



Laura Despres

I'm a resident of the South Coast. I'd like to tell the story about my mother who grew up here on the South Coast in Fairhaven. Her name was Margaret Roder Debre. She was born in August 1918, in the middle of the flu epidemic. This greatly affected her mother, Anne, who was very young, 16. Having the flu and being pregnant was extremely dangerous. 50% of the women who were pregnant and had the flu, died during that epidemic.

But my mother was a hearty, inhaling baby. She grew up in Fairhaven off of Scoticut Neck on Manhattan Ave, in a cottage that was not insulated. They would gather seaweed in the winter and lay it around the foundations of the house, in order to help keep some of the heat in. During the winter when it was very cold, my mother would be sent to her grandmother's house to live in New Bedford, because the house by the ocean was just too cold. But my mother loved the ocean. She was a fantastic swimmer.

They were very poor. My grandfather was a carpenter and just had his bucket of tools and would stand on the side of the road, or go to the boatyard and stand in line and wait to be chosen for that day, to be a day laborer to work on the boats.

Early in the turn of the century, he actually worked on some of the last whaling ships as a carpenter. His name was George Brodeur. And later, because he had worked on some of the old whaling boats back in his youth, he helped build the Lagoda at the Bedford Whaling Museum, along with a friend of his, Mr. Leo Telesmatic.

But meanwhile, back to my mother, growing up poor in Fairhaven. She was a strong swimmer and loved the water. Her neighbor, who had sailed around the world on one of the whaling ships and had come home with a kayak from Alaska, would allow my mother to take the kayak out. And she would gather clams, go fishing, get quahogs, and then sell them up on Scoticut Neck Road.

My mother was also a daredevil. Her and her best friend when she was 12, decided to take my grandfather's car and go for a joy ride up and down Scoticut Neck. The only reason they got caught was that she had driven it straight into the garage, as opposed to backing it in the way my grandfather normally done.

Now mind you, they had gotten enough money by this time to buy a car, because of some great fortune known as Prohibition. My grandfather ended finding steady employment, putting secret cabinets in boats, so that people with some well-off money, some of them being from Newport, could play at rum runners, and take their cigarette boats out past the 12 mile limit and pick up alcohol from the boats that were offshore, and then dodge the police and Coast Guard on the way in.

This was a very lucrative business and my grandfather made a good deal of money building these secret cabinets inside of boats for the rum running. In fact, he even made friends with the Vanderbilts, and worked on one of the racing boats they had. I believe the name was Nefertiti, which won a number of races, and I believe won one of the America's Cup.

But my mother grew up and continued to be a great swimmer. In fact, one day, her and her friends would dive off the New Bedford-Fairhaven Bridge and swim all the way out to Palmer's Light and back. One day, there was a boy who kind of liked my mother, otherwise known soon to be my father, Paul Debre, decided to join her in this event, but he did not know what kind of swimmer you had to be to do this. And when he dove into the water, unfortunately he lost his teeth, because he had false teeth because of diphtheria. And my mother ended up having to go diving for his teeth. They were never found.

Then they got married and World War II hit. By this time, my grandfather had raised enough money from the bootlegging boat deal, in order to buy one of the boatyards in Fairhaven, just in time for World War II.

Here in Fairhaven, I believe we built primarily PT boats. I heard about the PT boats, because one of my mother's jobs ended up being to be a test driver for the PT boats. So she would take the boats out to the harbor and run them full throttle and back.



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This need for speed went for my mother for the rest of her life, who did not give up her driving of a car until her 90th birthday. And the Fairhaven Police Department tended to call her Grandma Flash.