



GEORGE ALDRICH:
The Romans Would've Loved Him
1925-2018

How do I encompass 93 years onto a page?
How do I capture George's endless tenacity?
His absolute willingness to face challenges and insurmountable risk... after risk... after risk?
How do I describe 93 years of accolades and accomplishments?
How do I convey his nutty sense of humor? His wit? His pranks?
How do I illustrate all the times he got screwed over after he trusted someone... yet, over and over, have the heart to extend others trust. Again.

This man was perfectly... *imperfect*.

I've spent time trying to nail down the key identifier in my grandfather. What is the fundamental character trait I wanted to describe?

Things like "funny", "hard working", "saver", "traveler".

He fit them ALL.

But what is that common denominator over the course of his entire life? Then it hit me...



GEORGE ALDRICH WAS A ROMANTIC.

That word is not what you think. The word "romance" has somehow evolved into meaning love and hearts and cupcakes and flowers and poems. But that's not accurate.

Romance... Romantic... derives from "Roman" language. Just like Germans have Germanic style... France has a French style.... And so forth. Romantic language and romantic *expression* come from the Romans.

The Romans were the first to transform writing, speaking, and life in a whole new manner. They took life... and added a *pinch of salt*. They kicked it up a notch. The Romans added style, grace, imagination,

descriptions, elaboration, exaggeration, expressive words, and myth. The Romans added *imagination* and *soul* into everything. Romans were the original *Romantics*.

It was the Romans who saw that life was tough... but, the stark ugliness is lessened with a little *soul*. And, life is especially beautiful when you add love, passion... and style.

My grandfather lived as a Romantic for 93 years.

Not sure? How did he drink his wine?

He'd get a \$6 bottle wine from the corner store... pour a small amount into their brown plastic dinner cup, swirl it around, sniff it, swirl it, sip it, then let it rest of his palette to take in the aroma. Then, he'd compliment the texture, the body, and the bouquet of Walgreen's finest.

"Not bad," with a pleasantly surprised nod of approval.

Do you think he drank white wine? A blush? Maybe a fruity strawberry contraption?

NO... it was red wine. Because that's the drink of a romantic. The more I dissected, the more it made sense. And it has nothing to do with liking wine.



THE SOIL

To understand a tree, you must look at the soil in which it grows.

Grandpa was born into a profoundly rare and awkward time for our country. The 1920s were as uncomfortable and divided as we are now... maybe worse. People say

the late 1960s were bad... but those folks fail to see to culture shift of the 1920s.

The twenties were a broiling revolution. We had no idea who the heck we were. We were on the absolute breaking point. We were awkwardly unshackling ourselves from the confining and strict 1900s, social stigmas, proper etiquette, social expectations. We were breaking free of this social straight-jacket so quickly that we rocked the boat. We didn't know what to hold onto, what to embrace, what to think, or how to act. It was a social revolution and expressions of this revolution occurred everywhere. I mean... five years earlier, women weren't allowed to vote. Now, the women's suffrage movement was talking about S-E-X! And our leader was Silent Calvin Coolidge. The country's youth had no voice... so we fought. And we broke rules and traditions in everything we touched. We were an uncomfortable country breaking at the seams from within.

Right when everything was at its most intense.... In October 1929.... The entire country got a gut punch when the market collapsed... taking with it the lives, finances, savings, jobs, families, and stability of every family in the country... for ten long years.

Who were we?

What was our identity?

Who did we want to become as a country?

Grandpa was born at this exact moment. The first decade of his life was marked by a cloud of darkness. Do you think he had toys? Do you think he had shoes? A television? Facebook? This boy hardly saw his parents. He was born into poverty. Born into a broken family. Young, unwed parents on two completely different paths in life (in a very puritanical region).



Poverty.

A non-traditional mother.

A non-traditional father.

Where does he get his IDENTITY?

Who does he identify with?



To this day, I'm not really sure if he knew that he was a Junior. He shared his name with his biological father. Or, that his middle name came from his paternal grandfather. I'm not sure he knew.

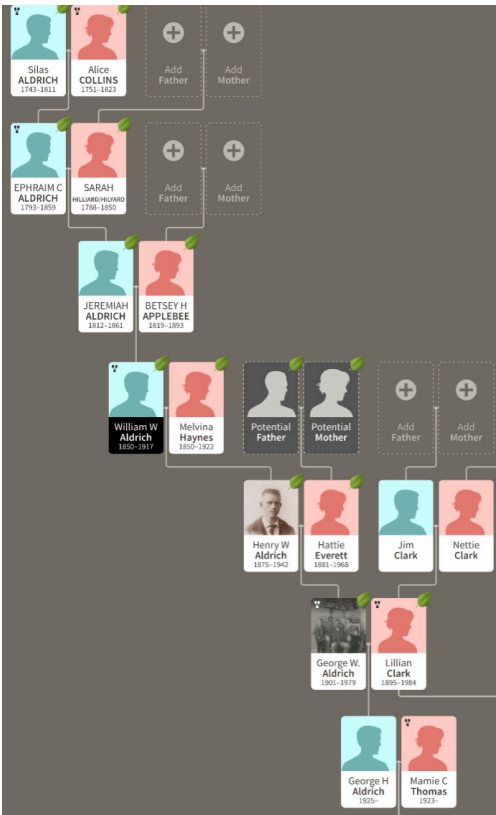
He rarely saw his mother and father.... But he longed for them. He longed for identity. He longed for FINDING out **who he was** and **who he would become**. This, I believe, is where he learned independence.

The roles of father and mother were filled by his mother's parents. His grandparents. Jim and Nettie Clark. From them, he learned manners, respect, kindness, love, gentleness, and compassion. He adored his grandparents. He rarely spoke about them without getting emotional. I thank God for Jim and Nettie Clark... who provided such love and attention to this young boy, that, even 93 years later, that young boy wiped tears from his eyes when he spoke of them.



His tears for them were *different*.





They weren't tears of loneliness, tears of death, or tears of tragedy. They were tears of **GRATITUDE**. He had a very difficult time finding words to describe the gratitude he had for Jim and Nettie Clark. Grandpa told me that he would've been on the street if it wasn't for his grandma and grandpa. He would often start a sentence he couldn't finish.

"If it wasn't for them..." he'd suddenly pause, then he'd change the direction of the sentiment. *"They treated me so good. I mattered to them. They were good people."*

He had so little with which to begin life. So few tools to tackle the world. He only had love. And an imagination.

So, to understand, I trace back to the one thing Grandpa spoke most often about. His first true love.

MAINE

I quickly realized that Maine was, in fact, the love the never abandoned him. It was Maine that gave him his first sense of identity... an identity that would turn out to be pure romance. A Roman would LOVE this as a background:

That tiny village in Maine called Mattawamkeag. The town was named after the Mattawamkeag River, an Indian word that means "A river with many rocks". Some guy built a sawmill where two rivers ran together. Grandpa told me all about it. The Mattawamkeag and the Penobscott river. The sawmill was eventually burned down by the remaining Indians who fought to protect sacred Indian burial grounds. The town barely



survived. The town would've been a speck of dust along the river had it not been for a bad railroad project. The North American Railway was building a track from south Maine into Canada. The railway project was halted for 2 years, and construction stopped. The railroad tracks abruptly stopped... in Mattawamkaeg. They built a small town hall in a tiny wooden building that had a little schoolroom and a dining hall on the first floor. Indians occupied the

streets and traveled throughout the region to tell their stories of sacred burial grounds and Indian traditions along the banks of the river.

What a vivid, romantic, background to a 93-year story! Abandoned railroad tracks. Poverty. Indians. Burial grounds. Stories. And two rivers flowing between big mountains... back when the world still moist with dew and you left your doors unlocked.

It was in these mountains where my grandfather learned to swing an axe as a lumberjack. And camp. And fish. And hunt. And survive through winter. And breathe in the abundance of youth that would last a lifetime. 93 years later, he could still smell the Maine mountains when he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. That's romance.

This is the soil in which my grandfather's imagination and longing for romance took root. Everything my grandfather said and taught for the next 93 years would somehow be weaved with a romantic, imaginative background.

So, with a background this rich and deep... if you happen to have a \$6 bottle of wine from Walgreens late one evening... how would a **gentleman** drink it?

You pour a small amount into a plastic dinner cup, swirl it around, sniff it, swirl it again, and then let it rest on your palette to take in the aroma. Then, you compliment the texture, the body, and the bouquet.

"Not bad."

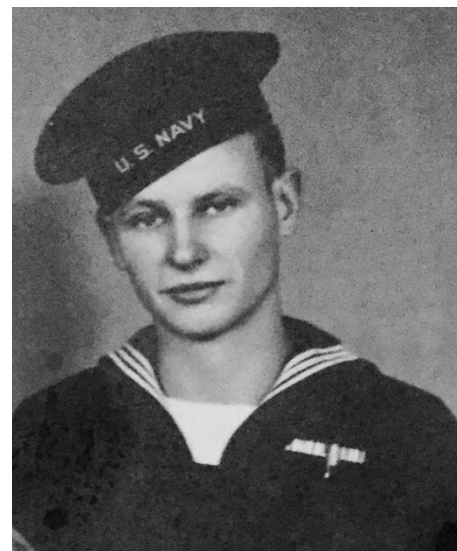
Then you'd sip it while you speak of sacred Indian burial grounds and old sawmills on the banks of rivers.

THE WORLD BEYOND MAINE

That young, lost boy in Maine would find himself in the Navy. He hastily signed up when he was 16. They shipped him off to sea, realized he was only 16, then promptly shipped him back to New York. He was ordered to sweep the piers until he was 17. So he did.

It was a profound life-change for him to stretch his sights beyond Maine. The Navy opened his eyes to a million sights, sounds, and flavors that he never dreamed of experiencing. It was a different Navy back then. It was a tough Navy.

His first assignment was on the U.S.S. Broome. From 1941 to 1945, U.S.S. Broome was attached to Destroyer Division 63, Patrol Force, and operated with the Neutrality Patrol on the



Atlantic coast. She served as a convoy escort between Iceland and the United States. engaged in convoy escort, patrol, and training operations in east coast. She escorted several trans-Atlantic convoys to North Africa and England. Grandpa told me that the Broome had a small crew, so each sailor had multiple jobs. As a young Seaman, he said he was assigned two tasks: do the medical work and swab the deck. Every day.



His second assignment was on the U.S.S. Seminole. She was an attack cargo ship operating along the east coast. She departed Norfolk for the Panama Canal Zone. Seminole transited the Panama Canal on and arrived at Pearl Harbor.

Throughout May, the Seminole engaged in training cruises off the Hawaiian Islands. She zigzagged her way the Caroline Islands, where she loaded anti-tank land mines. On 18 July, the ship steamed southward to avoid a typhoon. During the war, grandpa described conditions so difficult that the ship was overloaded with troops on multiple occasions. They had so many troops on board to transport to warzones that they had little room for anything else. All non-essential items weren't allowed. Water, men, their seabags, and a few mattresses were carried. In fact, he laughed when he explained that no room could be spared for meal luxuries. During one crossing of the Atlantic, all foodstores were reduced to hard-boiled eggs. Bread and boiled eggs. He ate boiled eggs for every meal for 30 days... just to transport troops to war.



At the height of the war, he was working as a Pharmacist Mate aboard the U.S.S. Hugh Scott. The ship took part in the Allied invasion of French North Africa. As part of Transport Division 3, she sailed on 24 October after amphibious training. She approached the beaches at Fedhala, Morocco, early on the morning of 8 November. The U.S. ships in the area were receiving heavy bombing by the enemy, which delayed the Hugh Scott from unloading her troops. Finally, the Hugh Scott landed her troops, turned back into deeper waters, and cleared the bombs. On 11 November, she entered the refueling area and then anchored in the Fedhala port to unload supplies. A nearby battle between ships had delayed the off-loading of Hugh Scott's cargo. Her departure from the Moroccan coast was also delayed. On the evening of 11 November, U-173, a German attack submarine slipped inside the protective screen and torpedoed a U.S. transport ship, a tanker, and a destroyer. Grandpa aboard the Hugh Scott escaped bombing that night. They remained alert and at battle stations all night. The next afternoon, 12 November, another submarine, U-130, snuck in and torpedoed my grandfather and his ship.

U.S.S. Hugh Scott, hit on the starboard side, burst into flames and tipped sideways. 8 officers and 51 men died in the explosion and the fire. My grandfather and the rest of the crew, jumped into the sea and treaded water for 12 hours as they waited for rescue. No boat wanted to come near... for fear of what was lurking underneath the waters. There was a submarine, somewhere. So my grandfather treaded water and waited.

You wanna know what I've thought about? What do you think my grandfather talked about for 12 hours as he waited for help alongside his shipmates?

Do you think he complained? **No.**

Do you think he griped about how bad his life was?

Did he blame the Navy for his discomfort? **Of course not.**



I can almost assure you... he made those poor sailors laugh. I can guarantee... he spoke about Maine. The Indians. The sawmill. An old Buick. He grandfather. And probably about some waitress in Panama. He very likely talked about a blonde in Singapore or a brunette in Iceland.

But this I know... my grandfather saved lives that day. With **morale**. With **imagination**. With **soul**.

His last tour was on the U.S.S. Memphis. And, this is probably the story about the person I know best. The U.S.S. Memphis was the Admiral's flagship. I did a tour on the flagship for the Seventh Fleet so I must emphasize: the Admiral for which you serve is usually on board. This is his floating office. This is the flagship for the entire regional fleet. So... passageways are pristinely polished each day, linens are pressed, and chow is prepped in an acceptable manner. Nothing is left out of order... because this is, in fact, the Admiral's floating office for the entire fleet.

So, when young Petty Officer Second Class George Aldrich was privately summoned to the Admiral's state room.... My grandfather rushed down. My grandfather walked in, stood at attention, and respectfully greeted the Admiral.

The Admiral called him in, distressed. Sweat poured from the Admiral's brow. Face reddened. Near berserk. The Admiral called Petty Officer Aldrich into the room and pointed down.

"YOU HAVE TO HELP! I CANT TAKE IT. I AM EATEN UP WITH THIS STUFF. I CAN HARDLY WALK!!!"

My grandpa looked down at the Admiral's feet, freed from black Navy shoes and black Navy socks. There, according to my grandpa, was the worse case of athlete's foot he had ever seen in his life. It was eaten up to his ankles, so red and inflamed that a sock would hardly fit. And the fire. The burning. The Admiral was in fits.

"HELP ME! YOU HAVE TO HAVE SOMETHING FOR THIS."

And, of course, my grandfather would add a little **soul** to this medical situation.

"Yes, Sir," he respectfully replied. *"We have plenty of stuff down in sickbay. But that's for mild athletes foot. I'll use some stronger stuff."* My young grandpa quickly ran to the sickbay and returned with a few bottles.

To hear him tell this story... with deep chuckles from old man



recollecting his youthful naiveté.

He poured a tub full of vinegar, chemicals, and mixed a concoction of ointment with a full bottle of Potassium Permanganate. He poured it all into the bucket.

"This will clear it all up within an hour, Sir. I'll be back in an hour to check on you."

Grandpa did remind him, though.... *"Don't soak it longer than an hour. Just an hour."*

Grandpa was on watch in the dispensary so he couldn't abandon his post. He didn't hear back from the Admiral so he assumed everything was fine. About six hours later, grandpa decided he'd check on the Admiral. Just to follow-up.

He peeked in the door and found the Admiral asleep in the chair, exactly as he had left him 6 hours earlier. Leaning back, completely passed out asleep.... With his feet still soaking in the Potassium Permanganate.

For those who might not know, Potassium Permanganate is an oxidizing agent that would, quite possibly, kill a fungus. But it also dissolves in water and creates a lasting purple dye. He ran over to the Admiral, woke him up, and reminded him of his one hour only precaution! *"Sir, I said one hour only!"*

In my grandfather's laughter while telling this story... he became the Admiral's best friend for the rest of that tour for curing the Admiral's atrocious and painful athlete's foot with one dose. From then on, my grandfather found himself receiving special treatment from the Admiral... and always a secretive wave... because my grandfather was the only person alive who knew the Admiral's secret: beneath his black Class A uniform, the Admiral was leading the Atlantic fleet from atop, what looked to be two very purple socks... which were in fact, his feet.



On August 15, 1945, Imperial Japan surrendered to the U.S. and Allied forces... abruptly ending World War II. Victory-Over-Japan day. Or VJ day. The surrender that the world simply knew would never happen considering a very prideful Japanese army. On that day in August, grandpa was working in the dispensary when they made a random announcement over the ship intercom system, the 1MC. My grandfather was part of that tremendous moment... that enormous undertaking of war... and was on that ship serving his country... when the announcement rang out. The war was over. And

he had been part of it. He heard the call declaring VJ day.

The romance of Maine and Indians and rivers and a sawmill now had the honorable accompaniment of war hero.



MAKING HIS OWN ROOTS

In the years that followed the war, my grandfather married a southern belle, served her with dignity, raised children, got an education, got another education, transferred to the Air Force, served for nearly 20 years, then retired active duty. We all know about his next adventure... the family business.

I don't know many details, but the family business afforded that poor boy from Maine a few luxuries he never had. A red Mercedes. Then a red Lexus. Stylish

sunglasses. And, of course, a Members-Only jacket and some Ray Bans. He was always cool.

Nothing was spared the additional spice of my grandfather's romance. Nothing was ordinary. He added **soul** to everything. The romance of everything fine and worth enjoying.

He somehow taught himself Spanish... because it's a romantic language. He taught himself to play guitar. Not acoustic guitar like the famous country stars... but classic guitar with Nylon strings.... Of course. It's classy. It has **soul**. And **romance**.

Even the most boring food on the planet.... The pancake. Water, flour, egg. How did George Aldrich manage to add romance to a pancake? A little olive oil at medium heat, and lightly pan fry. Because that adds **soul** to the morning.

How did he like his coffee? From a percolator. Every morning. Because that's classy.



In 1989, I was mowing my grandpa's grass when he pulled into the driveway. He handed me a car magazine and told me that a new car company was coming out to compete with Mercedes. He told me all about it. The new car company was called Infi-NI-ti.

"Infiniti?" I asked. "What is that?"

"No, I don't think it's Infiniti. It's Infi-NI-ti."



So I read everything I could about the Infi-NI-ti... and I couldn't wait to see one on the road.

When he had a daughter later in life, he didn't name her Natalie. He reminded us.

"NA-tali. It's prettier. NA-tali. It has a little Italian ring to it," he'd say.

When something was good, he didn't say it was good.

"That's bueno!"



He taught himself how to rebuild cars. So, on a whim, he bought a fixer upper. Did he buy an old Impala or some Thunderbird? Of course not. That's not romantic. He bought a 1969 Lamborghini Islero. And he disassembled it bolt by bolt. Piston by piston. Labeling each and every screw into its own bag. Then, he cleaned and polished each component. Then rebuilt it.

Was there anything he didn't do?

It was for this reason, while I was in middle school, I immediately thought of grandpa when the teacher offered extra credit if we knew a doctor in our family who would be a guest speaker in class. I knew Grandpa did medical stuff in the Air Force and he wore a white medical coat every day of his life. He also had some sort of diploma or plaque in his office. I had even seen him with a stethoscope.



"Is grandpa a doctor?" I asked myself. "Probably," I answered myself without hesitation. He was probably a doctor at one point or another.

The entire family got a big laugh when they found out that I had asked "Dr Aldrich" to speak to my class.

"Doctor?!!!" they all belted out in laughter! *"He's DOCTOR QUACK!!!! Get him to tell you the Athlete's Foot story!"*

He wasn't a doctor. But he wore a white medical coat because it was **classy**. And, it probably had a pocket for his Ray Bans.



What a ride. Ultimately, my grandfather had money. Lost money. Was swindled. Stolen from. Looted. Robbed. Ripped off. Sued. Sued again. Probably finding himself a closer to the original poverty than he wanted. But he couldn't possibly have cared less.

I saw first hand him pick up a homeless man who needed a ride. I saw him take a man holding a sign on the road and offer him a job. Then, the next day, buy him clothes, food, and some cash to get a small apartment. The next month, my grandfather helped him get a small used car to get to work. A used Toyota. Then, just as sure, I saw this man brazenly steal thousands and thousands of dollars from my grandfather... practically daring him to fire him. And just as sick as you could expect... I saw that man sue my grandfather for racial discrimination.



How do you recover from that? How do you learn to trust again? Do you know how George Aldrich handled it?



He made pancakes lightly grilled in olive oil, and let the aroma of Walgreen wine sit on his lips so he could compliment the aroma. Then, just as sure... my grandfather probably rolled down his window at the stoplight that next week... and offered another man another job... and food... and clothes.

He worried about nothing.
Life was too beautiful for worry.
Life was too short for stress.
Life was too rich for poverty.

TEMPERANCE

In all my life, I never heard him raise his voice. I never saw him angry. In all my life, I never... never once... saw my grandmother fill up her gas tank or wash her car. My grandfather filled up her tank and washed her car every Sunday. Because there's class in that. It's what a gentleman does.

He wore a Lexus shirt because it was romantic. It had *soul*. Throughout his entire life, my grandfather carried a cell phone, a pistol, and a comb. Because he was cool. Because that's what a gentleman carries. Especially a gentleman who came from a place with Indians, sacred burial grounds, and a sawmill between two rivers.



Even in his last years... using a walker with a storage bin... he carried a cell phone, a pistol, and a comb.

In fact, I've shared this story before but about 10 years ago, an old friend of mine from high school was getting his oil changed. He was sitting in the waiting room, alone, except for an older man sitting across from him, who was looking up at the TV on the wall. Just like my friend, the older man was sitting in the waiting room waiting for his oil change.

My friend couldn't believe the behavior of this old man. He didn't have a care in the world. The older man sat in the chair, legs cross, holding a wallet in one hand, stuffed with papers and notes... and, in the other hand, a 9mm Glock handgun in a black holster. My friend secretly took out his cell phone and quietly snapped a picture of this modern-day rebel. He sent a group text to all of us with the picture of the old man. My friend added the comment,

"This old guy doesn't give a shit about nothing! Just hanging out with his gun at Jiffy Lube!"

Without hesitation, another friend of mine received the picture and replied.

"Um... I think that's Jarrett's grandpa."



It was. And I still love that picture... my grandpa sitting in Jiffy Lube, wearing a white tank top with a 9mm Glock in his lap, watching Foxnews on the wall-mounted TV.

I knew why he was holding that gun... poor guy probably had a gun stolen from him during an oil change years earlier and he learned his lesson.

There are people here that have known George Aldrich for much longer than I have... who know much more than I do. But, for the small part of life we shared... especially in all the hours of doctor visits and appointments and emergency rooms and waiting rooms and all the hours in traffic.... My grandfather and I became buds.

Know this: there was NOTHING more hypnotic... more intoxicating... than the sound of a peaceful human who didn't have an ounce of hate or rage or frustration or anxiety within.

A lesson from my grandfather:

WE choose the taste of life

WE choose the romance... the soul... the imagination... the spice.

Even when life hands us 30 days of boiled eggs or a \$6 bottle of red wine. Even those things have flavor.

A truly romantic life.

"Not bad!"

The Romans would've loved him.

