



THE GREATEST LIVING MURDOCH

Jay Craven

Shortly before the recent presidential election, candidate Barack Obama traveled to Hawaii to pay a farewell visit to his ailing grandmother. I found the moment affecting, mostly because it reminded me of my own grandmother who helped raise me and ignited my love of movies. My “Geema” took me to see westerns, James Bond movies, and Tennessee Williams pictures as a kid. I’ve written about her before—how she sneaked me into the San Francisco Giants locker room by bluffing her way past security guards. Once inside, she led me straight to the showers and seized upon the hapless Giants star outfielder, Willie McCovey, only to discover that the dripping ballplayer wasn’t Willie Mays. Undaunted, Geema plunged forward, catching sight of Mays getting dressed by his locker. Mays graciously obliged us with his autograph.



I’ve also been thinking lately of my grandfather, who helped care for me until he died at the age of 61, shortly before I turned nine. I never saw my own father after he left, when I was six. In my father’s absence, my grandfather “Phil” carried the ball. If I developed a love of movies from my grandmother, I came to appreciate poetry and the idea of social entrepreneurship from my grandfather. He especially loved poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Phil was also the one who spurred me to sell Cub Scout jamboree tickets door-to-door as an eight year old, and drove me straight to the front gate of Philadelphia gazillionaire Jay Cooke. Scared as I walked to the tycoon’s door, I came away with a tip, a crisp five-dollar bill. My grandfather beamed like a Cheshire cat, pleased that he’d done his duty by sharpening my instincts for commerce. Or maybe he knew he was cultivating a non-profit fundraiser. I wonder.

In summer, Phil would often invite me to sleep in one of the high beds on his screened-in porch. He’d sleep in the adjacent bed and we’d talk until I fell asleep, nestled in tight under thick Canadian blankets. Knowing how much I loved it, he’d keep us sleeping outdoors into September.

To me, Phil embodied the spirit of Christmas because he always came up with the best presents. My favorites included a Davy Crockett get-up, including coon skin cap, a “Catalina racer” I could hand pump around our driveway, a Lionel train set, and a toy soda fountain with miniature root beer glasses.

Phil was Santa—reveling in the delight that he would kindle in my younger brother and me. And we still remember his two trademark holiday sayings, repeated each Christmas night as we passed presents from around the tree. First he’d (jokingly) needle us, “Is there nothing under this tree for me?” Then he’d revel in anticipation as he eyed a lone present that he’d always guess as something huge. When he eventually unwrapped a pair of pajamas or slippers, he’d remark with feigned astonishment, “Lookie, lookie, I’d be ashamed how did you know?”



My grandfather sent big boxes of apples and figs to a hundred people on his gift list each Christmas. Phil loved his friends. In summer, he'd grow thousands of gladiolas in his beloved garden, just so he could cut and deliver them to his large social circle. He jokingly called these friends, "The Loyal Brotherhood of Murdoch."

Phil's Loyal Brotherhood started after he surprised his three daughters by bringing home Murdoch, a pet burro, on the commuter train from Washington. I've seen old sepia pictures of Murdoch, looking perplexed. But I guess he fit in well enough to inspire my grandfather's fake organization.

Phil printed membership cards, promising non-existent rights – and he made up names. His banker was "Financial Murdoch." His 300-pound drinking buddy was "Man Mountain Murdoch" and my mother, his youngest daughter, was "Pipsqueak Murdoch." My grandmother had two names: "Fascinating Murdoch" and "Extra Fancy Murdoch."

My grandfather worked in the Roosevelt Administration at the time, in charge of the procurement and shipment of food overseas to American forces fighting in World War II. So, some of his Murdoch friends worked in government and during the rise of 1950's McCarthy witch hunts, government agents apparently caught wind of my grandfather's whimsical fraternity. They also discovered that my grandmother had been given a Russian fur coat by Soviet diplomats who lived in their neighborhood.

Their curiosity piqued, FBI agents began visiting members of Phil's Brotherhood of Murdoch, asking questions. Then an agent tracked down my grandfather at his Philadelphia office, where he managed the city's port authority. After a thorough interrogation about his war-time friends and acquaintances, the FBI agent departed—and nothing ever came of it. But after the G-Man took his hat and coat and walked out the door, my grandfather turned to his secretary. "Patty Cake," he said. "Let's send that man a letter and a membership card. Let's call him "Investigating Murdoch." And they did.

My grandfather also had a name for himself—"The Greatest Living Murdoch." And just weeks before he died, knowing that his health was fading, Phil called me into his bedroom. It was July and he apologized that we hadn't been able to sleep out on the screened porch that summer. I said it was OK and that I knew he wasn't feeling well. Then he took out a membership card and filled in my name. "You'll need this," he said. Then he signed the card with his name, "The Greatest Living Murdoch." My name? "The Greatest Living Murdoch in Existence."