been declared after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, and he and his buddy were going to help win that war for America. He was 18 and the 1st of three of my siblings to serve in WWII. Dave, who was married and had a new son, later joined the Air Force and Mary Eileen served as a Navy nurse. Like many American families we notified the passersby that members of this household were serving our country. We were proud to have a flag with three gold stars hanging in our front window. At home we did our part by using our ration stamps for sugar and gas and numerous other items that were rationed during the war. Dad and Jim worked at the Ravenna arsenal making munitions, and Mary Eileen was a nurse there before she joined the Navy. I remember that Dad's hair turned red from exposure to some of the chemicals. The concern for her children's safety during those trying years probably worsened my mother's heart condition. She had rheumatic fever as a child and her heart valves were in trouble. That connection was not known at that time, however.

After I graduated from 8th grade at St Patrick's Catholic Grade School in 1944 the question about where to go to high school became an issue. One of my dad's cousins, Sister Innocents Leydorf, was a Benedictine nun in Nauvoo, Illinois. The community she belonged to owned and operated a girls' boarding school there

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in Nauvoo. As there were no Catholic High Schools in Kent, it was decided that I should go to high school in Illinois. I say, "it was decided" because I do not recall having any say in the matter. My sister Martha had graduated from that school in 1943 so the precedent was set. As I try to remember how I felt about it at the time, I draw a blank. I don't recall that going to a Catholic girls' boarding school was particularly big on my list of desires. But then, Martha had gone away to boarding school and had some happy stories to tell about life there, so the idea gradually became okay for me to go too. Eventually the idea of going away to school sounded kind of exciting so I started sewing nametapes on my clothes in preparation.

Come September I had my train ticket on the Erie RR from Kent to Chicago. My dad had worked for the Erie for many years before he started his plumbing business. It was my first train trip by myself and I was a bit intimidated. My mom had told me to find an older lady and take the seat beside her – which I did. When I got to Chicago, Sister Innocents, my cousin, met the train and guided me to the Santa Fe Train, which would take some Chicago girls and me to Ft Madison, Iowa. There is no train service to Nauvoo – hence the stop in Iowa. There was a bus waiting for us in Ft Madison. We crossed the Mississippi – an impressive sight to this small town Ohio girl – and were greeted by Sister Rose, the principal of St Mary's Academy. Later some seniors showed us to our dormitory.

So boarding school life began in earnest. I made friends with other boarders from all over the country – some even from Mexico. One of my dorm mates was Cyrene Palmisano from Chicago. She thought it quite amazing that I had nine siblings. I used to

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refer to myself as being the 7th from the top and 4th from the bottom. Those numbers didn't make sense to her – 7th and 4th - when there were just ten of us. The following summer she sent me a post card addressed to "Cookie" 7th from the top 4th from the bottom, Kent, Ohio. I actually got the card. Kent had a population of about 8000 at that time and we were the only Cook family with lots of kids. I have used that phrase as the title of my memoirs.

I never had a nickname before so I loved being called Cookie. I have always liked to learn and became immersed in the freshmen curriculum. The teachers were all nuns and I grew to love and admire them. I remember being amazed at how human they seemed – and happy. I recall how surprised I was when I first saw Sister Rita, long skirt and all, climb over a fence on one of our frequent walks down to the Mississippi River. My previous experience with nuns was my grade school teachers – who didn't strike me as particularly happy or human. They were okay, but just "our teachers" and we didn't live with them like we did with the nuns in Nauvoo. I didn't realize it at the time, but the seed was sown for following in their footsteps when decision time came around after graduation.

To help with the tuition, I had a job ironing the uniform blouses every week. There were walks to the River (the school was on a bluff in the bend of the Mississippi) and picnics in the park and basketball and other sports. No dates with boys, of course, but there would be time for that later. Each class put on a play during the year so that was a new experience. Lots of personal growth opportunities were available to us and I took full advantage of as many as I could.

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I went home at Christmas but stayed at the Academy for Thanksgiving and Easter. When June came and I left St Mary's for the summer, I did not know I would not return until my senior year after my mother's death. Because of my mother's increasing illnesses, I stayed home to help rather than return to boarding school in the fall of my sophomore year.

###

### **I remember my mother**

Mother was born Helen Mary Martha Bradley. Her twin sister was called Hazel. They were the youngest of seven children. She was born in Streetsboro, Ohio, to Eldora (called Dora) Baxter Bradley and William Bradley. Her grandfather, David Baxter, had come to America from Scotland with his parents and his brothers. He fought in the civil war with the North and was wounded. I recall one census report when I was doing some genealogy that described him as a cripple, the result of the war injury.

My mother was a beautiful woman as I remember her, soft and warm, as a mother should be. She had no formal education beyond 8th grade, but was an intelligent woman with a ready laugh. I remember that she liked to sing. My sister Irma and I used to listen to hear if mom was singing downstairs when we awoke. If she was, we knew it would be a good day. By the time I was old enough to notice such things, my mother was in her late 30's. She was 33 when I was born and 43 when Paul, the youngest was born.

Mother also played the piano by ear. One song I

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remember went something like this, "Though you may not sit in the chair of the Whitehouse, never despair. It pays to be a man. Be a shining example of righteousness and truth." Not sure why that stuck with me but it did. I also remember her playing and singing "Juanita." I don't think any of us inherited her musical talent. Several of us took piano lessons for short periods of time, but never really developed any skill at playing. I could tell some horror stories about my inability to carry a tune.

I've seen pictures of mother when I was a baby and her hair was mostly dark but I remember her as having beautiful white hair. I thought she was beautiful and others did also. I remember when we were in Arizona together, (more on that later), even strangers used to say what grace and beauty she had. I love to look at a photo I have of her when Mary Eileen was an infant. She looks so serene and beautiful. I wonder what was going through her mind. Dad was in the army during WWI when Mary was born. Mother was staying with her mother and father at the Bradley home on Route 5, and Mary was born there in 1918. The home is still there, across from the Kentwood Restaurant – a gray and pink building now.

I have a picture of mother with the first five children. She is seated in a large wooden lawn chair holding Martha on her lap with Bill on one arm of the chair and the other three standing around. I think she looks a bit overwhelmed. And to think that there were five more after that! I wonder now, how she managed. Large families were not uncommon in those days and most women accepted that role without complaint.

We had lots of summer picnics in area parks with