

Features

Rochester woman's family reunion bridges half a century

By Mary E. McCrank

Mary Breslin has lived most of her 67 years apart from her five siblings.

Sent to an orphanage after her mother died in 1931, Breslin spent most of her life alone, never marrying and supporting herself by doing laundry. She always suspected her siblings were alive but — caught up in the struggle to earn a living — she was never able to search for them.

Deprived of her own family, Breslin found at St. Augustine's and Ss. Peter and Paul parishes some measure of the help and friendship families customarily provide. When she was lonely or needed solace, a ride somewhere or a place to share a holiday meal, she would sometimes turn to a friend at one of the churches.

Then in January Breslin discovered that she had a family of her own after all, when she received a letter from her only sister, Christine Ashton. "I was surprised to hear from them," Breslin remarks. "They called me. They wanted to know how I was?"

"They can't wait to see me," she adds. Breslin enthusiastically awaits July 15, when the family will reunite in their hometown, Wilkes-Barre, Pa. In addition to the two sisters, the gathering will also include four Breslin brothers: John of Oklahoma City, Okla.; Anthony of Pittsburgh; Jimmy of Bisbee, Ariz.; and Frank of Mountain Top, Pa.

The Breslin children separated after their mother died in childbirth, shortly before the Great Depression. Because their father could not care for them, Mary — who was nine at the time — and the other children were scattered across the state of Pennsylvania. One brother and sister were adopted; another brother lived with family friends; and yet another was cared for by distant relatives. Mary Breslin and her brother John were temporarily sent to Wilkes-Barre orphanage, but they, too, were separated when John later was sent to a boys' boarding school.

Ashton, who was adopted by a Philadelphia family, only vaguely remembers her older sister. While growing up, none of the Breslin brothers and sisters were allowed to visit one



Bonnie Tratelet/Courier-Journal

On July 15, Mary Breslin will see her sister and brothers for the first time since their mother died more than 50 years ago.

another. But in 1955, when Ashton was living in South Carolina, her older brother Frank found her.

Last year, Frank Breslin and Ashton, who now resides in Wilmington, Del., decided they would reunite as many of their siblings as possible. Frank believed Mary had died, but Ashton nevertheless decided to try and discover what had happened to her sister.

One of Ashton's childhood friends, who now works for the Social Security office in White Haven, Pa., agreed to help locate Mary. Six months later, Ashton disproved Frank's theory by finding her sister living in Rochester.

Ashton wrote Breslin right away, and once Breslin confirmed they were indeed sisters, the reunion picture was complete. Ashton has arranged for Breslin to fly next month to Pennsylvania, where the family will gather

Yet the memories the Breslins will share during their get-together may not all be pleasant. Mary recalls, for example, that when she was a child, fellow students teased her because she had no shoes or stockings. "They used to make fun of us because we were poor," she says.

Judging by Mary Breslin's memory, her situation did not improve much once she arrived at St. Patrick's Orphanage Asylum in Wilkes-Barre, where she lived from 1932-45. "They (wouldn't) let you go out much. They never let me see movies," she says.

When Mary's older brother Edwin died at age 16 of spinal meningitis, she recalls not being allowed to attend his funeral.

Breslin's father — her only visitor — would bring her fruit and money every Saturday. Yet Mary recalls that the nuns who ran the orphanage took the money away from her. "They said I was too young. They didn't want me to have nothing," she says. "They said they used the money for my mom's funeral."

After attending St. Anne's High School in Freeland, Pa., through the ninth grade, Breslin went to work at a Wilkes-Barre hospital doing laundry, a job she had learned at the orphanage.

In 1953, she moved to Rochester and took a similar job at Central Laundry, where she worked until 1981.

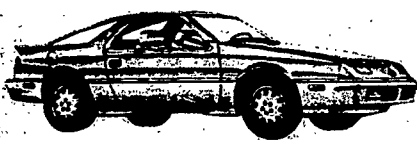
A lifetime of laundering has lined her face and creased her hands. Yet she seems content with her solitary lifestyle. "I have my TV, and I have my two radios and my two clocks," she says. "When I get lonely, I go visit my girlfriends."

Attending weekend Mass also gives Breslin a chance to socialize with friends. She has alternated between St. Augustine's and Ss. Peter and Paul parishes since she moved to Rochester's west side six years ago.

Parishioners occasionally offer Breslin rides to church and food supplies when her funds run short. Her friends in both parishes are also sharing Breslin's excitement over the upcoming reunion. "It restores your faith when you hear things like that," says Diane Hayes, a member of Ss. Peter and Paul parish, which is planning a party for Breslin July 10.

"We just want to wish her well," Hayes explains. "She has a certain sweetness and simplicity of heart and innocence ... You just can't help liking Mary."

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