

My Mother's First Photo Album by Ginger Wolnik

<https://wolnik.us/Loretta1950sAlbum/>

PART 1 – Loretta Cook

A recently rediscovered photo album has led me to new discoveries about my mother Loretta when she was single. I thought I knew everything about her, but my first-hand knowledge started several years after I was born. The only stories she told me were what she wanted me to hear. A life of a parent is like a puzzle where we will never have all the pieces, but if we find enough pieces, a picture may emerge, as I found in my case.

I've learned that my mother told different parts of her life story to me and to my siblings and other relatives. Or maybe everyone found different stories more interesting and therefore only remembered certain ones. Everyone subconsciously filters stories, so even recollections of the same event may differ, especially in the details. However, photographs don't lie and dates written on photos can usually be trusted. Sharing scans of old photos with relatives has allowed me to add a few new puzzle pieces of my mother's life.

I don't remember exactly how I came to possess this old, frayed album of black and white prints, held onto thick black pages with little corner tabs. I think I brought it home from my mother's funeral, or maybe it was my father's funeral. He died 10 months after her and my brother wanted to dispose of their possessions that he didn't want to keep. I was working at the time and too busy to go through everything in detail. I put the boxes of photo albums and documents away after a cursory review. Occasionally, I would glance through one or more while looking for particular photos, so I was always aware they were there.

Recently, my cousin invited me to visit her in Chicago and that made me recall there was an old album with photos of her as an infant, so I thought I'd give her that album. When I pulled it out, I realized it was too fragile to take on a plane trip. Flipping through it, I discovered more old photos that I could not recall seeing before. So, I gently pulled out the photos that I thought she would like to see and scanned them, then returned the originals back in their corner tabs, careful not to touch the surface of the glossy prints. I used a flat-bed scanner attached to my computer and scanned them at the highest resolution. When I viewed the digitized photos on my large computer monitor, I was amazed at the details; they were easier to view than the little prints! I ended up scanning about 80 photos and put them on a thumb drive for my cousin to keep. She was overwhelmed and cried when she saw them. Like me, she could not recall seeing them before. She was able to identify some of the people at family parties and I took notes.

When I returned home, my next project was to scan more of the photos from that album. I ended up saving 180 high resolution scans on my computer. I also edited them for uploading onto my personal website and created index webpages by event and by person. I was able to share links to those pages with all my relatives, who could then view by a party, wedding or by a person's name. Everyone was amazed and I received many new pieces of information about my mother and her life before me!

So here is what I figured out: my mother apparently bought a 35mm camera in 1950, when she was single and working. She began this album with her first photos, which date from 1950-1956. Most of the early photos were of family members taken at the frequent family parties. However, there were also photos from a train trip to Toronto Canada that she took with her mother, my grandma Marie Cook. Neither I nor any of my living relatives could recall hearing about that trip, but I have the proof with dated photos of the two of them and all the sightseeing they did!

My mother told me that her first car was an Oldsmobile convertible and I recall that she spoke fondly of it. From the photos in the album, I see she bought it used in 1951 because that is when the driving trips started. Checking images on the internet, I was able to figure out that her car was a 1949 Oldsmobile 88 Convertible Coupe. The color was probably Nankeen Cream, similar to light yellow, which was the lightest color they came in that year. She started driving it a lot, taking her mother and other relatives on day trips and longer vacations. There was also a photo of a guy I presume was her boyfriend driving her car.

One ambitious excursion was a trip with her mother to Colorado to visit "Uncle Louis" as the caption showed. I never heard of this trip, but identified that relative from my genealogy research. There was a photo of my mother in Nebraska posed on a statue of a bucking bull taken on the drive there. They made a stop at Mt. Rushmore in South Dakota on the way back. Best of all, there were photos of her uncle's house and family, as well as tourist stops in Colorado like Red Rocks and Garden of the Gods. I shared the webpage of those photos with several of my second cousins in Colorado that I had discovered through DNA research, they were all descended from my mom's Uncle Louis. As a result of that connection, they are planning a family party for me to attend when I visit Denver next year!

PART 2 – Loretta Wolnik

Like many children, when I was young, I asked my parents how they met. They both gave me a similar story of how they met at a dance. They also said they had not dated for long; they were married less than a year later. Since it was over a year after their wedding before I was born, it was not a shotgun wedding, so I always assumed it must have been love at first sight. Analyzing the timeline of the photo album has raised questions, though.

The first photo of my father in the album was at their wedding in August of 1953. Just 8 months before, at a party in December 1952, there was a photo of my mother hanging all over some guy. If they broke up, was my father her rebound relationship?

When I shared this question with one of my younger sisters, she told me some things I never knew about our mother. Apparently, my mother Loretta had dated a man with the last name of York for quite a while. However, she only wanted to marry someone with a college degree, a good job, and who was also an only child so that her family would be the sole heirs. My mother grew up very poor in a large family, but her older sister Lil had married an only child and they became financially well off, so that was Loretta's strategy. At that first meeting at the dance, she grilled him about his background and after learning he was an electrical engineer with no siblings, she pursued him.

I had always believed that my mother's only goal was finding a Polish American who was a devout Catholic. Now I know that was just my father's criteria and my mother led him on to think that was important to her too! It is now clear why they never seemed to get along. Theirs was a marriage of convenience; they did not really know each other well before marriage and as a result, they bickered for as long as I remember. They never got divorced because they thought it was a sin, but my mother clearly did not respect my father and he once told me that she was his cross to bear in order to get into heaven.

After the wedding photos, there were a lot of honeymoon pictures. When I was young, my mother often talked fondly of the train trip they took from Chicago to California. She shared how exotic Chinatown was in San Francisco, and how exciting Hollywood was in Southern California! It was amazing to see those stories come to life in her photos, which I had no recollection of seeing before. There was also a ferry ride under the Bay Bridge, a tour bus ride over the Golden Gate Bridge to Muir Woods, the beach in Santa Barbara, CBS's Television City, and a stop at the Grand Canyon on the way back.

Shortly after returning home to Chicago, there were pictures of other weddings in the album. My oldest cousin Pauly was married just a month later, then there were photos of another wedding and reception of friends. My mother was meticulous in writing the dates on most of the photos, and sometimes the places, but rarely included names. So, I have no idea who the people are in that other wedding. That was the end of a busy 1953!

There was exactly one photo from 1954; it shows my parents sitting together when my mother would have been 4 1/2 months pregnant with me, her first child. Then there was just one photo from 1955, my parents are posing with me at age 3 1/3 months. I believe the lack of camera activity was due to turmoil in their new relationship. My father, being an only child, was living with his parents after college and that is where he and my mother lived after their honeymoon. My father's parents were immigrants from Poland and did not speak English well. Even though my mother's grandparents were all from Poland, she never learned the language, so she was frustrated living with her in-laws. Also, they apparently figured out that she did not have my father's best interests at heart. My father once told me they never liked her and tried to convince him not to marry her.

After less than a year being married, my father lost his job while she was expecting me. That must have made my mother even more angry and frustrated. My father was resourceful and started a television repair business. He rented a commercial building with an apartment upstairs and they were living there by the time I was born. I recently verified that their address on my birth certificate matches the address of that building, which I found online in the Chicago phone book for 1955!

The photos started again in 1956. In June, there was a large family party with lots of pictures of most of my relatives from that time. There were a couple of lakeside beach outings, one with friends on a boat, another with relatives - and baby me! The TV repair business must have done well, because my mother documented the construction of their own commercial building in Des Plaines, a suburb of Chicago. My earliest memories are from the flat we lived in above the TV shop in that building. My maternal grandmother, Marie Cook, lived in another small apartment on the ground floor behind the shop. I was amazed to see the photos of how this building was built!

The last page of the album showed my father's first TV repair shop in Chicago just before my family moved to the new building in Des Plaines. Coincidentally, I had been trying to find the name of that first business, but searching online archives of the Chicago Yellow Pages did not show any TV related businesses at that address. However, the newly discovered photos were clear; the name was "Wolnik TV." My father did not use that name for the new shop, previous research showed it was called Cumberland TV, named after a local road. But the very last photo in my mother's album shows me at age 2 in front of my father's first TV business!

Shortly after they moved to the new building in early 1957, my sister Michele was born. My mother was probably too busy with two small children to take many photos, but if she did, they would be in another album that I have yet to discover. Since this album covers my pre-history, I am happy it is the one I found!