ALL MY MOTHERS

I had the privilege of having four mothers, each of whom shaped and encouraged me in her own special way: Winnie Flowers Harvey, my biological mother; Margaret "Maggie" Colburn Flowers, my maternal grandmother, with whom I lived two years; Gladys Bishop Acklam Harvey, my father's second wife; and Eleanor "Nell" McReynolds Mills, my mother-in-law, who put the finishing touches on the new-bride-learning-to-live-the-country-life.

I believe that Winnie was proud and fulfilled when, in her thirties, she became the mother of two little girls. We were a year and a half apart in age, but she gave us twin names and dressed us alike. She imparted to us a deep reverence for God, appreciation for community, a sense of compassion, and the joy of reading and learning. I never doubted her love for me or her confidence in me that I would do the right thing.

When my grandfather died, the family determined that my grandmother Maggie needed help living alone. Therefore, each of her four grandchildren would take turns spending a school year living with her in order to help with the chores. She was a small frail woman. She had a large vegetable garden, a milch goat and chickens. She needed one of her strong young grandchildren to help her. I was the first (and only one) to go. I was the designated helper for the school year when I was in the 7th grade. The plan was that one of the other grandchildren would come the next year, but I was happy and content in the situation and volunteered to

stay another term. In later years, other family members – my sister included – would refer to our grandmother as a "tyrant". I did not find that to be true. She and I had a very good relationship. She was stern but gentle, loving me and helping me during those formative years to stay the course of learning and compassion which my mother Winnie had established, and adding to it a great deal of knowledge about household, garden, and livestock maintenance. She taught me to cook and to sew. She encouraged me to hone my skills and submit entries in the local and county fairs. She was every bit as proud as I was each time one was awarded a ribbon. Her firm hand taught me the rewards of discipline.

There was a short period when I was sometimes uncertain who the mother-figure in my life was. After I had lived with my grandmother Maggie for two years, my parents divorced, and my mother Winnie came to live with Maggie, also. She brought with her my teen-aged sister. What a household! -- Three generations of females under one roof. The mother (Maggie), the daughter (Winnie), and the grandchildren (two girls in their early teens). I believe it was a pretty turbulent time for everyone.

My third mother figure was my step-mother Gladys. When my parents divorced, Humble Oil transferred my father to their office in Pampa, Texas, where he met the widow Gladys Acklam. Neither of them had any intention of ever marrying again, but after a few years, they decided that marriage might be a good idea after all. It was. They were very happy together. Gladys loved children but had none of her own. Her new husband came with two children. She lavished on us all the pent-up love of the years. When I graduated high school, I went to business college in Amarillo, 50 miles West of Pampa. So we saw each other frequently and Gladys was finally the mother she wanted to be. From her I gathered important life-style

ideas. She was an independent, successful business woman. She loved people and parties, and was the perfect hostess. Her yard and flowers were her peaceful delight. When my sister and I had children, Gladys was the proud, gloating grandmother.

My fourth mother was my mother-in-law Nell Mills. I was the young bride whom her only son brought home to the ranch to share family life there. She had two daughters, both already away from home. The immediate family now consisted of mother and father and son and wife. The four of us lived together (in harmony) under one roof for a while until my husband and I moved to a neighboring ranch leased for extra pasturage. Nell and I still saw each other almost daily and she was able to help me "fit in" to the new lifestyle. She herself had come to the ranch as a young woman, hired to teach the six Mills boys. When she eventually married the oldest Mills boy, "Mother Mills" became a strong and loving mother-in-law to her. Now Nell was doing the same for me. In those days of the mid-twentieth century, there was a definite division of labor between the sexes. The men did the heavy outside work that took strength and stamina – working stock, keeping equipment and vehicles in working order; whereas women were happy to do the inside chores related to household and children. Nell and I loved each other and found pleasure in working together. There was also plenty of time for community life and parties. My son was born, and our good life continued until the time of a severe drought, accompanied by a fall in stock prices and the failure of the mohair market. The nine-section ranch could no longer support two families so my husband and I left to seek our livelihood elsewhere. But the ranch was forever a respite, a place where we COULD "go home again". Nell and I continued to love each other. Even after her son and I divorced, she claimed me as a daughter.

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