

## CHAPTER 37

### OUR WORLD WAR II LOW-BUDGET MARRIAGE AND HONEYMOON

When I see today's lavish weddings while surfing the television, I have to wonder if the complex preparations, spectacular ceremonies, and huge receptions increase the prospects for long-term happiness, an improved relationship, and a stronger bond between the couple. Jeannie's and my simple wedding was probably the opposite extreme of today's extravaganzas.

Jeannie and I met halfway through fall semester at Penn State in 1941. She was a freshman and I was a sophomore (I had skipped a grade in school). However, World War II began for the United States in December 1941, and I enlisted in the US Navy. Jeannie took the accelerated program and graduated from college in June 1944. We were married on August 5, 1944, when Jeannie was 9 days short of her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. I had turned 21 in May 1944.

At that time, I had a two-day leave from the Navy for the wedding. I left Bainbridge Naval Station, Maryland, in a bus for the train station to board a train to Philadelphia, PA, where I caught a subway train to 69<sup>th</sup> Street in Philadelphia, and then the Philadelphia Electra train to Havertown where Jeannie lived with her mother. From the Havertown station, I walked about a mile to their house where the wedding was to take place. I was on time – a minor miracle considering the many connections in my route.

Jeannie and I were married by Chaplain Rear Admiral Duncan McNair, US Navy Retired. He was a friend of Jeannie's family. I had never seen a Rear Admiral before and was properly awed. The wedding party consisted of Jeannie's mother, my father (we had each lost one parent by this time), and Jeannie's Aunt Frances, Aunt Chris, and Uncle Henry. Aunt Fran served as wedding photographer with a simple Brownie box camera. We had the traditional wedding cake and coffee. Probably the biggest expense was my travel fare. No rice was thrown (too valuable). Jeannie wore a simple white dress, and I wore my uniform. We were married in the living room with no flowers or music. Certainly, the wedding has to be considered at the most basic level. We repeated the traditional vows, and I put a ring on Jeannie's finger. The occasion was solemn. Since Jeannie was not yet 21, she and her mother both had to sign a simple form affirming that her mother approved of the marriage and that Jeannie wanted to be married (this Quaker area did not swear any oaths, but one "affirmed").

My father had saved a full tank of gas (a feat during the war), so after the wedding Jeannie and I set off for the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania. This decision turned out not to be so wise, but we wanted our brief honeymoon to be in a natural setting. We arrived just as the sun was setting and found a typical summer cottage on a lake. I think we were the only guests – people did not travel much during the war when gas was rationed. The cabin rental was probably less than \$10. The next morning we rowed a boat in our part of the lake for a few hours and then reversed our trip. I was back at the naval base before taps that day. The wedding was what Jeannie and I would also have chosen in peacetime. Neither of us liked large public displays that detract from the primary purpose of the event – a pledge that two people have bonded for life.

In any case, our marriage lasted 61 years and was ended by Alzheimer's. For that entire period (except the last four years), we looked forward to doing things together. Like our wedding, our life was not based on material possessions or lavish displays. Even during the worst, last years of Alzheimer's, we were content just being together – we just couldn't hike, folk dance, travel on white water rivers, and so on. Summers at field stations enabled us to spend more time almost daily in natural systems until health problems in the last four years of our marriage put an end to being in natural systems as a couple.

Our married life, after I left the US Navy, began with one child and no debt as we were living in Jeannie's mother's house. We were living on a welcome allotment from the GI Bill of Rights. We were blessed not to be in debt. A few people cautioned that wartime marriages did not last, but ours did. One thing our experience did prove was that a lavish wedding and honeymoon were not essential for a long and happy marriage. Another major factor was that neither of us were interested in material possessions or large houses. Our children enjoyed being in the small, simple cabins of field stations with no phone, television, washer and dryer, etc. After all, we were surrounded by a spectacular natural world. As a consequence, we always had money for the things that mattered, such as educations for our children. Jeannie and I never had an argument about money – our needs were simple and we never had to go in debt except for our first and second houses.

We had our share of crises, but we faced them as a couple; the biggest crisis was the Alzheimer's that ended Jeannie's life. We handled it fairly well, considering how challenging Alzheimer's is. Before this illness, we had 57 wonderful years. Jeannie died quietly with no fuss (as she did everything else) in February 2005. When Jeannie died, something in me died with her. She saw beauty everywhere, but especially in natural systems. I still remember those two days of our honeymoon vividly – two days out of 61 years together with many other treasured memories.

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