

Hattie

She Was Wired Differently

LOIS REIMERS



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*Dedicated to my son Thomas Reimers
who's encouragement and support for my labor of love
accomplished its mission.*

TELL ME A STORY

BY LOIS REIMERS

Long ago there were storytellers in villages
towns and the wilderness's everywhere
sitting under shade trees and in front of
fireplaces, telling and retelling
the history of their people

The little children would be the most fascinated
listeners,
wanting to hear the stories of long ago,
told over and over again.

They loved best the stories of their
Mothers, Fathers, and Grandparents.

Those storytellers of long ago have almost all gone now.
Let us give our children the feeling of belonging
once again and the warmth which come from
hearing the stories of their families' struggles

Both the failures and successes.

Introduction

I know my Great Aunt Hattie Fuller would be appalled that I have written her life story, but I think it is time for it to be told. The point is not to “out” her for some sick, unkind reason, but rather because I felt if someone who lived in her era (1876 to 1946) wanted so badly to live as a different gender, then it could not have been a preference.

I ran across her story while tracing my genealogy. My grandmother, Nellie Fuller Carey, had me type her family’s early history. Her family lived on an Indian reservation while she was growing up in South Dakota. She also said her father, Melroy Fuller, could be traced back to the Mayflower Fullers, Samuel and Edward.

I decided I would try to make this connection to the Pilgrims after my grandmother passed. I then ran into this fascinating story of my grandmother’s younger sister, Hattie. I learned she had lived almost her entire adult life as a man. She dressed as a man, smoked cigars, and was married to a woman by the name of Inez. They lived together in the small town of Rhame, North Dakota. Hattie had bought the weekly newspaper and operated it from 1916 to 1946. She was on the school board and belonged to several men’s clubs in town, where she was known as Cappie or Alfred D. Fuller.

I decided to tell the story of this remarkable woman and her family, not to out her, but rather to show how deeply the choices of who we are

must be etched on our psyche.

As you read this book, you will wonder how Hattie found the courage to lead the kind of life she led. Thank God she had the family, especially her father, Melroy Fuller, who supported her all her life. He shielded her secret by accepting her as exactly the way she was.

Lastly, you may ask why I am outing her now.

I thought more people need to look at the struggle that still exists for a person who is perhaps wired differently.

I asked, Can we begin to look with love and tolerance at people who are different? I asked myself, Isn't that what all religions say to do?

Then I asked why should people need to hide who they are?

I asked myself what God would have me do.

Acknowledgements

First, I need to acknowledge my grandmother, Nellie Louise Fuller, Hattie's oldest sister. In 1945, she asked me to type her story about growing up on an Indian reservation and an Indian agency around Chamberlain, South Dakota. The time period spanned from 1880 to 1890—ten long and interesting years, she said.

Typing her story seemed to give me the imagination to continue seeking stories of ancestors. It piqued my interest in the study of genealogy. This is how I stumbled onto Hattie's story.

Next, I need to acknowledge my wonderful, hard-working, open-minded parents.

They loved me and supported me in everything I undertook—from joining the Women's Army Corps during World War II at age nineteen, to helping my husband raise our four sons. My mom and dad, Ethyl and Jerry Tolliver, encouraged and loved me. They taught me how to work and love. I bless them every day of my life.

Then there is my wonderful, supportive husband, Jack. He has never uttered a word against the time I take to follow the passions of my heart, which are many: from writing to painting to my dedication to all my friends and family. Never a cross-word, ever! Bless him; a greater

gift I could not have received from God.

Also, I must thank Merrie Sodder, Fred Fuller's granddaughter, who found me online many years ago. Without her help in digging up and sending me all the documents of our mutual ancestor I would have been unable to tell her story.

Lea Reimers, my daughter-in-law, needs to be mentioned and thanked for her very valuable contribution to the book. She holds a master's in English and I turned this manuscript over to her for corrections.

Then I need to give thanks to my very helpful Thursday writers group. Its members encouraged me and corrected my spelling and grammar mistakes with such kindness. Special thanks to Laurie Greene, Joe Minton, and Mirian Bethancourt.

To my two dear friends Al and Ruth Bendekgey. Al for his expertise with a camera, and Ruth for the hours spent away from her wedding business to help me. Thanks friends!

And finally to you, dear reader, who had the courage and curiosity to want to understand transgender people. They are people who live among us and have been so discriminated against that they have a high rate of depression, suicide, substance abuse, and relationship difficulties. I applaud your open-mindedness.

As I researched my Aunt Hattie's life, I applauded her for her pluck, which her mother, Elizabeth, called "guts." I acknowledge most of Hattie's family and especially her father, Melroy, my great-grandfather, for his unwavering love of Hattie—accepting her exactly as she was and protecting her with his love. That I acknowledge most!

About the Author

I have been a writer of stories since I was a little girl. It seemed to come naturally for me to tell stories on paper. Each time I pick up my pen, I seem to become Hattie.

In 1945, I became interested in genealogy while typing my grandmother's life story. She had a grand story to tell of growing up among the Sioux Indians on an Indian reservation in South Dakota.

My grandmother had a younger sister named Hattie. I stumbled onto the family secret that Hattie had lived almost her whole adult life as a man. I became fascinated when I inherited all the family pictures, including one of Hattie and the women she married. I was captivated; my research began, and then the story had to be told.

Passion for this story has kept me writing for seven years. I have joined a few writing groups. In 1980, I authored a book called *Our Child's Roots*. I have had a short story and a poem published. I feel after many rewritings, it is time to publish this timely story.

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CHAPTER ONE



Where am I? What's going on? I can't talk! I feel so strange! Not exactly pain, more a sense of pain somewhere nearby. I feel detached from my body! What is happening? "Calm down, calm down!" I tell myself. I can hear my heart racing. Whatever's happened, panic surely won't help! I must get myself under control. My eyes and ears seem to be working. It looks and sounds as though I am on a moving train. How did I get here and why am I lying down? Wait, I hear Carl Peterson's voice. He's saying something about a stroke and the hospital in Baker, Montana. Is that what happened? Did I suffer a stroke? I can't seem to remember.

That must be it. Doc Weber had warned me last time I saw him that my time was nearly up, and a stroke was as likely as a heart attack. I'd asked him if there was any difference between the two deaths, thinking they were pretty much the same thing. He had stroked his short beard with one hand, a nervous habit of his, and said, "Well, if you have a heart attack, Cappie, given your long-term heart problems, it will likely be over very quickly. A stroke, on the other hand, would leave you partly or completely paralyzed for a time; at first, some people lose their ability to speak, see, or even hear."

He also had warned me to "put my affairs in order" and said, "perhaps, Cappie, you should take a room here in Baker." Guess that was

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his way of saying it might be safer for my “secret” if I were to be closer to Baker and him. Doctor Weber is not one to mince words, but a good man just the same tells the truth painful or not. I am sure he will keep his promise to guard my secret. I know if any other doctor were to be there in my last mortal moments, it would bring on a terrible scandal. That had been my one fear all these years, a scandal that could devastate me and my family who had openly associated with me and guarded my secret. I had worked hard for many years not to disgrace my family because of the choices I had made.

Hearing Carl’s voice was a relief. He was my good friend and never asked me why I was so adamant about no medical treatment anywhere but in Baker, or why I wanted him to accompany me personally. He never was one to judge or question; he just gave me one of his lopsided, toothy grins and said, “Ya, I will take you.” I knew I could count on Carl. We had been friends for over twenty-five years. In the little town of Rhame, North Dakota, we helped each other out through all our personal sorrows and illnesses. I couldn’t have asked for a better friend; if only I could tell him my secret now. How shocked even he would be to find his longtime friend A. D. Fuller was actually Hattie Fuller, a woman!

I’ve acted my role for so long; it is even hard for me to remember when I wasn’t Alfred D. Fuller, or “Cappie” as my friends call me. Even my family, my late father, my sisters, and my only brother had become accustomed to calling me “Cappie.” I smile to myself remembering their children calling me “Uncle Cappie.” Of course, the children, too, like Carl, did not know my secret. Hattie was just a dim memory even to me now.

My sisters, Nellie, Marble, Elizabeth, and Ethel, their husbands, and my only brother Fred, and his wife, knew of me masquerading as a man, but none of their children knew. They called me “Uncle Cappie.” I had been a family secret for so long now, let’s see. I pondered as my woozy head allowed me to think in waves. I began my disguise as Alfred in 1903, and here it is 1946: *there, I remembered the date!* I must be better, I thought.

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Who am I, I ask myself, and how did I get to be who I am now? Did some event change who I was while I was growing up? I had asked myself this many times. I wondered whether it was the semi-nomadic life Father led us through. Where and when did Cappie begin and Hattie end? Do I have time enough left to figure it out? All these thoughts seem to be racing through my head as I feel the motion under me of the train on its tracks. Clicky clack, clicky clack.

I can't seem to remember today or yesterday, I thought, but the past is vivid in my memory. I remember back before I turned four, when the world seemed such a wonderful, fascinating place, a place where Mama and Papa kept us safe and warm. I felt as though nothing could hurt us as long as they were there. By the time I was born, Mama and Papa had moved twice. They were living in Spring Valley, Minnesota, in 1872 when Nellie was born, then moved to Sleepyeye, Minnesota, in 1874, where Mabel was born. They were living in Sheffield, Iowa, at the time of my birth in 1876. Fred was born in Mason City, Iowa, although purely by chance, Mama said. Our family had gone for a Christmas visit to Mama's brother and his family, and we were stranded by a huge blizzard. By the time the trains could move again it was February and Fred had made his arrival.

I was only four when Fred was born in 1880, but young as I was, I could tell my Papa was very happy at finally having a son after three daughters. I so adored our Papa that I was happy for him. Everyone seemed to adore Papa. He was tall, handsome, and full of energy. He seemed to know everything and everybody.

I knew Papa always gave his first attention to Mama when he came home, then a hug and kiss for Nellie, as she was the oldest. I heard Mama tell everyone that Nellie was the apple of Papa's eye. I really didn't know what that meant, but I felt that it was a good thing, as Mama always said it very proudly, and she would put her arm around Nellie as she said it.

Then Papa gave Mabel a hug and kiss, saying, "How is my pretty lass today?" We all knew that Mabel was very pretty. More than once I heard people say as we were leaving church, "Oh, Mrs. Fuller, that

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Mabel of your is a beauty!"

Finally, Papa's attention would come around to me, the littlest and youngest until my brother Fred was born. I wanted to melt into the floor because I wanted his attention, yet I didn't want it either. I tried to hide behind a sister or a chair, thinking perhaps he would miss me, but he never did, "Come here, Hattie, my little intellect!" I didn't know what that meant either, but he said it proudly as he called me to him.

I remember moving over to stand between his bony knees and looking up into his blue, kindly eyes. "Well girl," he usually said, "What did you do today?" I tried to remember something that he would be proud of; I remember when I told him I had learned how to spell "God." He had looked very pleased and had patted me on the head and said, "All right, my dear, spell it for your Papa." I said, "G-O-D" in my quietest voice. He smiled that charming smile of his and said, "Good girl." Looking at Mama, he said, "She takes after you, Liz, very smart."

Their eyes met, and anyone could tell they loved each other very much; they had been married nine years when Fred was born.

Then I remember seeing his eyes seeking out baby Fred, lying in the cradle that he had built. Mama would rock it with her foot while sewing something with her always-busy hands.

Papa, his blue eyes twinkling, and with his duty to Mama, Nellie, Mabel, and me finished, went over and picked up baby Fred with his big, rough hands. His face softened, and his smile seemingly lit up the whole room. I could feel his happiness in holding his only son. I so wanted it to be me that he was holding and looking at with that kind of proud love. I remember the feeling of wishing to be the son that everyone seemed to love the best. Even my two sisters, whom the baby had also displaced as number one in Papa's heart, even *they* did not seem to care. But of course *they* had each other to play with, I thought, and I felt so alone. Did this have anything to do with my desire to be a male, I wondered?

We lived among the Sioux Indians while I was growing up and I

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watched the Indian women constantly working; it seemed they were never done. The Sioux warrior way of life was hunting and fighting to protect and feed the tribe.

Lulled by the train motion, my mind began remembering roaming the prairies with Fred on our Indian ponies.

Fred and I felt part Indian ourselves and began thinking like them at times and taking on some of their ways. I must have been about ten and Fred was about seven when we began our roaming on the Lower Brule Indian Reservation across the Missouri River from the Black Hills Rose Bud Reservation.

The Sioux Indians on the reservation came onto the agency once a week to get their rations from the government. If they had no money, they traded all kinds of skins from different animals they had killed: buffalo hides, elk, skunk, coyotes, foxes and deer skins. Fred and I would enjoy looking over their kills. We watched them as they would demonstrate how they had killed the animals with their bows and arrows. They were proud of their hunting skills, letting out loud war whoops as they danced.

I felt the train rumble under me as I heard the train whistle screeching. This woke me out of my memories of those long-ago events. The shrill cry jolted me up out of the comfort of the passenger seat I had been lying on. The seat was tilted back so far that I was almost lying down. I looked down at myself and noted I had on my best waistcoat; my gold watch was snugly in its little pocket attached to the gold chain Inez had given me on our tenth wedding anniversary, many years ago. I was wearing my stripped blue-and-white shirt with no coat; the shirt sleeves were very wrinkled, I noted.

I looked around and saw my lanky friend, Carl, in the seat across the aisle from me. His legs were spread out under the seat in front of him and he was snoring, taking a deep breath and letting it go with a soft whistle. Seeing him was a relief. I knew I was safe; the train whistle hadn't even woke him up. He must be very tired, I thought.

A nice warm blanket was pulled up around my chest. I felt the train lurch as the brakes were applied with a loud piercing shriek. A loud

voice called out “Baker! Baker, Montana!” I still wondered how I had gotten on the train, but I didn’t wonder how I was going to get off. I heard Carl’s voice say, “Hey, Cappie, I’ll help you up. How do you feel? I see you’re a bit better. This is where you wanted me to take you, and here we are.”

He straightened the seat up a little for me and said, “I think your doctor is going to meet us, Cappie.”

“Did you call him, Carl?”

“Yeah, you gave me his card last week when you weren’t feeling to good. Do you remember?” he asked me. Before I answered, he continued, as he leaned over me.

“Good thing you did. I needed to call him today, when I saw how poorly you were feeling. He said he would be here to meet our train, isn’t that good of him?”

I looked at Carl’s worried face, and could tell he was concerned about me.

“Oh yeah Carl, I remember, that was very smart of me to give you his card. Doc Weber is a great doctor and a friend, too. I think I’ve mentioned this a few dozen times.” I smiled.

But I really didn’t remember giving him the card. My mind just didn’t seem to be too alert. I felt I was still in a daydream, reliving the past.

The next thing I remember was Carl helping me down the steep train steps. I saw Dr. Weber with a wheelchair waiting for me. He pushed it toward the steps and hurried to help Carl get me down carefully. He could tell I was pretty weak.

I saw my old friend was concerned as he helped me into the chair. He grabbed my wrist and with his strong fingers pressed for my pulse.

“How do you feel, Cappie?” he asked me, looking into my eyes with a worried look.

“Oh, just dandy, Doc,” I answered, trying to smile up at him.

“Well, I got a room waiting for you in the hospital and I’ll do some tests when we get there, so let’s go.”

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With that, he began pushing me quickly down the station's platform. I saw a car parked with his wife waiting at the wheel.

Carl was following us. He helped the doctor put me in the back seat and followed me in to sit beside me.

"How you feeling, pal?" he asked.

"OK," I lied, resting my head against the back of the seat.

Doc got in the driver's seat as his wife slid over.

"How is he?" she asked.

Doctor Weber mumbled something.

"We're taking him to the hospital," is all I heard him say.

It seemed like just a few minutes until the car stopped and they were helping me out and into another wheelchair. That was fast, I thought, as they pushed me through the brightly lit doorway.

Before I knew it I was in a white-sheeted bed, with Doctor Weber helping me into a hospital gown. I was very grateful for his help; we had talked about this scenario a few times before—how I could protect my anonymity. I knew he would put me in a private room, and he knew certain people who would keep their mouths shut for him, he had assured me.

He had someone come in and take my blood. They left, and Carl came in to say good-bye.

"So long, Cappie, I've got to get back, but I'll call you." Turning at the door, he waved, gave me a big grin, and was gone.

"Good friend you got there Cappie," Doc Weber said as he leaned over, putting his fingers at the side of my neck. Then he took my blood pressure. Getting a reading, he took it again. I tried to read his face, but he didn't let on what he was reading.

"Good thing you got here when you did. I've ordered some tests, and I think you're safe for the night. I've got a good nurse who knows how to keep her mouth shut. She'll be reporting to me any change in you and I'll get the results of your blood work in the morning. You just rest, my friend." And he left.

Did I tell him thanks, I wondered. Everything seemed to be going either too fast or too slow. The nurse came in and dimmed the lights.

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After she left I again slipped into a dream state wondering about my life. I had done this almost my whole life, wondering why I was so different. What had made me like I was, different and defiant? I had keep diaries, putting down all my feelings since I was a very small child. I couldn't talk to anyone about what I was thinking or feeling.