The aunt I never knew

She was a smiling, blond Norwegian girl, the picture of health

By Sigrid Bathen

Once, it was a letter from Norwegian relatives, addressed to my grandparents at a house where they had lived on Lacy Lane off Marconi.

The people who bought the house many years ago remembered seeing my name in the paper, so they sent the letter to me.

It was an eerie feeling, seeing my long-dead grandparents' names over that address so familiar from my childhood.

It happened again, not long ago, in a letter asking me if I had a sister who worked for the state Department of Social Welfare in the early 1940s. Since I was born in 1946 and my only sister five years later, I figured the writer had made a big mistake.

"I am sure you are the one who used to meet her," the woman wrote. "Would you please ask her to phone me?"

Then I remembered the small framed photograph on a wall in my house. It is of a smiling young woman in fashionable '40s slacks and a short-sleeved jacket, and the photo was on my grandparents' bedroom dresser until they died.

HATLEY MASON

I didn't know much about her except that she died when she was 22 and that when I was born three years later my parents named me after her. They say she would be pleased that I named my daughter after her as well.

I found myself wanting to know more about the young aunt I never knew, whose name I carry. Fueled by personal curiosity and the craft of journalism, I talked to my aunt Sigrid's sister, who *did* work for the old Department of Social Welfare in the '40s. I talked to my father, who was overseas during World War II when she died, and who agonized over his inability to be here to help when she was so ill. I talked to my great-aunt, my grandfather's sister, who was 19 when the family emigrated from Norway. I took notes, examined family photos.

She was my father's youngest sister, born in Mosjoen, Norway, March 4, 1921, emigrated with the family to Oakland in 1924, then to Sacramento five years later.

There were four children born to Peter O'Lai and Annie Bathen, three in Mosjoen before the post-World War I collapse of the family canning business, the fourth in Oakland. Sigrid was the third.

The family pictures show three round, blond Norwegian babies in the "town house" in Mosjoen, where I'm told my great-grandfather once owned the cannery as well as the newspaper and the telephone company. There was also a "country house," and a nanny for the children. All of that changed in the depression that followed World War I.

My grandfather emigrated first, then saved enough to send for his family. He worked in canneries in Yuba City and Oakland and Sacramento, and he always had a job in those Depression years, though times were tough.

Things had improved by the time the children were in high school. My grandfather by then was a foreman in a Sacramento cannery. Sigrid and her sister Harriet, my "*Tante* Hattie," were very close. The family albums are filled with photos of two healthy, blond Norwegian girls in pleated skirts and V-necked sweaters and saddle shoes.

Hattie worked as a file clerk for Social Welfare at Sixth and K, Sigrid as a keypunch operator for Thomson-Diggs at Second and R. They drove to work together, had lunch together, bought a car together — a sharp little gray and green 1936 Chevy with orange spoke wheels and a rumble seat. They lived at home and paid their parents $20 a month room and board.

"We went everywhere in that car," my aunt remembers. "We'd drive to Roseville, which was a long way in those days, for a milkshake. We'd drive to Carmel to the beach. We had such fun."

Sometimes there were too many trips and too many parties and not enough sleep. Who had time to sleep?

First, she had pneumonia. Then the family G.P. diagnosed her condition as pleurisy. When it didn't get any better, he still diagnosed it as pleurisy.

People trusted their doctors in those days.

They didn't file malpractice suits against the family G.P. But finally, after nearly two years of "pleurisy," they took Sigrid to a specialist in San Francisco. He diagnosed her condition as advanced tuberculosis.

"The doctor said he doubted very much that she would live," my aunt recalls. "He said he could have saved her but it was too far gone. One lung was completely gone, and the TB was already in the other lung."

First the family put her in a private sanitarium in San Rafael. It was during World War II. It was expensive. My grandfather went heavily into debt. My father was in the Navy, and he sent as much as he could. When the money ran out, she was sent to the state-run TB sanitarium in Weimar, which is where the picture I have was taken.

She didn't like it there, so the family brought her home. That was when lots of fresh air was recommended treatment for TB patients, so they built a screened-in room at the back of the house. They rented a cabin in Paradise, Butte County, and she lived there for a while.

"I don't think they ever told her how bad it was," my aunt remembers. "But I think she knew. She said she wasn't worried about it, she saw death as one more stop on the road. She said when her time came she'd be ready to go."

She was allowed to come home for visits, but physical contact with the family was prohibited.

Hattie by that time had married and had a son. My father had married my mother, who is the same age Sigrid would have been today.

Aunt Hattie remembers Sigrid's visits home, remembers her sister sitting across the room while the baby had his bath.

"She wasn't allowed to touch him, and she wanted to so badly."

Toward the end, she was in another private sanitorium in San Jose. My grandparents would visit her every weekend.

One morning — not a Saturday — my grandfather awoke with a terrible urgent need to visit her. "We have to go," he said. "She needs us."

They got there in time to be with her when she died. She couldn't talk by then, but she made a circle with her index finger and her thumb, to let them know, to let them know that everything was fine. □

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2/22/87