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A Working-Class Gloucester Woman
by Kenneth Lawson



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A Working-Class Gloucester Woman

BY KENNETH LAWSON

Some of my favorite memories from growing up in the 1960s come from spending time with my Nana, Elsie Lawson, in Gloucester, MA. When I was a child, she lived at 24 Hawthorne Road with her young daughter Susan and her mother-in-law (my great-grandmother), Marm Lawson. My family and I would spend virtually every holiday with Nana. In the summer my family and I spent many a lazy weekend with Nana at Good Harbor Beach, enjoying the sun and the ocean waves.

My Nana was also a fabulous cook, making use of whatever was available. Sometimes we slept over, and in the morning she would ask us to go in the yard and pick blueberries or rhubarb, which she used to make muffins or pies. Other times of the year, she cooked Portuguese food including sweet bread, which we all enjoyed.

As a teenager in the 1970s, I still enjoyed visits with Nana. She always made me feel welcome. The house was small on a small lot, and the train tracks ran close to the backyard so the whole house shook when the trains went by. I remember the derelict outhouse in the backyard and the abandoned chicken coop. I also recall crawling into the basement and seeing the massive beams used to hold up the house. The structure of the house at 24 Hawthorne Road was built from a dilapidated wooden ship, and the masts of the ship were the support beams for the house.

My Nana Elsie was born on Portuguese Hill in Gloucester on June 9, 1912. She was born at home at 62 Friend Street and was the middle child of three surviving sisters. Elsie was one hundred percent Azorean Portuguese, as both her parents were born in the Azores. Her mother was Mary Gloria Silva, and her father, Joseph Muniz Barrett, was away fishing when she was born. Elsie recalled starting school at age five at the nearby Mount Vernon Elementary School. While the older generation spoke Portuguese, she was encouraged to speak English at home and at school.

Elsie fondly recalled that before the 1919 pandemic, when her fisherman father would return from sea, how he played and laughed with the children. He sang cheerful Portuguese songs for the family while he played his mandolin. When Elsie was six years old, her father and her sister died in 1919 from what was called the Spanish Influenza. His death shook and impoverished the family. Hundreds more died in Gloucester with hundreds seriously ill. Elsie's mother was very sick, and when she woke up from her delirium, she realized that her husband and one of her daughters had died.

Despite hardship, Elsie said her childhood was mostly happy. She did not know how poor her family was. Her mother did laundry, sewing, and housecleaning to make ends meet. There were many fatherless households in Gloucester, from fatalities at sea, and the Spanish flu, so Elsie's situation was not unusual. Elsie's mother had strict rules for her three daughters, Rose, Elsie, and Thelma. Lunch was always at noon, supper was always at 5 PM, and the children had to head home when the streetlights came on. There were so few cars in those days, the kids could play safely on the streets of Portuguese Hill.

Elsie completed school in the 9th grade. She earned the Sawyer Medal for academic excellence. She recalled that her graduation day was the first time she wore high-heel shoes; the first time she wore silk stockings; and the first time she had a professional haircut.

At age fourteen, Elsie went to work at a stocking factory in Gloucester. She recalled that her responsibilities were to stand all day at a machine that made seams for stockings. Elsie had the academic ability to remain in school and excel, but poor family finances meant she had to quit school and work. In a discussion Elsie had with her mother about whether to stay in school or go to work, her mother said, "If you go to school and don't like it, you will have lost your job



In 1926 Elsie (front right) and her family commemorate her receiving the Sawyer Medal for academic excellence. Her mother Mary Gloria is in the left rear, with her older sister Rose on right. Next to Elsie is her younger sister, Thelma.

already. What will you do then?" Her mother added, "Girls do not need an education." Elsie did not continue her schooling.

Elsie's next job was at the Net and Twine factory in Gloucester. She was the "bobbin girl," meaning she walked around the factory checking and changing bobbins on the machines. (A bobbin was a small metal or wood reel design that held thread). Elsie liked this job very much.

While working at the Net and Twine, Elsie met her future husband, William K. Lawson, who went by the name Bill. She remembered the first time she saw him in 1928 when he applied for a job. She was sixteen years old and remembered that Bill was "a handsome young man." At the same time, Bill noticed her and said to a friend, "Who is the pretty little girl in red?"

After five months of dating, Elsie and Bill were secretly married in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, when he was nineteen years old, and she was seventeen. They returned home and went back to their parents' houses. Two days after they were married, Bill visited Elsie at her mother's boarding house apartment on Friend Street. He told Elsie's mother that they were secretly married two days prior. Elsie's mother did not appear surprised and stated, "A wife should be living with her husband." Elsie and Bill moved a few miles away into a room at his parent's house at 24 Hawthorne Road. The following year, in 1930, Elsie gave birth to a son, William K. Lawson, Jr. The couple saved money and rented an apartment on Portuguese Hill, near Elsie's mother. Two more sons were born to the couple, Peter E. (b. 1932) and Roger B. (b. 1936). Later, a daughter was born, Susan M. (1954).

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Elsie was a stay-at-home mother with three young sons. They struggled. Her husband Bill was a hardworking man who was almost always able to find work during the Depression. Bill had only a ninth-grade education and had jobs as a fish cutter, a lumper, and a general laborer in local factories and mills. He served on a fishing vessel when he had to, but he did not care for that. To supplement his pay, he was at various times a member of the



Elsie B. Lawson and her first-born child, William Jr., in 1930.

National Guard, the Navy Reserve, and the Merchant Marines. The Great Depression caused financial ruin for many, but for Elsie and Bill Lawson, their life was already hard with a low income. They scraped by and persevered.

During World War II, Bill served in the Merchant Marines and was injured in an altercation with a German U-boat in the Caribbean. He was hard of hearing for the rest of his life. During the war Bill worked in the defense industry at General Electric in Lynn, Massachusetts. He was also a neighborhood night watchman in Gloucester, making sure that lights were not visible

from the outside due to the threat of German submarines offshore. Bill held various jobs as a laborer, including cutting fish, delivering ice, painting boats, and moving furniture. When work was slow in the winters, Bill would sign on for a cruise with the Merchant Marines. His normal ports of call were in the Caribbean Sea and South America. He could be gone several weeks or a few months at a time. Somehow, Bill sent his pay to Elsie, so the family did not suffer any extra financial hardships while he was away. As a sign of the times, neighborhood children on Portuguese Hill often appeared at Elsie's house around suppertime. She was generous to them with what provisions she had.



Elsie and Bill Lawson on their fifteenth wedding anniversary, June 1944.

Elsie and Bill's three sons, Bill Jr., Peter, and Roger grew up on Friend Street. Then in 1942, the family purchased a small house a few hundred feet away at 3 Taylor Court. The three boys walked to school: the Sawyer School, the Mount Vernon School, and the Central Grammar School. Their father always had a car, but never a new car. Most people on Portuguese Hill did not have a car. Elsie managed the home, cooked Portuguese and American food, and made daily trips on foot to the local market. She recalled that the neighborhood was safe and friendly. When she lived on Friend Street there was no indoor toilet, but the house on Taylor Court had indoor plumbing. Clothes were hand-

washed in a tub and hung to dry near the stove in the kitchen. In her home, nothing was wasted. Elsie did not have a refrigerator for the first fifteen years of her marriage but had an icebox on the porch that the iceman refilled on a schedule. She always made her own bread. Elsie also mended the three boys' clothes and handed them down from the oldest to the youngest.

Bill got tired of hustling for jobs to supplement his work as a fish cutter on the waterfront. He was tired of getting laid off in the winters. A steady truck driving opportunity opened at a freight company, so Bill, Elsie, and Roger moved about 35 miles inland to North Andover in 1950.

Elsie and Bill were pleasantly surprised when Elsie was pregnant, having a baby girl named Susan, born in North Andover in 1954. But Bill was not well. While in his mid-forties, Bill Lawson began to show signs of a weak heart. By 1957 he was disabled. They moved back to Gloucester in 1958. He was forced to stay home and care for their baby daughter while Elsie went to work as a fish packer on the Gloucester waterfront. Bill had a pacemaker installed to support his heart in 1963. He died in 1964. Elsie was a 51-year-old widow with her nine-year-old daughter Susan at home.

Bill's parents, Peter and Florence (Marm) Lawson were living in the house at 24 Hawthorne Road in Gloucester, and welcomed the widowed Elsie, and Susan. Peter, called "Pap" Lawson, died in 1961. Thereafter three generations of Lawson women, the widow Florence Lawson, the widow Elsie Lawson, and the girl Susan Lawson lived together for the next fifteen years. Marm Lawson died in 1976. Elsie continued to work on the waterfront as a fish packer.



Elsie Lawson in the 1960s, on the steps of the Lawson homestead at 24 Hawthorne Road in Gloucester.

As a boy, I remember visiting my Nana Elsie at her work on the waterfront. She wore high rubber boots and a rubber apron, and her hair was in a hairnet. She stood all day with others

along a conveyor belt that dumped fresh fish from boats to be packed in ice by laborers like my grandmother. The place was very noisy, fish blood was everywhere, and the place stank, especially at low tide. The workers had a roof over their heads but were otherwise exposed to the elements year-round in all kinds of weather. My Nana Elsie worked as a fish packer along the waterfront until she was 70 years old.

When I became an adult, I still very much enjoyed time with my Nana. I cannot remember a time when I did not want to visit with her. She was a classic, working-class Gloucester woman who had a hard life in some ways. But in other ways, Nana Lawson lived a rewarding, fulfilling life. She was the heart of our family and present for all major family events.

Elsie Lawson died in 2001 and was buried next to her husband Bill, and many other Lawson relatives, at Beechbrook Cemetery in Gloucester. I was honored to speak at her gravesite on that sad day. Thank you, Nana, for the sacrifices you made and the unforgettable memories. I am a better man for having known you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken Lawson's Gloucester roots go back to the 1880s, when his relatives emigrated from the Azores, Denmark, and Nova Scotia. He has many fond memories of family meals and of visiting his Gloucester relatives on Hawthorne Road.

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