



Beverley Elliott's story of
Ramona/Betty Jean



My mom was born Ramona Jean Rea, July 16th, 1933, in Listowel, Ontario. At least that is what her birth certificate says. Her birth certificate, however, was issued on April 15th, 1933, three months prior to her birth date.

The lost pages and the untold stories are all forgotten and missing details of my mother's life.

Mom was the sixth child born to Ernie and Jean Rea. Jean never recovered from the delivery of baby Ramona, and shortly afterwards died of pneumonia. Ernie, a struggling farmer, and now a single father, could not raise six young children alone. The difficult decision was made to put the three youngest, children, up for adoption. Bernice, Allan and Ramona would be separated not only from their father and three elder brothers, but from each other as well.

I have been told by those in the community, that this happened immediately after Jean Rea's death. Following the graveside funeral, as was the custom, friends and neighbours gathered at the Rea home. Two local women stood by the crib of the sleeping baby girl, in the back bedroom. Margaret Elliott was the first to come forward. "Oliver and I will take the baby, Ramona, and raise her as our own, a little sister for Bill," Margaret announced.

"Please let us have her", Marjorie Hamilton, said softly. "Lloyd and I only have our son Donald and I am unable to carry again." Margaret Elliott conceded and that was how it came to be that Ramona Jean Rea was adopted by Marjorie and Lloyd Hamilton, probably on the 16th of July 1933, the date on her birth certificate, and Ramona's name was changed to Betty Jean Hamilton.

The two other children, Bernice and Allan, were adopted by the Coghlin and Parkhouse families respectively. All of the original Rea family, including Ernie and his three older sons, lived within a ten-mile radius of each other in rural southwestern Ontario.

Young Betty Jean grew up on a beautiful dairy farm with her new parents and brother Don, eight years her senior. The Hamiltons were a proud family, prosperous farmers, members of the Presbyterian church and were well respected in their community.

Who knows the reasons why, perhaps it was pride, perhaps it was simply not considered appropriate, but my mom was never told of her adoption. It wasn't until she was in grade four playing on the playground of her one room schoolhouse that she was taunted by the older kids: "You're adopted, you're adopted."

Mom raced home and asked her mother if these taunts were true. "Yes, it is true and we have the papers to prove it. If you speak of it again, we will send you back," Marjorie Hamilton retorted. My mom never spoke of it again.

My mother was kept home most of the time. She was rarely allowed to have friends over, visit girlfriends' homes, participate in after school activities or have a part-time job. She was to help out on the farm where she was needed.

Every six months or so, an elderly woman would come to the Hamilton farm and ask to see Betty. She would stay and chat with her in the yard, never in the house. This anonymous woman would only visit with Betty, not her parents or brother. Each time she came, she would bring a small gift, take a photograph of my mom and sometimes would bring a copy of the photograph from the previous visit. After this woman would leave, my mom would ask her mother "Who was that lady?" but the answer was always

the same, “Just some woman who wants to see you.” Years later, my mom found out the mysterious woman was her maternal grandmother, her mother’s mother, Jean Murray.

Over the years, and in such a close-knit community, my mom came to know who her biological siblings were and where they lived, although she never acknowledged their relationships. Mom read in the local paper the news of her natural sister Bernice’s upcoming wedding. Betty, 16 years old, borrowed a camera and snuck into town to watch the bride and groom leave the church in a shower of confetti. From behind a fence, Betty snapped two photos and imagined herself a part of this joyous occasion.

Little did she know that her sister Bernice had grown up with a completely different understanding of her roots. Bernice had been told of her adoption and had been taken for regular visits to the Rea family, as it was always Ernie’s wishes for the family to stay connected. In the planning of her wedding, Bernice asked her mother, Mrs. Coghlin, to telephone Mrs. Hamilton and ask if her only sister, Betty, could be her Matron of Honour. The call was dismissed by my Grandmother Hamilton who simply said, “We do not acknowledge the Rea family.” My mom was never told of this request until years later.

When Betty was eighteen years old, she found herself smitten with a dashing fellow from the 8th line, Bill Elliott. A highschool friend urged her to invite him to the Sadie Hawkins dance, but Betty lost her nerve. Apparently Bill was having the same romantic thoughts about Betty and asked her to the dance the following weekend. One year later the two were united in marriage in a June wedding, held on the front lawn of the Hamilton farm. They moved onto Bill’s home place just a mile down the road and began a life of farming. A green, velvet, rocking chair arrived as an anonymous wedding gift. Even though it was not discussed, everyone knew that the chair was a gift from Ernie Rea.

Bill and Betty raised a family of three daughters and one son, of which I was the third child. We were Bill, Betty, Brenda, Bonnie, Beverley and Jim. Jim was the long awaited golden boy, named after a favorite uncle. My mom preserved her middle name, Jean, the name of her birth mother, and maternal grandmother by giving it as a second name to her eldest daughter, Brenda Jean, who in turn, named her daughter Lisa Jean. Lisa carried on the tradition naming her son, Tyrus Jean-Charles.

We moved from the farm on the 8th line to a bungalow outside of Listowel. Mom became the manager at the Sears Order Office. Everything we owned came from the Sears catalogue. “If you can’t find it in the catalogue then it’s not worth having!” My mother sang with the Sweet Adelines. All dolled up in her pink chiffon dress, heels, Avon lipstick, and strawberry, blonde, poofy, wig it was showtime.

Dad was her first boyfriend, first love, and life partner. They were best friends. Mom and dad farmed, spent time in Elliot Lake, belonged to the Women’s Institute and Orange Lodge respectively, built a pool in the backyard, travelled across Canada, grew an enormous vegetable garden, stocked the freezer and cold cellar for the winter, brewed dandelion wine and took us camping. Most Sundays after church we would drop in on unsuspecting relatives, play with cousins and sometimes stay for supper.

My Grandma and Grandpa Hamilton, Nanny and Dodo as we grandchildren lovingly called them, had moved off the farm, leaving it to my Uncle Don and his family. They bought a house in Atwood, Ontario, across the street, as it turns out, from Ernie Rea. Ernie had retired and was living alone. When Mom would visit her parents, she would sometimes see Ernie in the driveway shoveling snow, or tending the yard, but they never exchanged more than a nod for a wave of the hand would have been too much. It was a very small community.

My Grandma Hamilton, Nanny, was stricken with arthritis and became bound to a wheelchair. Being seen in public in her condition was most uncomfortable for her and consequently she never left the little house in Atwood for 13 years. She watched the world from a 2' X 3' kitchen window. . Shortly after my grandfather's death, my Uncle Don moved Nanny back home to the family farm where she lived until she died. Betty visited her ailing mother often. Mom was in her early forties when her mother died.

It's uncertain as to whether it was because both of her adopted parents had passed away or because time had marched on and no one cared about formalities anymore, but my mother began to be invited to several Rea family events. At first it was to attend family funerals, but eventually she was invited to all kinds of occasions. My dad encouraged mom to make this connection with her birth family, and although Ernie Rea had died, the siblings gathered as a family at the 25th wedding anniversary of Murray and Shirley Rea. A photograph was taken of this family of Rea's, the first in almost 50 years.

Mom became quite close to her brother Murray, but their new found friendship was short lived, as Murray died suddenly just two years into their reunion. Mom was very saddened by this as they enjoyed an uncanny sense of kinship with each other.

My mother found a true bond with her sister Bernice. They looked and felt like sisters with their naturally curly, red hair and their many similarities. They had unknowingly chosen the same names for two of their children – Bonnie and Jim. They enjoyed each other's company and even began holidaying together at Bernice's winter home in Florida. Although Bernice and Betty were raised two miles apart, it wasn't until their sixties that they truly got to know each other as sisters.

Bill, my dad, had succumbed to cancer and died in his early 50's. Bernice, too, had become a widow. As time passed, both women sought the companionship of another man in their lives. Bernice found a new partner and began planning her second wedding. With tears in her eyes, she revisited her dream as a young woman, and asked my mom to be her Matron of Honour. Now, fifty years later, my mom walked down the aisle at her sister's wedding, her heart bursting with love and pride. When I would see them together, I could see two women cut from the same cloth but with a different tailor's hand.

Mom also went on to enjoy a second love in her life with retired farmer, Bob Wade. Together they continue to enjoy bowling, golfing, dancing, and a ripping game of cards. A shared rural heritage brought them together and they are truly farmers at heart as the most important topic of any conversation is the weather.

Even though Mom never had a relationship with her birth mother, nor had the warmest bond with her adoptive mother, she found the mother she craved in her mother-in-law, my dad's mother. They had a very close connection. Grandma Elliott played a major role in my mother's life. In the early years, mom helped Grandma on the farm, and then in my Grandma Elliott's later years, mom would help Grandma with her groceries, prescriptions, would bring her fresh fruit for canning, and would drop in keep her updated. Grandma Elliott did have four daughters of her own, but her daughter-in-law held a very special place in her heart. A place that was destined to be hers as far back as 1933.

You see, Margaret Elliott, my dad's mom, was the woman whom after Jean Rea's funeral so many years ago, stood by the crib of the sleeping baby and said, "Oliver and I will take the baby, Ramona, and raise her as our own, a little sister for Bill." Had that happened, had Marjorie Hamilton not intervened, my mother and father would have wound up as brother and sister instead of husband and wife. As my

Grandma Elliott told me this story, her blue eyes welled up with tears as she confided, “But I got her anyway, didn’t I? I got her anyway.”