Mildred Pickett: in Memoriam
(comments from Warren)

Much will surely have been said about mother’s dedication to her God and her church. That is so true, and probably I have little to add to what has been said. Mother was also dedicated to her children and her husband, in some order. While I don’t want to focus on “me” in this memoir, I do need to mention a feeling I had in my formative years, possible around 8th grade or so, not so much about mother as about the clan.

The Pickett family was just a Kansas farm family, a noteworthy difference being that there were always an unreasonably large number of children around. [An aside: I had read Cheaper by the Dozen, and was discomfited when the 12th Pickett kid did not appear.] But what I saw about my brothers and sisters from my 8th grader’s viewpoint was awesome: my sisters were, in order, a registered nurse, graduating from college, a certified hairdresser; my brothers were (when not firing amateur rockets powered by a sulfur-sugar mixture into the next county) excelling in college; my just older sister was a savvy teenager who seemed to know all the music on the radio before I would get to hear it; my younger siblings were poised to extend the Pickett tradition that I was hearing about. I felt for some time that we were superkids -- supermen and superwomen in the making, so to speak. In our little backwater “the kids were alright!” as well as the parents. But -- as the years and the decades passed, it turned out that we all encountered challenges and faced up to setbacks as practically everyone must do. It’s called “real life,” which was something of an awakening for me and my simple world view, and definitely several heartaches for mother.

Recall, this memoir is about mother. Her children were her life, as memorialized in her Mother of the Year Award. Even in the earlier days, it became clear bit by byte that none of us were without “issues” and we did suffer setbacks, indulge in misbehavior, and fall somewhat short of the perfect children she knew we all could be, and should try to be. Perfection, apparently, is not so simple to attain. Nonetheless, mother was always supportive, even when the case for support was marginal. She may have missed her calling as a defense attorney. And when the news was positive – her child stood out in some way – she would air the news at any opportunity. Her other calling – the PR honcho.

In other times, her support was not the type that required judgment or defense; it simply was. An annual occurrence that has come to my mind repeatedly is that period in late August, when mother would take us to get the two new pairs of jeans, three new shirts, and prepare to send us off to the new school year in high fashion (Kansas fashion, in those days, before Prada.) I was so happy, and thrilled to be returning to school. And we would get new pencils, scissors, and crayons. I vividly remember proceeding from the 8 crayon box, to the 16, to the 32, to the wastefully extravagant 64 crayon extravaganza. Picasso would never have needed more than 16, but more than once I got a new 64 crayon box. Alas: artistry was not to result, in
my case. I was good – too good I think – at coloring within the lines. Without lines, I would be better spending my time manipulating x's and y's. Typically there would be 5 or 6 of us to outfit in late August for the new academic year. I recall, or perhaps imagine in my mind, that in the lean years our father was wondering just how the expenses could be spread out over the following several months. But mother’s job was to outfit the kids for school, and it happened without fail. This is one concrete example of faith: faith in her husband, faith in her children, faith that dedication and hard work would be rewarded, that preparation would pay off.

From an early age I was in awe of my older sisters and brothers. I recall what must have been during the year I was 5 years old, after my afternoon nap (bore-ring!) I would walk to the end of the lane and sit in the ditch beside the culvert and wait for the bus to arrive with my sisters and brothers, when real, exciting life would resume after a very boring afternoon. Real, exciting life was what happened when a lot of the family members were together. We learned a lot in the milkbarn: states and capitals, magical algebra riddles, so much more. Single children have for a long time had my deepest sympathies, in spite of their having undiluted parental attention. I have often been asked what it’s like to grow up in such a large family. I have no concept of having to do otherwise; it was nothing unusual to us. Well, that’s not quite true – we were frequently reminded that we had a uniquely large family.

Mother was almost always around at home. But occasionally she would not be, and this could lead to memorable experiences. Once I recall that Letha was in charge. [Such was the age span of children in the family that I do not recall Verla and Nelda at home.] Letha was in charge, and as a teenager she already understood how to wield power. I refused to eat my peas at lunch. Being ten years younger than her, I was probably 6 years old. I was very definitely too old for a high chair, but Letha put me in the high chair and would not let me out until I ate a HUGE bowl of disgusting peas. I don’t recall the details of the contest of wills (hers and mine). Somehow I did finally get out of the high chair. And ever since, I have liked peas! This is the kind of data that drives psychologists nuts. But big sisters are savvy applied psychologists.

Letha was not the only formative force amongst my older siblings. I recall a couple of times that rather strenuous fights between Lester and Laris erupted when no one besides us youngsters were around. It was frightening: Jesse Ventura against Godzilla – they were big guys! But the fights ended without significant physical consequence, and apparently to no hard feelings the following day. Ruth: she was neither frightening nor manipulative; more like a friend with several mutual interests, though she was about six years older than me in most ways. About my younger siblings: I recall many interactions with them, but I don’t recall times when I was left in charge. They will have to be asked about those times that I terrorized them.

Mother left other legacies. We kids often had birthday parties with 8-10 friends over. Mine, being in summer, were weenie roasts with my choice of cake and usually homemade ice cream, a favorite of all of us. And just think of the normal daily meals:
mother's cooking was prodigious. Breakfests for parents and 6 (typically) children worked on rota from 6am to 8am, and amounted to a smorgasboard. Who has forgotten the brown sugar syrup for our pancakes or French toast, a unique mother's speciality! Fried chicken (sometimes chickens were alive one hour before); pot roast; blonde brownies; date pinwheels; we all must have had our several favorites.

Mother's later years were still dedicated to family, though the emphasis changed. For a few decades much of her time was dedicated to distributing family news around the many members. There was no Pickett family listserv then; there were other means -- handwritten letters or somewhat more often typed letters with a few carbon copies. Have our eyes suffered trying to read those carbons, or the tiny handwriting? It's mostly normal aging, I imagine.

Mother lived to be 99.95 years of age. For some 96 of those years, she lived in her own home with the front door unlocked. Initially to allow the children to come and go freely, of course extended to her siblings, nieces, and nephews, not to forget local friends. Later the door was open to grandchildren, then great grandchildren, but also local friends. Perhaps the unlocked doors were more a matter of the place and the times than her personage. Whatever it was, that's in the past for all of us. The earth is more crowded and more complicated now – or so it seems to us “mature” Pickett kids.

Mother had, all things considered, a very healthy life and lucid awareness until near the end. She leaves as her legacy a large, complex, but still devoted family – family devoted to family. And to our father’s credit, he left his own legacy (not fully delineated yet) and an estate that served its purpose well: to take care of mother till the end. And he might not have been thinking in terms of 99.95 years. Life is complicated, and there can be and are any number of viewpoints on the many aspects of existence. But we all have similar challenges (and have been dealing with them for years): to live the good life while we help family and friends, and to leave our mark in the best way we can manage. Mother would be supportive of the thoughtful decisions that her family members would and will make.