

WHO ARE ALL THESE PEOPLE? – MARYLIN NEASE – TEXAS

I attended my first family reunion in 1982. My father's cousin George and his wife, Ramona, in their retirement, became the reunion leaders after another cousin, Gene, planted the idea. They named that first reunion the Johnson First Cousins Reunion.

Daddy called my sisters and me to tell us about the reunion and to urge us to attend.

What a gathering it was! You see, Daddy was one of 36 first cousins on his father's side. His paternal grandparents, Hiram and Mary Johnson, married in 1880 and had nine children from 1882-1905: Edgar, Cleveland, Herbert, Edna, Dewitt, Bertie, Bernice, Biddie, and Jessie. Cleveland and Bernice died in childhood; the remaining seven became the parents of the 36 first cousins of my father's generation.

Ramona said that, at that first reunion, George looked around at the gathering and asked her, "*Who are all these people?!*"

Ramona said she answered, "Why, George, these are your cousins."

George and Ramona organized nine reunions, every two years—the last in 1998, when they announced, "It's somebody else's turn."

Through these reunions, George and his first cousins learned the now-adult faces and names of the cousins they had played with at holiday times at Pappy's and Mammy's (Hiram's and Mary's).

Oh, the stories and memories these cousins shared at reunions!

I learned that Hiram, my great grandfather, was known as "Cussin' Johnson." The cousin speaking said, "He wasn't a bad person. Everything he said just naturally came out with cussin' in it." I heard about Santa Claus bringing the 36th cousin, about cousins having wild-cow milking contests, about a cousin who told time by the sun and another who couldn't, and so forth. Beneath the stories and fun, I heard a strong sense of family. Pieces of my life fell into place—traditions like summertime gatherings at my grandparents' home, where we cousins played all day, then slept on quilts on the floor.

To keep the reunions going, my sisters and I are taking our "turn." Since 2003 we've been "the sisters" who organize the reunions and keep our spread-out-across-the-U.S. family in touch.

Of the 36 first cousins of our father's generation, one remains. Bob is the second youngest of the 36 and will soon celebrate his 87th birthday.

The 1980s and 1990s reunions gave the generation with 36 cousins a chance to reconnect and to introduce their children and grandchildren to life in an extended family. One cousin who understood the importance of family was Phil, the youngest of the 36. Speaking as one of several elders at a reunion, Phil said: "We left Tishomingo and, in some cases, Oklahoma to go out and find ourselves and our careers. Now we come back because this is where we're from and it's part of who we are."

Phil learned what Hiram and Mary taught their children and grandchildren about family.

My generation? We're passing forward what we've been taught about family.

Thus, it must be: each generation teaching the next.