One Ironing Board, Four Generations



***“***[***A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.***](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/marcusgarv365148.html?src=t_culture)***”-Marcus Garvey***

History is a bond that connects family members over generations. Items and memories are two things that connect individuals in the stories, “Shoeless Joes Jackson Comes to Iowa”, “Everyday Use”, and “The Things They Carried”. A father and his son bonded over their love for baseball, a quilt made of pieces of clothing connects family members across generations, and soldiers carried emotions and memories throughout the war. My grandmother recently passed away and while cleaning out her apartment, my family discovered a wooden ironing board behind a door in the spare bedroom. I quickly found out from my relatives that this was not just a typical ironing board because it had belonged to my great grandmother, Estella Pelzel, which made it over 75 years old. This wooden ironing board functioned as a bridge between generations of family members. The history and memories behind this simple household item seemed unending and it gave me a better understanding of who all my ancestors were and how they lived their lives.

This simple household item holds a lot of significance and memories for my family. Estella had used that wooden ironing board for many years back in the 1930s and early 1940s to iron clothes for her six children. This was during a time when they didn’t have electricity so they had to use the woodstove to heat up the iron before using it. When she passed away in 1945, my great grandfather, Leopold Pelzel, chose to pass it onto his daughter-in-law, Oliva Pelzel. My grandmother had seven children and she would spend hours upon hours, stretching into the late night, ironing clothes. This was during a time before permanent press clothes were readily available, so she would iron everything, even my grandfather’s handkerchiefs. When the brace between the legs on it broke, she didn’t throw it away and get a new one, she kept on using it. It would squeak and rock with the movement of her hand on it and my grandmother would rock and sway with it. My grandmother taught my mother how to iron on that board and she eventually learned how to do it correctly after receiving several burnings from the hot iron. She remembers her mother getting the board out every day to iron their clothes. When we discovered the ironing board behind the door, we couldn’t possibly throw it away. It had too much of a past and memories behind it.

In the story, “Everyday Use” the quilts represented a link between generations, similar to my great grandmother’s age-old ironing board. The quilts were very special to the narrator and mother in this story because they had been pieced together by her mother, Grandma Dee, and then the narrator and her sister, Big Dee, finished them. They contained pieces of clothing from other family members that added to their significance. “In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bit and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell’s Paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra’s uniform that he wore in the Civil War” (Walker 523). These quilts were made of bits of history that were sewn together to make blankets of memories. Dee (Wangero) had wanted the quilts so that she could hang them up. Dee was a part of the new generation of African Americans and she wanted to display a part of her heritage and history. She felt that that was their only use and she believed that Maggie wouldn’t understand their true meaning. ““Maggie can’t appreciate these quilts!” she said. “She’d probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use”” (Walker 523). Dee makes it seem as though using the quilts was wrong and isn’t their main purpose. My great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother all believed that if something still works, it should be used, not replaced with something newer and better. The narrator and mother in this story also felt the same way and she believed that Maggie would make the most use of them, the way they were supposed to be used. Today, the ironing board is no longer used and sits quietly in retirement, full of decades of memories.

The wooden ironing board has a lot of sentimental value to my family. Like the items that the soldiers carried in, “The Things They Carried”, the ironing board has been something that has been passed down through the generations. It holds many memories from each generation and creates more as it goes down the line. When one family member dies, the next one takes on the ironing board and adds their own memories to it. This is similar to when a soldier would fall in the story. “They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear. Often, they carried each other, the wounded or weak” (O’Brien 1072). The soldiers would carry what their fellow comrades could no longer carry. The ironing board itself is a physical item, but the memories that it holds are intangible. This is similar to what the soldiers had to carry with them throughout the war. They had to carry the physical items, which were listed throughout the story, but they also had to carry the intangible emotions such as grief, fear, and love. My family chooses to keep the ironing board because of its memories and will continue to pass it down the family line.

I never met either of my great grandparents, the original owners of the ironing board. My great grandmother died in 1945, followed by her husband many years later in 1967. The ironing board has allowed me to learn more about both my ancestors and my family history. This is very similar to the relationship between the narrator and his father in “Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa”. The two men never had much of a relationship except for the bond they shared with their love of baseball. “One of the last days of his life, late in the night while I sat with him because the pain wouldn't let him sleep, the radio picked up a static-y station broadcasting a White Sox game. We hunched over the radio and cheered them on, but they lost. Dad told the story of the Black Sox Scandal for the last time” (Kinsella 7). The narrator’s fondest memories of his father was their connection of baseball and he grew up hearing stories of baseball games and players. “Instead of nursery rhymes, I was raised on the story of the Black Sox Scandal, and instead of Tom Thumb or Rumpelstiltskin, I grew up hearing of the eight disgraced ballplayers: Weaver, Cicotte, Risberg, Felsch, Gandil, Williams, McMullin, and, always, Shoeless Joe Jackson” (Kinsella 3). This is very similar to the ironing board and the memories and connection it holds between family members. I got to hear many stories of my great grandparents and how they lived during very hard times. I also got to hear all the stories of how my grandmother would stay up for hours after everyone went to bed just to get their clothes all ironed for school the next day. The ironing board in my family, like baseball, connected family members over generations.

The wooden ironing board has been a piece of my family’s history that has linked several generations. Although I had never met either of my great grandparents, or my grandfather, I have gotten a better understanding of who they were through the memories of the ironing board. My great grandparents were born in the late 1800s and were very hard workers that survived through the rough time of the Great Depression and both World Wars, in which time they raise four girls and two boys. While raising their children, they never had any electricity until their youngest one was almost twenty years old. This meant they had to cook meals and heat bath water on the stove, along with heating the iron up for ironing the clothes. Likewise, my grandfather, Ed Pelzel was also a very hard worker who would at times hold three jobs to support his wife, five boys, and two girls. My grandmother, Oliva Pelzel, raised the kids, while her husband was away working. She was always the first to rise and the last to bed. She worked hard to make the best life she could for her kids.

Finding the ironing board behind her bedroom door brought back floods of memories for my family members. From this one simple household item, I have learned over a century of information about my ancestors and how they lived. Learning this family history makes me proud of where I have come from. My mother promised that the wooden ironing board would become mine someday when I have my own house and room to put it. I will be the fourth generation woman that will own the iron board and all of the memories that it holds. My grandmother had meant a lot to me and having this ironing board that belonged to her and my great grandmother that I never knew means a lot to me. People may see this as just a simple item, but it’s not just a wooden ironing board to my family, it’s a piece of our family’s heritage that contains many memories.

Works Cited

Garvey, Marcus. "Marcus Garvey Quotes." *BrainyQuote*. Xplore, n.d. 23 July 2015.

Kinsella, W. P. "Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa." *Shoeless Joe*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982. N. pag.

O'Brien, Tim. *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. By Ann Charters. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 1065-078.

Walker, Alice. "Everyday Use." *In Love and Trouble*. N.p., 1973. 517-24.