

Curious Jean

IHAD AN UNEVENTFUL BIRTH, according to my mother, but it wasn't uneventful for me. Saturday, July 6, 1935 was a great day. I weighed in at six pounds and some ounces, ready for all that life had to offer. On that same day on the other side of the world, Tibet's fourteenth Dalai Lama was born, destined for greatness, but other than that, the calendar of significant events for the year 1935 doesn't even have one entry for July.

Our family started without me, so I had a lot of catching up to do. My brother Donnie was one and a half years old when I was born, and my sister Kaye was two years older than Donnie.

Mom told me I walked when I was nine months old; I had places to go and crawling just didn't get me there fast enough. By the time I was two, we lived on Brook Street, and Mom said she could not keep track of me. In desperation one day, she took some clothesline and tied one end to the front porch railing and the other to the back straps of my sun suit. She felt certain this would keep me from wandering off, so she could get her housework done.



JEAN IN 1937,
TWO YEARS OLD



JEAN AT THREE
YEARS OLD

Mom was deep into her chores an hour later when someone knocked at the front door. When she answered it, she was shocked to see our neighbor holding me in his arms in my *altogether*. He explained that as he walked down the street to his house about a block away, he saw me running toward him without a stitch of clothes on, wearing only a gleeful look on my face. He scooped me up into his arms and carried me home. My mom laughed, thanked him and knew that she'd have to come up with a more sophisticated way to keep me where I belonged. She said that I was like a little monkey—small enough to walk under tables, able to climb as well as I could walk and impossible to keep track of.

WHEN I TURNED THREE, we moved to Connecticut Avenue and lived in a white, two-story house on a hill. One night I fell out of bed and broke my collarbone and had to keep my arm in a sling so it could heal. Somebody was *supposed* to be watching me while Mom went to the grocery store, but apparently they weren't as diligent as they should have been. I hopped on my tricycle and started down the hill, which was approximately one block long.

Mom pulled up just in time to see me going lickety-split down the sidewalk with one arm in the sling, my legs sticking straight out at the sides, a huge grin covering my face and the pedals of my tricycle spinning like a top. She held her breath until I reached the bottom of the hill and knew I was safe. Then she proceeded to warm my butt and took my trike away for three days.

MOM AND DADDY HAD A FRIEND, Millie Anderson, who occasionally came to visit when we lived on Connecticut Avenue. Millie was a heavy smoker and lit up one cigarette after another the entire time she was at our house. Her process fascinated me. She took a cigarette out of the special container she had for them and gently tamped it against the smooth, metal case. This packed down the tobacco, so she didn't get loose bits in her mouth. Once in a while, her method didn't work, so she stuck her tongue out just a little and wiped the tiny piece of tobacco off with her middle finger. Then she gently



**JEAN, DONNIE AND KAYE (FRONT) BILL, JR. AND NEIGHBOR GIRLS (BACK) WITH PUPPIES
IN THE SIMONSENS' BACKYARD**

held the cigarette between her index and middle fingers and eased it up to her mouth every few seconds. With her brightly colored lips barely touching the cigarette, she sucked air through the white stick, making her cheeks sink in just a little while the end of the cigarette burned brighter. Then she turned up her head a tad and blew the smoke into the air. Quite often, she flicked the ashes into the ashtray, so they wouldn't fall on the floor. This was a great show for me to watch.

One day when Mom and Millie stepped into the kitchen, I picked up the cigarette she left in the ashtray and tried to imitate what she did. I took in a mouthful of smoke and began to cough. I coughed and coughed until Mom finally came in and caught me in the act. After she ripped the cigarette out of my mouth, another butt warming followed.

GETTING SPANKED was nothing out of the ordinary for me growing up; I got paddled every day for one thing or another. If a day went by that I didn't get smacked, I wondered what was wrong.

WE HAD A NEXT-DOOR NEIGHBOR named Bill Simonsen who was probably fifty years old and loved to sit out on his front porch and watch the world go by. He was tall and skinny and always used suspenders to hold up his pants.



KAYE, DONNIE AND JEAN, SHOWING OFF THEIR NEW HAIRCUTS

Sometimes he'd call me over, put me on his lap and drop his false teeth down into his hand to watch the expression on my face. I just sat there with my mouth wide open, looking at his big, gummy smile and laughed so hard. It was the funniest thing I had ever seen. "Do it again, Bill. Do it again," I giggled, and he did, over and over and over. I never got enough of watching him do that. He liked it as much as I did. With his rocking chair tipped back, he always threw

his head back and laughed and laughed, which made me laugh even more.

NEEDING A LITTLE ENTERTAINMENT once in a while, Mom sometimes took me, my brother Donnie and my sister Kaye to early afternoon movies at the Struthers Library Theatre in Warren. We climbed on the bus at the corner of Kenmore Street and Conewango Avenue and headed for the theatre, getting off at the depot on the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Liberty Street.

More exciting to me than the movie was the snack counter. While Mom bought the tickets and Donnie and Kaye got candy or popcorn, I loaded up on Good & Plenty candy. Donnie and Kaye picked something different every time, but I never strayed from my all-time favorite—those little bright pink and white, candy-coated bits of licorice.

The Library Theatre was a beautiful old theatre that Mom said was built in the late 1800s, which meant it was really old, older than Grandma even. It had big, red, plush seats and a balcony that was usually empty on weekday afternoons when we went. We felt special going there, like it was our own personal theatre.

Navigating all of our moods must have been difficult for Mom. I had to have my Good & Plenty candy. If the snack bar was sold out, it wasn't going to be a pleasant afternoon for anyone. When Mom chose to see a *shoot-*

'em-up western or cowboy movie, Donnie was happy. He was ready to leave as soon as any other type of movie began. If it was a sad, romantic movie, Kaye sobbed through the entire film. I didn't care much about the movie as long as I had my Good & Plenty candy. I'd sit through almost anything, content holding that little purple box in my hands.

OUR FAMILY PLUS A COUPLE of my uncles went to Niagara Falls one summer when I was five years old. It was a long trip especially with my short attention span. Within ten minutes, my litany of questions began.



KAYE, JEAN AND DONNIE - 1940

Are we almost there?
When are we going to get there?
Can we stop and get something to eat?
Can we get something to drink?
I got to go to the bathroom.
When are we going to stop?

OUR CAR WAS FULL—Dad; Uncle Don, my mom's brother; and Uncle Chuck, my mom's brother-in-law, in the front seat. Mom, Kaye, Donnie and me in the back seat, and it was *hot*. Donnie sat next to me, and his sweaty skin rubbed against mine as we were all squished together. "Mom, Donnie's touching me," I whined. It was more than I could stand. "Mom, can I have the back window down some more?"

"No Jean. The wind is blowing my hair all over as it is," Mom replied. Donnie and Kaye took naps and slept the hours away. I stared out the

back window, looking for animals to distract myself from the heat and my sweaty brother.

Two hours later, we finally arrived at Niagara Falls and got out of that hot, crowded car. The fresh, misty air cooled us off as we walked down the wooden stairways where we could get closer to the falls. I thought they were beautiful and huge and scary. And loud...we had to yell at each other just to be heard. We watched the *Maid of the Mist*, filled with people in yellow raincoats, trying to keep dry as the boat navigated through the massive rocks and crashing waters. We all *ooh'd* and *ahh'd* for a time and ate our lunch at a picnic table overlooking the falls. Then it was time to get back into the hot car and go home.

Along the way home, Daddy and my uncles decided they were thirsty and stopped at a bar to *wet their whistles*. "Mom, I didn't see any whistles. What kind of whistles do they have? Why can't I play with one of their whistles while we wait in the car?" I asked.

"Jean, there are no whistles. It's just a figure of speech," she said, settling back in her seat and closing her eyes. I didn't know what that was either, but I figured I'd ask about it some other time. We waited and waited until Mom finally got tired of it and sent me into the bar to get the men.

She watched as I walked the short distance to the bar. I opened the door and stepped inside the warm, dimly-lit room that smelled of beer and cigar and cigarette smoke. It took me a minute or so to spot my dad and uncles in the far corner, sitting around a small table with smoke wafting toward the ceiling. Standing in the entrance, I put my hands on my hips and shouted above the many garbled conversations, "Daddy, Mom says she's been in the car with us long enough. It's time to go home!" A burst of laughter filled the room as I turned on my heels and marched out the door. I reported to Mom they would be back soon. A couple of minutes later, the men walked out of the bar, chuckling, got into the car, and we headed home.

ONE TIME WE HAD A LEAK in a water line outside the house, and Dad called someone to fix it. A nice, bearded man in a red-plaid shirt showed up to take care of the problem. Watching him dig was very interesting to me, so while he worked, I plopped down beside him and asked questions.

What are you doing?

Why are you doing that?

Why is the hole so big?

What are you digging for?

How come you have to dig so far?

*Do you like to dig?
Do you have any little kids?*

AND MY STANDARD QUESTION for everyone I really liked, “When are you leaving?” I asked that because I wanted to know how much time I had left to spend with them. I didn’t want him to leave too soon.

Mom had known this man for years, so she didn’t have any hesitation in letting me be with him. She was also probably grateful to get me out of her hair for a while.

He stopped to eat his lunch at noon and asked me, “Why don’t you bring your lunch out here and eat with me?” Mom made me a peanut butter sandwich, and I raced back to where he was sitting on an upturned bucket under a tree. He told me his name was Joe, and he taught me a little saying,

*Hello Joe, whaddya know?
I just got back from Buffalo.*

AFTER A COUPLE OF DAYS, Joe’s work finally came to an end; the leak was repaired, and he had to go on to another job. I was sad to see him leave, but he told me to remember the little saying and think of him. I still do.