

Martha LeBaron Antos: Fearless, Persistent And ‘Mighty Lively’

Extraordinary Life

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Each Sunday, “Extraordinary Life” looks back on someone who died in the past month whose life made a difference.

Most people these days know how to take some money and turn it into nothing. Martha LeBaron Antos, on the other hand, perfected the art of taking no money and turning it into something.

Doing so was something of a necessity for Martha, who died in July at the age of 91. For many years she was a single mother of three small children, living on Route 6 in Columbia, working at a bank job that didn't pay much and provided no health benefits. There were trying times, like the day Martha came home from work to find her son, Rob, had the mumps. Her daughter, Bette, had two bloody, black and blue knees from a fall. And her son, Chris, while sledding that day, realized he was about to hit a patch of ice with cracks in it. So he grabbed hard onto a nearby wire. Barbed wire.

“She just rolled her eyes and dealt with it,” says Chris LeBaron, who now lives in Vermont.

Martha, who later moved her family to Andover Lake and then to Granby, was good at dealing with emergencies and problems. You might say the men in her life were sometimes a source of those problems. But she was never one to let difficulties overtake her. She would always rise to the challenge. There was the time, for example, when she visited a relative's farm in the Gilead section of Hebron and decided to ride Belle, a horse no one else dared to ride. Chris remembers seeing his mother cantering around the field. Then, to his horror and delight, he saw his 40-something mother stand up on the horse's back while it was moving.

His mother trusted horses, and animals in general. She could hitch a horse up to a logging sled to haul logs and farming products. She raised Dobermans for a while. While a very young child, she tended several hundred baby chicks on the family farm. She learned early not to help the ones struggling to be born. “Those I helped died anyway,” she told her son Chris. “I left them alone after I figured that out. They developed the strength they needed for life from the struggle to be born. I guess having it easy isn't all it's cracked up to be.”

The LeBaron kids didn't have it all that easy growing up. They knew they weren't as well off as some of their neighbors. But they were always well fed. Martha could put good food on the table with next to no money, a skill she learned from her mother, Catherine Shannon, whose family fled Ireland's potato famine. There were Irish stews and hearty soups with homemade whole-wheat bread. Martha knew how to prepare milkweed shoots, cowslips, dandelions, snared rabbit and woodchuck, even. Not that woodchuck was a staple, but her children knew she was fully capable of killing one, skinning it and preparing it. One night, they walked in to find a critter on the table, fully cooked in the pan, with its tiny arms tidily crossed. She told them, with a big smile, that it was woodchuck. But it wasn't really. It was raccoon.

Martha could be prickly at times. She wasn't the kind of mom who was always pulling her kids up to her lap to cuddle. She was the kind of mom who kept a garden her children will never forget, working the earth when she got home from her job to grow the food that would keep them healthy. Vegetables. Berry bushes.

Peach trees. Apples trees. You couldn't make it from the road to the door without eating two or three peaches. They just grabbed at you, Chris says.

When she died, she left her children many wonderful memories. Mom the wood lot estimator. Mom playing a song on the violin that made them weep as they sat around a campfire. Mom the artist who left them hundreds of paintings. Mom hiking. Mom skiing. Mom spending all day Saturday sewing their tattered clothes. Mom making a quilt. Mom, when she was in her 60s, showing Chris how to hitch up a team of horses to a sled so he could haul some logs from the woods to the site where he was building a house. Then, Mom sitting down at a shaving horse with a drawknife and making more than 400 pegs to hold the hand-hewn beams together.

When her kids were going through her things after her death, they found an old sheet, neatly folded and tied like a package. "Needs a new middle," said the note on the top of it.

Chris, who is writing a book about his grandmother, mother and sister, says Martha was a great believer in persistence, frugality and compound interest. Chris remembers going for a walk with her one day about 10 years ago. She stopped halfway and picked up a crushed Budweiser can. Chris, exasperated, asked, "Can't we go for a walk without you picking up garbage?" She shook the can in his face. "That's the interest on a dollar for a year," she said, putting the can in a small plastic bag she was carrying.

She's right, he thought, and they kept walking.