

## Grabbing Granny's Dishes

At one time my grandmother Rene had enough dishes to use a different set each day of the week. My favorite of all of them was her Franciscan Ivy china. "Someday you can have those," she once promised me.

Franciscan Ivy Salad Plate I remember showing them to my new hubby when we visited my grandparents the summer we were married. "Someday those will be mine," I whispered to him. By then I realized they had more than sentimental value. Franciscan had discontinued that pattern after only a few years of production. They had already become a collector's item.



Due to circumstances of geography, I was only in her house twice in the first twenty years I was married, and the dishes slipped from active memory. The year after we moved to Pittsburgh, I realized she was not getting any younger. In 1987, I hopped on a plane and flew to Las Cruces.

We had a ball, just the two of us. In many ways it was like time had stood still and I was ten years old again. She taught me how to tat. We looked through trunks of her old clothes. She could still fit into her squaw dresses, and I took pictures of her wearing two or three of them, including the one with elephants on the bottom tier that she wore as a delegate from New Mexico to the Republican National Convention in 1956.

She told me stories about The Olden Days. One story that stands out in my memory was about a couple she and Cub had known when they were young. "As time went by, he decided he'd rather be married to somebody else, and she

decided she'd rather be married to someone else too, so they got divorced, and then married those other people."

After she repeated some variation of that tale a couple more times, I was shocked. "I didn't know things like that happened back then!" I blurted out.

She looked me straight in the eye. "Do you think your generation invented anything?" she asked. Apparently not.

Throughout my visit, she cooked bizarrely creative meals on the two functioning burners of her electric stove. Two others sported fused remains of pots that melted when she left the heat on high a couple of years earlier. We ate her eclectic concoctions on the ivy dishes.

"I remember these dishes. They've always been my favorites," I said. Once again, she promised I could have them, "someday." I hoped so, but with her, one never knew for sure.

I visited her again in 1992. The dishes came into our conversation again. "You can take those dishes home with you if you still want them," she told me. My heart sank. From her tone of voice and other cues, I knew time was growing short. I wanted them more than ever, but checking them through on the airline, especially with two changes en route, did not seem like a good idea. "Maybe I'll ship them to you," she offered.

"That would be great. But wait a few weeks. We'll be leaving for Austria as soon as I get home, and I don't want them arriving when nobody is there."

I knew she wouldn't ship them. As I expected, they were still on her shelves when I returned in 1994. She made the same offer, "You can take those dishes home with you if you still want them."

"Okay ... I may just do that," I answered. This trip I had a plan. That plan included getting those dishes to Pittsburgh, one way or another. My sister now live in Las Cruces and I was staying with her this trip. By happy coincidence, my brother showed up in Las Cruces at the same time. One afternoon he and I took off to roam around together in his rental car.

“I want you to take me to Mailboxes to get boxes and plastic peanuts, and then I want to go over to Grandmother Rene’s and get those dishes,” I told him. When we arrived at her house an hour later, with two huge flattened boxes and an enormous bag of packing peanuts, she was flabbergasted.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Boxes to pack those dishes in,” I answered breezily, holding my breath. She was notorious for frequent mind changes, seeming determined to keep people guessing until the last minute. We all knew she’d have the last word on anything, and we didn’t try to predict what she’d do. I realized I was on thin ice; there was a strong chance she never would have offered to let me take them if she’d thought I would do it. I was calling her bluff, and we both knew it.

Several seconds seemed like hours as I waited. “Okay,” she finally said, turning toward the kitchen. She let my brother take the dishes down, since the shelf they were on was well out of her reach. She set aside a few odd pieces, gesturing at the rest as she told me I could have “all of those.” To my delight, “all of those” amounted to four complete place settings and several serving dishes. It took less than twenty minutes to get them safely packed in peanuts and double-boxed. They fit perfectly. I could not have fit those extra pieces in if she had given them to me. I taped the boxes shut, and put them in the car. By now it was too late to go by UPS, so I left money for my sister to ship them.

When they arrived a week later, I anxiously surveyed the box. It appeared to be intact. I ripped open the tape and scattered plastic bits everywhere in my haste to examine the contents. I breathed a huge sigh of relief to find that not a single piece was damaged. For several weeks I left them sitting on the counter in full sight, feeling gleeful each time I looked.

After her funeral five years later, the remaining pieces sat beside them. Considering that her vast collection of Indian jewelry and other valuables had suspiciously disappeared by the time she died, I know I would never have gotten those dishes if I hadn’t seized that moment when I did.

Those dishes will remain my most treasured ones. In spite of their value, I do use them now and then, and I bought a set of solid green stoneware to mix with them for larger groups. They are the most beautiful dishes I have ever seen, and they remind me of her and the legacy of strong mindedness she left behind. That makes them special. The memory of calling her bluff and getting away with taking them makes them priceless.