

# Moral Archeology

Jeff Loeb

**W**hen my mother died a few years back, I was appointed her executor. She'd spent her final decade in eldercare, so there wasn't much to distribute: a small life insurance policy, a little cash, her wedding ring. In going through the meager possessions she'd kept in a cardboard box under the bed, my younger sister and I unearthed an old tobacco tin. I vaguely remembered it sitting on a closet shelf during my high school years—a red Prince Albert container of the older type with a domed lid. My grandfather had been a pipe smoker, and this was his brand. The can was heavy, filled with old coins, not exactly a collection, it seemed, but a willy-nilly lot dating back well over a century. We agreed an appraisal was in order, so I put the round tin in the car and hauled it back to Kansas City with me. It was weighty enough I had to set it on the floorboard.

A few months later, ready to finalize things, I suddenly remembered the can, stowed, ironically, in our own linen closet. I grabbed it and headed over to a nearby coin shop in a decaying strip mall. Inside, I could tell it was more of a pawn shop—money lent, jewelry bought, services like that. I was the only person there besides the man tending the counter—the owner, as it turned out—so he shot me the appraisal fee and we got down to it. He'd pluck out a coin, run his fingers over it, maybe give a quick dab with his cloth, then announce what he called his "best guesstimate." Once he'd guesstimated a few individually, he started leaking them out several at a time. He'd pick through these and, if one caught his fancy, give it a little mmm-hmmm and mutter something like twenty-five or fifty. Nothing really eye-opening.

When the can seemed empty, he tipped it up and something else fell out—a blue change purse stuck in the bottom. He squeezed it open, I saw his eyes get bigger, and he quickly handed it over to me. Inside, instead of more coins, was an ugly, jagged piece of rusted steel a little smaller than finger size. I pulled it out—very, very carefully—and held it up. The coin guy looked puzzled, but for my part I knew right away what it was: a piece of shrapnel. I'd seen plenty of these. But more importantly, I'd seen this particular one—a long time before, when I was really young. It had belonged to my grandfather, had been, in fact, pulled out of his thigh by a field surgeon in World War I. He must have stuck the thing in the can beneath his coins. The dealer just stared, trying to make sense of the shard. I didn't need to. The red dirt of Khe Sahn filled my inner eye: me scurrying toward a bunker, a loud crack above, a sudden punch to my back, sharp burning, and the panicked groping at my flak jacket for the hot chunk of steel scalding my neck—a younger cousin to this very fragment.

Fast forward a few years: Carolyn and I, newly retired, moved to NYC to enjoy, among other amusements, grandsons Milo and Jasper. Their parents had just bought a Queens row house and were in need of an upstairs renter. As things turned out, we were it. We sold our house in suburban Kansas City, auctioned what we could, and gave most of the rest away. What was left, of course, were keepsakes, heirlooms, and (since we were teachers) a whole lot of paper in boxes.

One day, while we were unpacking—with Jasper, the younger of the two, “helping”—what came floating to the surface but the blue change purse, the shrapnel still inside. Clearly I'd dumped it there years before without another thought. Naturally, this gem attracted his eye, but when I showed him what was inside (sort of explaining it too), his imagination took off. His primary interest in life—rampant, uncontrolled violence—lay at that point somewhere between

*Star Wars* and *Fortnite*, so the fact that what suddenly nestled in his palm was an actual, real-life instrument of such mayhem sent him into paroxysms of joy. It wasn't hard for him to understand the shard's destructive potential with its jagged, rusty edges, but explaining how it happened to appear here was more difficult, so I "blew him off" (as our students used to say) with some story, and he and I both quickly forgot about it. I thought.

Two weeks ago, now several years older, Jasper suddenly appeared upstairs and asked me where "that thing in the blue pouch" was; he wanted to see it. So we searched through boxes and file cabinets, and—unbelievably—we found it: nestled in the top of my chest of drawers. He gripped it softly, then bounced it up and down in his hand, and asked me once again where it came from. When I told him my own grandfather, something clicked for me.



Jasper in a rare pensive pose



Holding the shrapnel in his palm

My grandfather was not a tall man but he *seemed* tall. Looking back, I think this impression came from more than just our difference in height—he died when I was fourteen—but because he carried himself with a certain gravity, possessed a sense of rectitude I didn't detect in other men, most particularly my father. Granddaddy, as I called him right up to the end of his life, had brought his military gear back from France with him. His hinged, compact mess-kit and especially his dish-pan helmet were of great interest to me; I was even allowed to take them to school for some dark-ages version of show-and-tell, proudly balancing the awkward helmet on my own head. Boys growing up in the early Fifties saw WWII steel pots with every newsreel, so this doughboy specimen bordered on exotic.

Naturally, though, his rifle, a military M1903 Springfield (as opposed to the later-issued British Enfield knock-off), bewitched me most. In his era not only were uniforms and *materiel* issued for life but evidently so was one's weapon, at least in the circumstances of his muster—a 1917 unit draft of every able male over 26 in his rural Kansas county. The prize weapon leaned in the corner of a closet (I couldn't take *it* to school, of course, even in those innocent days), right next to his shotguns and fishing gear. If I pleaded enough, Granddaddy would pull it out and place it carefully in my hands. I remember its flip-sight, its weight, its utter seriousness—all doubly impressive since my father (who, to my shame, hadn't been anywhere near combat in his war, in fact had never left Los Alamos, where he was an Army chemist) refused to own firearms and only grudgingly allowed me and my brothers toy ones for playing cowboys or war.

The biggest prize, though, was the piece of shrapnel, hailing from the massive battle of the Meuse-Argonne and which he'd somehow managed to hang onto for forty years. He'd let me handle this—carefully, mind you, because the steel was razor sharp—and yet never said a word to me about the injury or, for that matter, the bright-pink mustard-gas scars marking his

cheeks. His reticence on this matter (and indeed the whole subject of war) must have fueled my curiosity to the point that over several years, certainly by high school, I'd devoured every single book touching on the subject of battle or the military—history, fiction, what have you—in the holdings of the George Smith Public Library: no mean feat since Junction City had bordered Fort Riley since cavalry days, making anything about combat a must-have for their collection.

When I was maybe eight, my grandfather's leg—the one with the raised, purple shrapnel scar—had to be amputated just above the knee. Whether this was some long-term effect of the original wound or the result of my grandfather's diabetes, I'll never know since he and my mother and father are long deceased. Granddaddy moved in with us after that, into what had been an attached one-car garage (for practical purposes a storage dump) that my parents converted to living quarters for him. Since he found it impossible to climb our porch stairs with his so-called wooden leg (actually an early plastic), and cutting a direct doorway evidently cost too much, one had to go outside and around to enter what became the apartment. Thus it fell to me to be his meal server and, unwittingly, his story carrier.

I should state here one more important thing about my grandfather. My grandmother—his wife of what now seems a very short marriage, a bit over thirty years—died when I was barely old enough to recognize her as such. Pictures of us together exist, ones showing my progression from baby to toddler to seemingly self-sufficient child, but then they stop. She simply isn't in the photos anymore, even though my grandfather stays there as I get older. What to him and my mother must have seemed the sudden, yawning absence of a beloved partner or parent, to me remains simply a stoppage in images, and she herself a cipher because the people who might have told me something about her did not. Things took a different direction, as they always seem to.

They'd married in early 1918, the event no doubt hurried because he'd been drafted in late 1917 and sent to Fort Riley for a few months training before shipping out for Europe. She was



**Granddaddy and Grandmother,  
wedding picture, 1918**

seventeen, younger by eleven years, and must have been sixteen, or even younger, when they'd begun courting.

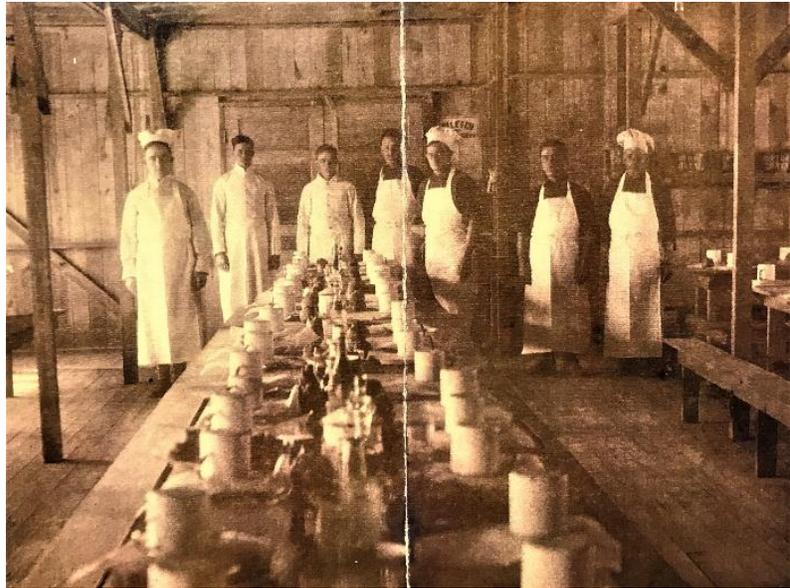
Both were small-town people; the only records I have of her family place them for two generations on the same piece of rural Russell County property (Bob Dole country to those unfamiliar with the State). My grandfather had been born in Southeast Kansas, very near John Brown territory, in a town so small it no longer exists, moved to Russell County with his family to the town of Vesper, and from there to slightly larger Lucas (famous now, if at all,

for *The Garden of Eden*, a bizarre century-old concrete

sculpture garden now recognized as legitimate populist art inspired partly by William Jennings Bryan.) There, he'd started—or come to own—first, a bakery and then a restaurant before being whisked away by enormous world events I have no doubt he scarcely understood.

Because of this background, Granddaddy was made a cook. A 1918 photograph shows him outfitted in cook's garb and posing with other men in a wooden, barebones mess hall at Camp Funston. (Note: the camp, which came into being specifically for WWI, was named for Major General Frederick Funston—also a Kansan—infamous for his 1901 butchery in the Philippines, but *not* for dipping rounds in pigs' blood, as our feckless leader has stated.) Along

with all Kansas draftees, he'd been shipped there to train, while my grandmother moved to Junction City. How often they were able to see each other during this time—especially during the mandatory, three-week "confinement period" recruits endured—I can't determine, though I have



**Grandfather is just to the right of the picture's center crease, Camp Funston, 1918**



**Grandfather in Paris, 1918**

pictures of the general boot-camp ordeal (much-sanitized, of course; in fact, it's made to look like some kind of summer camp with uniforms) from a handy 1919 publication called *Cantonment Life* which sold for the princely sum of one dollar. One of my mother's saved photographs shows my grandfather in France en route to the front; it seems to date from May of 1918. He's posed in front of an impressive Second Empire building in the largest city he'd ever see. Still a private at this point, his uniform has been tinted olive and his cheeks pink. He's

slimmed down from his younger, Lucas pictures, no scars yet on his cheeks, and eyes revealing a brightness highly improbable in one who's "seen the elephant." He seems in full possession of himself, despite the obvious uncertainties of his circumstances.

Other photos of the same vintage feature him and fellow doughboys in some version of battle attire, posturing in the same mock-hardened way we ourselves were prone to adopt at, say, the Hill 34 PX outside Da Nang. Whatever this might say about the immediate circumstance of these men Headed East (or, for that matter, about the imaginative verve of the Parisian hustlers behind the cameras), we can at least surmise they'd been issued gear and weapons—and the hardened poses were their desperate camouflage for chilling fear. All these photographs were, of course, taken before their unit, Headquarters Company of the 353<sup>rd</sup> Infantry, 89<sup>th</sup> Division, was thrust into the conflagration at Chateau-Thierry.



**Grandfather and companions in France wearing .45 caliber pistol holsters and ammunition pouches**

No doubt because of his civilian profession, my grandfather was ultimately promoted to sergeant and put in charge of his unit's mess hall. The unusually complete descriptions in the book *The History of Russell County in the Great War* indicate quite clearly that cooks and messmen were just as likely as anyone else to come into harm's way (hence their being issued



LOCATION OF HEADQUARTERS COMPANY KITCHEN ON ROMAGNE ROAD

Image from *The History of Russell County in the Great War*

military .45s, as the group photo shows). One picture in that book displays the site of his company's makeshift battlefield mess after it was destroyed at the Meuse-Argonne. But for the caption, one would never identify it as a place where food had been prepared. In fact, in some ways, it's barely distinguishable from my own memories of fire-base life in Viet Nam—a lightly fortified site of what were once a tent and cookshack surrounded by the telltale shell holes and defoliation of a fierce artillery battle.

When Granddaddy returned in May of 1919, following half a year of occupation duty in the Rhineland near Luxemburg, it was with a pronounced limp and badly scarred cheeks—both injuries so totally a part of him that years later I barely questioned them—and to a son, Lavan,



**The American Cemetery at Romagne, Meuse-Argonne**

whom he'd never seen. (Not to mention a country in the throes of a flu epidemic that likely started in Camp Funston, according to recent theories.) The 1920 US Census shows the three of them living in a neighborhood of small houses very near St. Xavier Church, where they attended Mass daily. By comparison

to Lucas, the area must have seemed a metropolis: the city nestled in a green valley and hugging the borders of the old cavalry post, with its massive stone barracks and officers' quarters; separated from it only by the meeting of the Republican and Kansas rivers; and the city and the fort together comprising some 50,000 people.

My mother came along in 1924, six years behind her ne'er-do-well brother (who, when his time came, was quickly swept up by the next European war). By then, my grandparents had built their house on Spruce Street that I remember (now termed a "bungalow" by realtors, an effort, no doubt, to enhance value by inventing quaintness), and which still stands a hundred years later, a wonderful, rambling one-and-a-half-story home. It wasn't particularly distinctive, though I remember it well from the early Fifties, when so-called "pre-fab" housing was becoming all the rage. Its uniqueness lay in the non-regulation materials of its construction—a

foundation of rounded stones, eccentric siding, sternly ornate trim—and a long, green-shingled roof, replete with dormers, sloping down gently from the roof’s pinnacle and completely overhanging the large, screened-in front porch.

Later censuses show that my grandfather worked, naturally enough, in produce sales and distribution for most of his children’s school years. At some point, he became an employee of Junction City—first as City Treasurer, then City Clerk—again natural enough since he’d also been a businessman in his younger life. Perhaps age and his war injuries caught up with him and desk jobs became more suitable than beating the figurative bush throughout Kansas for sales. And, of course, there were the Dust Bowl and Depression. One can’t, of course, sell produce that no longer grows, or to out-of-work people forced to raise their own.

Some of my earliest memories of him come from his City office, where he desked across from the public works director, a loud, hard-bitten, tobacco chewer named Jake who was in charge of everything from street cleaning to sewer maintenance, and who commanded the



**Atop the streetsweeper in a downtown parade**

heavy equipment to perform these tasks—road graders, street sweepers, and tractors. The greatest benefit of this arrangement to me was being able to sit atop these monsters back in their huge garage, pretending to drive them; or, even better, actually riding on them down Washington Street in the City’s frequent parades, all of which featured, of course, rank upon triumphant rank of marching soldiers, their shouldered M-1’s glistening, followed by

massive WWII-vintage tanks and trucks hauling the very type of 105 and 155 howitzers I'd see in Viet Nam in just a few short years.

Early on in this period, my grandmother died, of what I don't know; her death certificate reads only "complications." Though this was a term commonly used then to designate cancer, her passing was apparently sudden. The loss must have been extremely difficult for his children. My uncle, I know, drifted in and out of jobs for years, didn't marry until a decade and a half later—well into his forties and then only temporarily—eventually working in a laundry until his early death (ironic since his given name, Lavan, is also the basis for *lavanderia*, Italian for that very type of establishment).



**My grandmother and me at their house, Easter, 1949**

My grandmother's loss must have been extremely difficult for Granddaddy, though I rarely recall him mourning her absence. I think now he probably offered up his sufferings to the Holy Spirit, as the Church suggests. For instance, he continued their practice of attending 6:30 a.m. daily Mass, and he became an officer in the Knights of Columbus, perhaps to help honor her life in faith. He was also involved in virtually all parish undertakings; I can recall from an early age his name being included in thanks from the pulpit for this or another project. Or he'd sometimes pull out photos of the delayed wedding trip the two of them took to California to see the redwoods. He seems to have taken me with him a lot—his office, for instance, but also



**Boarding the train for KC with Granddaddy**

seeing the daily trains at the Junction City Depot was a favorite of his and mine. The scrupulous notes in my baby book indicate that at least once in these years we actually traveled together on the Union Pacific to Kansas City and spent a weekend. My size in the photo of this junket, as well as the fact that I have no actual memories of it, suggest I was very young, no doubt soon after my grandmother's death. Looking at the picture brings

back to me, however, the discolored, scraped cheeks of his war, by then some thirty years gone. I can tell now, from both memories and pictures, it was my grandmother's passing that led to our time together, which had continued even after the first of my siblings had come along—rabbit hunting, for instance, when I was perhaps six, and fishing—exploits that seemed to provide him (and me) a sense of our place within the pastures and woods and streams of wild nature—finding one's proteins at their very source—him sweating and talking in blunt, plain words that said precisely what was meant. Or, if my uncle and others were along and we were strolling the fields after pheasant and quail, the loud pops of their heavy shotguns, their curses at missing.



**Granddaddy bringing me home from fishing**

We labored together as well in nature's tamer pasture: the garden, his crowning glory and focus of his work-away-from-work—turning the ground, poking in seeds, pulling weeds, harvesting. It covered his whole back yard from porch to alley and much of the front as well, with walnut and fruit trees overhanging those parts not planted with flowers or vegetables, all of it a tightly connected network of stakes, twine, vines and leaves so dense that in high-growing season it was difficult to keep one's balance while negotiating the narrow paths that were the only means of passage. Again, these outdoor photos of us together remind me clearly of his war-scarred cheeks, and the central fact of life—his and mine—that mortal strife never lays far away. Granddaddy had been born with American romanticism still in sway: the very year Dickinson died, and both Melville and Whitman still very much alive. I see now that the hunting, the fishing, and the labor, both for the city and in his garden, provided him a center, some physical connection to things themselves—tools, machinery, weaponry—that my father, with his world of commerce—clean and socially lubricated; its tasks, such as they were, tied to paper; who refused even to mow the lawn—never attained. The differences between them were, and remain, vast beyond measure.

There's a picture of me amidst that glory of urban agriculture (another contemporary term, of course). The date in my mother's writing on the back of the photograph—May of 1951—conveniently locates my age as three-and-a-half. I'm dressed in overalls, sunglasses, and a hat and scarf, affectations no doubt carefully molded by her. However, it's not my image, or even that of the riotous growth behind me, which I always see first. At the bottom of the frame



is a clear, crisp shadow of the photographer—  
Granddaddy himself with his ever-present brimmed  
hat. Standing tall as always.

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