



# Mary Jean Blasdale

Interviewer:

All right, so we are recording. This is Emily Reinl, and I'm here with Mary Jean who is going to tell us a story, so go ahead.

Mary Jean Blasdale:

Oh, I had fun researching for this story and I tried to keep it simple, so there are a lot of things I might've left off that someday you might want to ask me. But my association with New Bedford began with my grandfather, Hugo Ernst Schmidt, who was born in Klosterlausnitz, Germany, on March 3rd, 1884. He left his family where he was one of 10 children, and he arrived in the United States in 1908. His father had been working in the textile industry, so Hugo came with skills to make parts for the machinery in the textile mills. He specialized in loom reeds and leather belting products. He began working with a partner and soon created his own company named Schmidt Manufacturing Company.

He married a local girl, Clara Ethel Tabor, who was born July 24th, 1888 in New Bedford. Clara's mother was most upset that her eldest daughter would marry a German immigrant. She, Clara, gave birth to five sons. Hugh Ernst in 1912, Vincent Raymond 1914, Clayton Ellsworth 1918, Donald Julius 1921, and Ralph Frederick 1923. They all grew up on the first floor of a triple-decker apartment house at 622 Summer Street in New Bedford. My sister Ann Marjorie have good memories of visiting our grandmother there often.

As was the usual family pattern of the day, the five boys were to learn the industry and follow in their father's business that he had founded. They began when they were teenagers, and the operation became quite successful, serving the New Bedford and other nearby textile mills. Eventually, they sold to mills in the South, Latin America and Europe. The sons also accompanied their father to the local German club in New Bedford for them to learn the German language and to learn to fire guns for deer hunting.

My father was Vincent Raymond Schmidt, and he inspired both my sister and me to always keep learning. As soon as he graduated from New Bedford High School with honors, he left the family as he wished to continue his education. His father said he was unable to further educate all five boys, and they should work in the manufacturing company and learn the business. Vincent went off to earn his own money and get a start at Mass State College in Amherst, Massachusetts.

My mother, Lillian Purvis Hatch, born in 1915 in Ayer, Massachusetts, was a librarian at the college and a recent graduate of Simmons College in Boston. Vincent met her and fell in love with this beautiful, educated woman. They married after his graduation in 1939. He began teaching at a high school in Sandwich, Mass, and Lillian continued to work at the State College Library, not telling them that she had married as she would've been asked to leave.

Soon Vincent's army reserve position in the cavalry was called to service for World War II as it was starting up. He and Lillian moved to Fort Riley, Kansas in a Ford automobile that he had rehabbed from the 1938 hurricane in New Bedford. I was born in Fort Riley in 1943.

Vincent was being trained in operating and fixing military motor vehicles, as well as working radio communication and other courses. In the many papers my mother saved from his years in the army, I found one that commended him for taking advantage of every opportunity to improve himself, and did so well, he achieved one of the highest academic standings ever recorded by a student officer.

These talents of our father inspired my sister and me to be good students in the short period that we knew him. Unfortunately, he died suddenly at the age of 39 when I was 10, and my sister was eight. My poor mother was,



again, incredibly saddened after having already had the experience of being orphaned when she was 13 years old.

During COVID, my sister Margie and I learned two interesting stories about our father that we had never known. Margie put two of our father's old army blankets on eBay as her children did not wish to have them. She was contacted by a man from the Czech Republic asking if he won the blankets, would she help him with the cost of transporting them to him? "Of course," she said, but then she said, "Why would he want the blankets?" This question led to a story we had never heard.

We learned Captain Vincent Schmidt had led the American 16th Armored Division in 1945 into Pilsen and liberated the Czechoslovakian population confined by the Nazi army. He is recognized today in a special museum built to honor the American Army that saved them, and every first week of May since 1945, they have had a large festival in Pilsen celebrating the American forces and dress in abandoned uniforms and bring out the tanks and trucks left behind. I have wondered if the half-track my father had my name on it was abandoned somewhere near there, and his bronze medal that we have is from this liberation.

We also learned he appears in a book on the subject by Bryan J. Dickerson titled The Liberation of Pilsen. While in Pilsen, there was a bit of a pause in army operations, and during this time, Vincent found a German army officer's uniform and passport, which I found in my mother's savings, that enabled him to drive 100 miles to Klosterlausnitz. He was able to speak German and sneak behind the enemy lines and visit his aunts and uncles and cousins whom he had never seen.

As my own life developed, and after the war, my father spent a short time at the University of Pennsylvania working on the invention of the EAC computer, the very first computer. We were all brought back to Massachusetts after my grandfather died, and Vincent was called back by his brothers to help with the family business.

We then moved to 122 Green Street in the center of Fairhaven. Margie and I had the good fortune of growing up in this delightful town. We spent our lives through our teenagers years, played out in every exclusive building designed by incredible architects and built by talented artists from Europe and the United States. We went to all the Rogers buildings, the grade school, Fairhaven High School on Huttleston Avenue, the Town Hall, the Millicent Library, the Unitarian Church, not only for church services, but for many activities given in the spacious meeting rooms such as dancing school, piano recitals, girl scouts, and weddings and funerals.

The man who dedicated his great oil in the ground fortune to the construction of these buildings and the future of the town was Henry Huttleston Rogers. He had left Fairhaven as a very young man and gone to Pennsylvania where he made his wealth with the Rockefellers and the Morgans. My mother worked at the Millicent Library where many of his descendants would come for celebrations and remembrances. I learned about the family and all the significant architectural gems, not only for the construction, but also for the stories they told of the charitable Rogers family.

I met my dear husband, Richard William Blasdale, when we were both 15 years old. We married a week after we both had graduated from our different colleges. He went to Princeton and I went to Smith, and we were married in 1965. After a short period in Chicago, we returned to Fairhaven. My Uncle Clayton offered Bill an opportunity to run a new company he had acquired into the Schmidt Industries, Julius Koch from Denmark.

Bill decided to assume this very challenging position and grew the company to 150 employees, making all the textile components for the new narrow slat Venetian blinds. They served the chief producers of these blinds, Hunter Douglas and the Levolor Lorentzen companies throughout the United States. He became one of the third generation of the family business members working from the foundation my grandfather had created.

When our two children, Spencer and Amy, were in school full-time, I ventured out to volunteer in New Bedford. I first became a docent at the Whaling Museum and at the newly opening Rotch Jones-Duff House. I became completely fascinated by New Bedford history, especially when I learned that Henry Huttleston Rogers had given funding to the beginning of the Whaling Museum.

I worked voluntarily at the museum from 1980 to 1990, researching and writing a biographical book to recognize



the many artists that we had collected and include those whose biography we knew. I was able to include altogether 250 artists working in this area from the late 1800s to approximately World War II. I raised much of the money from many generous donors to publish the book *Artists of New Bedford*, a biographical dictionary, and the museum encouraged its publication in 1990. This work gave me some credentials to be hired, and I worked in the curatorial department for many years.

I also served on community boards such as the Rotch Jones-Duff House, and eventually headed the board. I served on and headed the board of the Grinnell House. The mansion had undergone reconstruction by the city, and now was a lovely home for several low income elderly residents.

When the New Bedford Child and Family Service Organization was having a special anniversary, I was asked to write about its beginnings using the early trustee committee secretary notes that had been given to the museum. As I read the notes, and with every change of the secretary, I just hoped for readable penmanship. I was able to create a small compendium of the work of several very dedicated women of the community who created the very first orphanage in the city in 1839.

Over the years at the Whaling Museum, I enjoyed giving lectures about the artists and the founding of our first early orphanage to various organizations to spread the knowledge of the museum's collections, and I would not have had the opportunities to do all this had my grandfather not made the decision to establish his livelihood in the City of New Bedford.

Interviewer:

Fantastic. Thank you so much.

Mary Jean Blasdale:

Oh, you're welcome.

Interviewer:

Wonderful hearing your life story. Are there any final things you want to add before we stop the recording?

Mary Jean Blasdale:

Only that I enjoyed going back over all this information, but it's in the past and you forget some of it, but it's wonderful to have it all recorded and especially part with my, I wish I knew more about my grandfather, but I only met him once before he died, so in any case.

Interviewer:

How old were you when you met him?

Mary Jean Blasdale:

About four years old, I think.

Interviewer:

Well, fantastic. Thank you so much for sharing this.

Mary Jean Blasdale:

You're very welcome.