



Shirley Thompson's story of

# Bea



No one seems to know why her parents gave her the name Beulah, but Beulah Violet Sweet was born in Vancouver, on November 28th, 1927, to George and Amy Sweet. Naturally, she didn't go by that name once she got into her teens, but rather had everyone call her Bea or Boo.

She had one sister, almost three years younger, named Beverly, and they were close all their lives, and especially so as adults. Her father was a machinist and was out of town a lot, so it was often just the three girls, living a quiet life in the house of Franklin Street, near what used to be Empire Stadium. Bea was an average student in school, and a good little girl, and her Dad would take her and Beverly ice skating once in a while and even roller skating at the rink at the PNE. The summer she was fifteen, she was able to go to Gibsons to work as a waitress in what later became Molly's Reach. It was surprising that her parents let her go away, but it was because of the people who ran the corner store, the Sulley's, who had the café in Gibsons, that she was able to go there to work.

Bea was only 5 feet tall, and she had long, dark hair and a very nice figure, including great legs. Throughout her life, she was known for loving to go to smorgasbords and being able to eat more than almost anyone! As an adult, she always wore White Shoulders perfume and her family always associated that scent with her. Bea loved shoes and especially open-toed high heels! Her children always teased her about clearing the table while family members were still eating and calling her children by the wrong name.

The Thompson family had a cabin at Grantham's Landing, where there were lots of summer cabins, situated up the road from where the ferry now docks at Langdale. Francis and Julia Thompson had three sons, all in the navy at the time, which was 1942. A man in uniform is a sight to behold, perhaps, but whatever the attraction, Bea met Gordie, who was 6 years her senior. They obviously saw a lot of each other and continued to do so when Bea returned to Vancouver in September for school, as she was pregnant by November. George and Amy were terribly upset and wanted to adopt the baby as their own, but Gordie wouldn't have it. So in January 1943, Bea and Gordie got married – she was 16 and he was 21. Their son was born on August 1, 1943. When they first got married, Bea and Gordie lived in an old building near Main and 25th, in a one bedroom apartment at the back of the building. Bea was on her own a lot then, as Gordie was in training at Halifax, although he was home when Wayne was born. It must have been hard for her – being a mother at age 16, left alone so much, and with parents who disapproved of the man she married.

In 1946, Bea and Gordie had a daughter, and 11 months later, another daughter. A fourth child was born in 1949, so by the time Bea was 22, she had four children and was always trying to make ends meet. Her kids would say they all grew up together! Throughout these years, Gordie was back in Vancouver and drinking which got progressively worse. He was not only an alcoholic, but a violent one at that, and everyone was a target when he came home drunk. Bea always had to walk on eggshells and most of the time she was afraid of him, for good reason, as he was often violent with her. In the early days, there was no television, so Bea would listen to the radio and she loved the music from the 40s and 50s. They got a TV in late 50s and that helped a bit when she was alone at night, and she also read and knit with what little spare time she found.

They lived in a lot of different homes, never owning one. When the children were very little, Gordie was a bus driver and they lived in one of the wartime homes, and they were doing well, but when he got fired from that job, they actually ended up living in a motel on Kingsway for a number of months. The school where the kids went was very close by, which was convenient. One day, Wayne, Lee and Shirley were walking to the nearby park and Lee got hit by a car. Bea, who was a block away, heard Lee's screams and came running to the scene. Luckily, Lee's injuries were not life threatening, but it scared Bea that it

happened at all. The family then moved to a house on Killarney Street and Beverley, her sister, ended up living down the street soon after, which helped as she had someone close by to visit with and to talk to, and with whom she could tell what life was really like.

Bea became pregnant with her fifth child. Gordie was not happy about this pregnancy and they fought a lot about it, and he blamed Bea for getting pregnant. Bea tried to abort but it didn't work and the baby was born prematurely, when Bea was 7 months pregnant. Part of the reason she went into labour early was because she was suffering from malnutrition. Gordie was not around much, as he was out drinking and didn't give her much money to live on. The children had to be fed, first, so Bea did without, not only food, but many other things

Gordie could not be reached when Bea ended up having to take a taxi to the hospital where she had the baby on her own. Her parents came and took the children to their home on Franklin Street, and when Gordie came around late into the night to try to find everyone, George and Amy would not let him come in and made it clear how they felt when he could not be found. Bea was in the hospital for about a week after the baby was born and when she returned home, the baby remained in the hospital for another month. Surprisingly, this baby became the apple of her father's eye and had a much different relationship with Bea than her other children, and they were never as close.

In 1956, they moved to 32nd Avenue, off Main and 33rd, and then they moved, once again, around the corner, to Sophia Street, and it was a tough time for Bea, as Gordie wasn't around most of the time, and when he was, they fought a lot and he continued to physically abuse Bea and the children. All the children were very afraid of him. Bea had to deal with the bill collectors and trying to provide for her family. She eventually went to work for the man next door, who made mops, which was hard for Bea, as she was the main breadwinner and homemaker. As her children grew up and started working, even babysitting, and later with part-time jobs, they contributed to the household.

When the oldest daughter was in grade 12, age 17, she got pregnant and when he found out, Gordie threw her out. Bea was forbidden to have anything to do with her daughter, but she did see her and met her first grandchild, a girl. It was late in 1964 and Bea was a grandmother at age 37. Bea's son got married when he was 23, and in 1966, Bea became a grandmother, once more, at the age of 39. Bea loved being a grandmother and there is a story that when her granddaughter was visiting, at age 3 or 4, she said to Bea "I love you grandma, but you sure have old hair", as Bea was completely grey by then, having started going grey in her 20s. In 1968, the other two daughters left home, after a huge fight with Gordie, where he was violent with Bea and them. It was very hard on Bea to only have the youngest still left at home, and she was often afraid of the abuse. There were times when Bea and Gordie would go out to visit friends or his brothers and there would be lots of drinking. Bea was always terrified of the drives home, as Gordie was often drunk. She never did learn to drive and knew she had no choice but to drive with him, or there would have been dire consequences.

Throughout these times, Bea seemed happy in many ways and her family was very important to her. She loved her children and they were her world. She was always very proud of them and what they achieved. She loved Gordie, in spite of everything and didn't feel as though she had any options, such as leaving. Gordie once told her if she ever left him, he would find her and bring her back. He was unfaithful to her throughout their marriage, right from the beginning, but she lived by the adage "you made your bed, you lie in it".

Bea's favourite time of year was Christmas, and on Dec. 1st, every year, she would decorate her home – even the lampshades! She loved the excitement and the anticipation and the get-togethers with family. Once the kids left home, it became a tradition, to make Bea happy, that they would all visit on Christmas Eve, no matter what time, before they went to their own homes. On Christmas day everyone would get together and Bea was tickled with all the gifts her children gave her and especially loved the stockings they put together. She was very easy to please!

By 1970, they moved to New Westminster, to manage a high rise apartment building, and having no previous experience, the majority of the work fell on Bea. She was a hard worker and was very conscientious in doing her job. That lasted about a year, as Gordie got them fired, due to his laziness and drinking. They then moved to an apartment building in Kitsilano, which they managed for a number of years. Bea was always afraid of the furnace in that building, and every day when she had to adjust a pressure switch on it, and it always scared her to have to do that. Again, Gordie wasn't around much, and so the workload fell mostly to her. The company that managed the building kept them on due to Bea being such a hard worker and the tenants liking her so much.

Bea's father died of a heart attack in 1977 and it was a very sad time for her. She was very close to her parents. Her mother died in 1981, after first living with her sister, Beverly and her husband, and then living in a care facility. It was another sad time for Bea, and she missed them both a lot.

Throughout her life, Bea was a smoker, since when she got married, Gordie smoked and it seemed like the thing to do. No one knew then about how harmful it was. In 1982, Bea had a heart attack and it scared everyone, including Bea, who became very depressed during her recuperation. Even though Gordie actually did some of the necessary work in the apartment building, Bea probably went back to work way too soon. She even shovelled snow off the sidewalks that winter. She tried to remain smoke-free, but Gordie did nothing to support her efforts and he continued to smoke around her, so Bea started to smoke once more. In 1984, on July 7th, a Saturday, Gordie came home about 5pm and found Bea on the hall floor, where she had died, alone, at the age of 56, due to another heart attack.

Bea's legacy to her children was her love, her incredible strength and her ability to be happy in spite of hard times – priceless gifts.