



Bertha Clark's story of

# Adelene



My mom, Adelene Ellen Alexander, was born October 23, 1920 in Victoria, B.C. Grandma raised her and her younger brother Tom. Ma's family were among the first Black pioneers to settle on Salt Spring Island and in Victoria by invitation of Sir James Douglas, back in the 1850s.

Mom didn't really talk much about her childhood with me. I am the youngest of 11 so when asked about mom's childhood, I had to call my oldest sister. Mom read a lot as a kid and rode her bike all over the place. Back then having a bike was a treat.

Ma was very popular and had lots of girlfriends. Her nickname was Stumpy and she had a teddy bear (which I still have) called Stumpy. Ma nicknamed all of us too and we in turn, nicknamed our kids and grandkids.

Mom spent a lot of time with family. She had aunts and uncles and cousins galore. Family in Victoria and Salt Spring Island always got together for picnics, parties and special occasions.

I remember Ma always looking sharp. As a kid, she wore pedal-pushers. She would get all prettied up, putting on her colorful clothes. She knew how to dress. Grown up, she always wore skirts and dresses and had more skirt suits than dresses; no pant suits that I recall.

Ma quit school at 17 in 1937 and went Seattle. She talked my Grandma into letting her stay at the YWCA. Grandma let her go under the conditions that Grandma's sister, Aunt Dora, checked on her daily. Ma agreed and started beauty school in Seattle. That's where she met my dad.

She married my dad at 19 and moved to San Francisco. Over the years Ma had 11 kids and she worked hard. She was housekeeper to a lawyer's family back then and my very first memory is when I used to wait for Ma at the bus stop everyday and she'd get off that bus smiling at me and I'd be smiling at her and we'd walk home together. I think I was in kindergarten.

We'd go grocery shopping once a week and she would always buy a bag of food for our neighbor Ms. Janks and her six kids who were very poor. Ma made sure we had food to eat and they had food too and would tell us all "we don't have much but the little we have we can share".

With 11 kids, it wasn't easy but Ma was the boss. She'd talk to us when we were sad, mad, acting crazy, fighting each other; Ma was the one! Love us, scold us, threaten us, whip our butts (we used to have to go out to the yard and get a stick) but she never swore at us, no curse words. Those were the San Francisco days.

There's a story about Ma when she lived in San Francisco. Because she liked to read and was interested in the world, she was invited to join a Negro Women's Sorority. She was shocked to find out that she was invited because she was a light colour while darker Black women were being refused admission. Ma was so angry she quit the sorority saying she didn't want to belong to a group that discriminated against its own people!

In the 1960's Ma divorced my dad and moved us back to Vancouver, Canada. She was home with her Mum. That's what she called Grandma – Mum! I'm laughing now 'cause Ma was Canadian (British) and all us kids are American. The way she talked, she'd say "eh", we'd say "huh" and boy, I'll tell ya, ain't and isn't. We were always corrected. You didn't mess around with the language thing. She knew that we knew how to speak properly and she made sure we did!

Grandma owned a restaurant called Vie's Chicken and Steaks on Union and we lived across the street. Ma started working with Grandma and life got easier. The restaurant was open from 5:00 pm to 5:00 am; closed Sunday and Monday. Every day Ma would go over about 2:00 in the afternoon and make the biscuits for the night.

The restaurant was famous back then. Big name entertainers would come in after their shows at The Cave or Oil Can Harry's. Ella Fitzgerald, Diana Ross and the Supremes, Earl Grant, Lena Horne, Louis Armstrong and many more. You had to bring your own bottle 'cause there was no liquor license. They sure partied! Ma would be tired but her and Grandma would get on that phone, talking about the night before and laughing, the two of them like l'il girls and so close!

Grandma would have a house party in the summertime. Everybody would be there; family, friends, folks from Victoria, Salt Spring and the States. Ma was in her heyday. The kids running around outside, the teenagers coming and going, the adults; my God, the laughter would be flowing like sweet candy! They were dressed to the nines back then, everybody was sharp!

There's lots I remember about my Ma.

Ma would get mad at us and most of the time she'd just give us a look. When she started saying frick we knew she was hot! She didn't swear though. Ma was gracious. She'd tell you what you did and how stupid it was in a kind way and humorous way. So when all was said and done and the anger had passed, the lesson was learned 'cause she was always right. Ma was too cool, she knew everything going on.

For years Ma talked about going to England...One day my phone rang and it was Ma. "Diddie, I'm going to England. I want to see the changing of the guards. I'm going by myself and I'll be fine. I'm on a tour the whole time so you're not to worry and I'll call you when I get back", and off she went.

These are her thoughts and observations in her own words, excerpted from her journal:

Wednesday Feb.28/90. Off to London. Sat by a lady name Liz from Prince Rupert. She was going to Scotland. We talked and talked. Three meals and free booze all the way. It was a nine hour trip to Amsterdam.

Thursday. 747 to London was very rough. Went to claim my bag and it was lost. Took a cab to the hotel. Cost 23 Pounds. Was so tired, checked in and fell asleep. The phone rang at 12:30 and my bag had arrived.

Friday. What a choice for breakfast. Ate like a pig. Made reservations for my tours. Arabs and East Indians own this hotel. My room is a nice size. TV is the pits; so many on TV have bad buck teeth. Some of their soaps would be x-rated here. I don't know why anyone would buy a TV there.

Right- no wash cloths; glad I brought one. Windy and cold. Walked to Harrods. What a huge place. Such an interesting food department. Very expensive. Was in there for 3 hours on the main and ground floor. Took the elevator to fourth floor restaurants. Such a fat man handling the elevator. Had lunch. What accents these people have.

Saturday. All day London tour. First stop Royal Albert Hall. Lots of stairs. Big bands and music stars appear here (Tina Turner, Sinatra, etc.,) Sat next to a young man from Houston here on business. Toured Westminster Abby, such an old, cold place. St. Paul's Cathedral is so impressive. So many statues. Walked a long way to see the changing of the guards. To the Tower of London. What a huge place. Lots of small towers. They search your bag before you go in. The jewels are fabulous. People on the tour are so friendly,

from everywhere. Special buses for Japanese tourists. Was so tired; couldn't stay awake to watch Englebert. What a shame.

Sunday. Stratford-on-Avon tour. Sat by a young girl from Brisbane. Her husband had another seat. I offered to move so they can sit together but they said no. We drove for over an hour through pretty country and quaint houses. Stopped in Oxford. The colleges are small and in such old buildings. The bathroom didn't have a sink; glad I had my wipes. Finally arrived at Stratford, Shakespeare's home. Had a good lunch at a pub. Lots of shops, most closed it being Sunday. We drove to Anne Hathaway's house. What an old place. People were 5'2 then, so many had to lower their heads. Then to Chipping Camden and had cream tea. A young man from Brazil sat with me, said he was a bank worker; very interesting to talk to.

Monday. Had lunch in the hotel. Cost 14.95 Pounds or \$30.00. So many people to wait on you. They serve a lot of cabbage in the restaurants.

Tuesday. Windsor Castle and Hampton Court. Sat by a girl from Ottawa. The tapestry and paintings were beautiful. Another changing of the guards. These castles are huge. Pictures by Rubens, Van Dyk, Rembrandt and so many others. Walked and walked. Had lunch at Windsor Castle. Not much furniture, lots of history. Had tea in a little shop. Went to the Hatfield house banquet with a couple and their 17 year old son from Oklahoma.

Wednesday. Off to Stonehenge. Not many Canadians (on the tour). Most Americans are from southern states; more men traveling by themselves than women. I have been the only Black on these tours. Bath is a beautiful little town. Roman Baths are interesting; springs are hot. It is amazing that things were built 100's of years ago and still standing. On all these trips there are museums.

Thursday. Went to see The Mousetrap. Had a hard time staying awake at the play.

Friday, my last day. Went to the Victoria and Albert Museum. Took a cab to Marks and Spencer's. It was a big old store.

I really enjoyed this trip. Had lunch one day with a Japanese lady and her daughter from Jersey City. The young people (so many of them) have spiked and 3 colours of hair. English people have buck teeth.

London is a dirty city. The houses are row houses like they are in Washington DC. There aren't any big trees in the parks. Lilac bushes and daffodils all over. Must be pretty in the summer.

Saturday. Cab to the airport. The cab driver was a young man from Barbados. You see a lot of Black women working in the stores, not many men; Black maids and bell hops in the hotels. All had Island accents. Didn't go to the Duty Free store as it was a long walk and I'm tired of walking. No problem getting my plane to Vancouver. Home!

Ma was so happy taking her trip and I was so proud of her. She got tired of waiting for someone to go with her and up and went on her own.

I moved back to Vancouver in 1996 to spend time with Ma. All her friends were passing on and I wanted to be with her in her senior years. She was diagnosed with emphysema and I was there to be her caregiver and to guide her to Heaven's doors. She passed away on December 30, 1998. It was a blessing for me to be there to give her the care and love she gave me throughout my life. She went out in style. I made sure she was treated like a queen and she was.

Ma was a gracious woman and strong! She loved us all and was so determined to make a better life for us. She made so many sacrifices and she did it with such a positive attitude and always humor and patience. I've lots of stories to tell about my Mother and I thank you for this beautiful opportunity to share them!