

Presidential In-Laws

In-laws have a bad stigma in our country, to say the least. From sayings like, “You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your relatives” or “When you marry your spouse, you’re marrying her whole family” to classic TV shows which depict the dreaded mother-in-law as a horrible threat or consequence for a character’s bad behavior (The Honeymooner’s, Bewitched, The Flintstones, to name just a few), in-laws definitely have a bad rap. Scenes from these shows flooded my brain recently when I read the following article on cnn.com – seems even the leaders of the free world have had problematic situations with their mothers-in-law. The reason the article was published is because apparently Barrack Obama’s mother-in-law, wife Michelle’s mother Marian Robinson, might move with the new first family to Washington. So will Mr. Obama’s situation be comparative to poor Harry Truman, whose mother-in-law refused to call him anything but Mr. Truman? Or will it be more like Dwight Eisenhower, who got along famously with his mother-in-law – in a good way? In recognition of Inauguration Day, read the following article for some interesting historical lessons about the complex familial relationships formed as a result of the union of two people:

From cnn.com, by David Holzel

(Mental Floss) – President-Elect Obama’s mother-in-law will be moving to Washington with the first family, at least temporarily, his transition team has confirmed. Marian Robinson will be the latest in a line of presidential in-laws who, for good or ill, lived under the same roof as the president.

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Here are four stories that confirm the old truism: While America can choose its president, the president can't choose his in-laws.

1. Ulysses S. Grant and 'The Colonel'

You would think that the Civil War was settled at Appomattox, and no question of its outcome would have been raised in the White House of Ulysses S. Grant, who, after all, was the general who won the war.

But you would be wrong, because living with Ulysses and Julia Grant was the president's father-in-law. Colonel Frederick Dent (his rank seems to have been self-selected) was an unreconstructed Confederate, a St. Louis businessman and slaveholder who, when his daughter Julia went to the Executive Mansion early in 1869, decided to relocate there as well.

The Colonel didn't hesitate to make himself at home. When his daughter received guests, he sat in a chair just behind her, offering anyone within earshot unsolicited advice. Political and business figures alike got a dose of the Colonel's mind as they waited to meet with President Grant.

When the president's father, Jesse Grant, came from Kentucky on one of his regular visits to Washington, the White House turned into a Civil War reenactment. According to "First Families: The Impact of the White House on Their Lives", by Bonnie Angelo, Jesse Grant preferred to stay in a hotel rather than sleep under the same roof as the Colonel.

And when the two old partisans found themselves unavoidably sitting around the same table in the White House, they avoided direct negotiations by using Julia and her young son, named for the president's father, as intermediaries, Betty Boyd Caroli writes in "First Ladies": "In the presence of the elder Grant, Frederick Dent would instruct Julia to 'take better care of that old gentleman [Jesse Grant]. He is feeble and deaf as a post and yet you permit him to wander all over

Washington alone.' And Grant replied [to his grandson and namesake], 'Did you hear him? I hope I shall not live to become as old and infirm as your Grandfather Dent.'"

The Colonel remained in the White House – irascible and unrepentant – until his death, at age 88, in 1873.

2. Harry S Truman and the Mother-in-Law from Heck

Harry Truman and Bess Wallace met as children. He was a farm boy; she was the well-heeled granddaughter of Independence, Missouri's Flour King. When they married in 1919, Truman was a struggling haberdasher, and Bess's mother, Madge Wallace, thought Bess had made a colossal social faux pas. Until she died in 1952, Madge Wallace never changed her mind about Harry Truman. Her Bess had married way below her station.

Madge had plenty of opportunities to let her son-in-law know it. The newlyweds moved into the Wallace mansion in Independence, and the three lived together under the same roof until the end of Madge's life.

When Harry Truman was elected senator, "Mother Wallace," as Truman judiciously called her, moved with her daughter and son-in-law to Washington. In the family's apartment, she shared a bedroom with the Trumans' daughter, Margaret. And when Truman became president, she moved with them into the White House, where she cast her cold eye on the new commander-in-chief.

"Why would Harry run against that nice Mr. Dewey?" she wondered aloud, as Truman was fighting for his political life in the 1948 presidential race, according to "First Mothers" by Bonnie Angelo. And when Truman fired Gen. Douglas MacArthur for insubordination, Mother Wallace was scandalized. "Imagine a captain from the National Guard [Truman] telling off a West Point general!"

In December 1952, shortly before Truman's term ended, Madge

Wallace died, at age 90. For the 33 years they lived together, she never called her son-in-law anything but "Mr. Truman" to his face.

3. Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Mother-in-Law of the Year

If Truman's story sounds like the set-up for a film noir, his successor's relationship with his mother-in-law might have been a Technicolor musical.

Elivera Mathilda Carlson Doud, Mamie Eisenhower's mother, was "a witty woman with a tart tongue," Time magazine wrote, and Dwight Eisenhower thought she was a hoot. "She refuted every mother-in-law joke ever made," Time wrote. There was no question that she would join her daughter and son-in-law in the White House.

Ike called her "Min," the name of a character in the Andy Gump comic strip. Ike and Min "constituted a mutual admiration society, and each took the other's part whenever a family disagreement would arise," said Eisenhower's son, John. The New York Times observed, "The president frequently looks around him sharply, and inquires, 'Where's Min?'"

Widowed shortly before Eisenhower became president, Min spent the winters in the White House and summers at her home in Denver. It was while visiting his mother-in-law's home that Eisenhower suffered a heart attack in 1955. Two years later, in failing health, Min returned permanently to Denver. She died in 1960, at age 82.

4. Benjamin Harrison and the Reverend Doctor

Benjamin Harrison's father-in-law, John Witherspoon Scott, bore a double title: "reverend doctor."

Scott was born in Pennsylvania in 1800, did post-graduate work at Yale and took a professorship in mathematics and science at Miami University, in Ohio. He was also a Presbyterian minister

and an outspoken abolitionist. The reverend doctor was rumored to have shielded runaway slaves in his home as a stop on the Underground Railroad. Whatever the truth, Miami University dismissed him for his anti-slavery beliefs.

He accepted a post at Farmer's College, a prep school in Cincinnati, where he became a mentor of a student named Benjamin Harrison. During his visits to the Scott home, Harrison became friendly with the reverend doctor's daughter, Caroline.

Young Harrison spent so many evenings at the Scotts' home that he got the nickname "the pious moonlight dude," according to "The Complete Book of the Presidents" by William A. DeGregorio. He and Caroline were married in 1853 at the bride's house. The reverend doctor officiated.

John Witherspoon Scott later became a clerk in the pension office of the interior department. He gave up the position when Harrison was elected president in 1888. A widower since 1876, Scott moved into the White House with his daughter and their family.

It was the president's custom to lead the family in a half-hour of Bible reading and prayer after breakfast, Anne Chieko Moore and Hester Anne Hale wrote in "Benjamin Harrison: Centennial President." When the president was absent, his father-in-law took his place.

Caroline Harrison died in October 1892, two weeks before her husband lost the presidential election. Her father died the next month, at age 92. An obituary described John Witherspoon Scott as "a man of wonderful physical vigor, tall, broad chested and well preserved mentally."

Let the water flow...up

As in up out of the sump pump pit when the sump pump fails... You may have heard of, or even experienced the weather happening around here while Ike was pounding the Gulf coast. Rain. Lots of it. It wasn't as bad as the storm system that hovered over us for days last year [EDIT: According to this morning's paper it actually was worse], but then last year we had a working sump pump. Apparently our sump pump got its intake clogged causing it to run dry and burn out. I learned this the other morning when I went downstairs to use the bathroom so as not to disturb the other occupant here. I tend to not turn on the light at the bottom of the stairs because I know my way around. Normally not a problem, but this day I put my foot down the final stair to a splash. Yuck. Four inches of water. Not so bad, but then think about where the water came from and what goes through that pit...

Bottom line, we needed a new sump pump. So did hundreds of others around here. After learning that Lowes, Home Depot, Sears, etc. were out, I found that Menards apparently stocks hundreds of the things as when I got there they had dozens left on the shelf and the cashier told me they sold well over a hundred that day. In the meantime, we do have a backup pump and my brother and I set it up. Unfortunately a hose was securely attached so its status as a backup remained firm. We had to run the hose up the stairs, buying and attaching another length to make it possible to run it out the door. Once set up, it took a few hours to drain the basement while the rain poured mercilessly down. Later that night, after church, I was able to secure that new pump along with the attachments my brother said we needed. We would have had it hooked up tonight, but the PVC cement takes several hours to cure so we will have to finish tomorrow. Good thing the weather report shows that we are pretty much finished with the rain for now. After that, let the cleanup and damage

assessment begin. Both of our dehumidifiers were caught in the indoor lake, but one of them still works. Hopefully once the other dries out it can be put into active duty as well.

Other casualties from the rain included a hot water heater that I only was able to restart a few hours ago and a closed road today next to a retention pond- pretty full when we passed it yesterday, and that was before another nearly 30 hours of rain. Another casualty was my lower back. It started hurting pretty bad yesterday to the point where I could only stand for a limited period of time and when sitting I had to make sure my back was supported. At one point I sat down and could not get back up it hurt so bad. It is a little better today and I am using a heating pad on it as I type. I did learn that Aleve does **not** ease back pain.

I am not looking forward to the rest of the week. So far I have $2\frac{1}{2}$ days assigned (my first elementary jobs of the year- up to now it has been middle school only) and a large cleanup job in the basement. By the way, the ELL assignment went without hitches. My boycott of ELL assignments in that school is over for now.