



The Teapot

by Ellen Michaud

As a winter storm roars through the woods and dumps several feet of snow in the firs surrounding my cottage, I reach up to pull down my great-grandmother Emily's silver teapot from the kitchen shelf on which it sits. Polishing silver is a lot better than shoveling snow in my book—and any day that's as cold as this one is a good day to catch up on stuff that never makes it to the top of my ongoing list of chores.

Carefully placing the teapot on my kitchen counter, I wondered, not for the first time, why the teapot was one of the trunk-full of things my great-grandmother had chosen to bring to the United States when she left England a century ago. Nineteenth century travel was tough, and I knew that she'd not only hauled the teapot across an ocean, she'd dragged it three-quarters of the way across the United States. She and her husband had settled in New Mexico when it was a territory, then five or six children later, they'd pulled up stakes and returned to England. Yet with all the complexity of moving a huge family by train, wagon, and ship, they'd still made room for the teapot.

Curious, I pushed the teapot closer to a light and studied it. The finish was badly tarnished. I hadn't been able to get to it—there were just too many other things that needed attention. Too many calls to return, bills to pay, kids to check on, and elderly aunts to visit. I sighed and began running hot water and lavender soap into the sink.

I didn't know much about my great-grandmother, I realized as I gently washed her teapot. I did know, however, that when her daughter Florence grew up, married, and immigrated to the United States with her husband and two tiny daughters, the teapot went along. The couple settled in Pennsylvania, and when their eldest daughter—also named Florence—grew up, married an army captain, and began a life that had her moving from one military base to another, she was given the teapot, too.



That Florence was my mother, which explains why I am standing in the kitchen up to my elbows in lavender suds, feeling guilty, and looking at a tarnished, soapy pot.

I take the pot into my workroom and remove as much of the tarnish as possible. Thirty minutes later the old metal begins to glow with a rich, soft light.

Huh. I wonder how old it is? Thoughtfully, I turn the pot upside down and study the infinitesimally tiny marks on the bottom. Having seen one or two segments of *The Antiques Roadshow* as I surfed from one channel to another, I realize that these tiny marks are a clue. Quickly, I plunk the teapot on my worktable and reach for my laptop. Within minutes I am up to my eyeballs in British "hallmarks" as the tiny pictorial marks are called, and it's not long before I find what I'm looking for. The teapot was manufactured in Sheffield, England, by Morton & Company between 1742, when the process of melding sterling silver with a copper liner for teapots was developed, and 1785, when Morton & Company stopped registering hallmarks.

Yikes. I sat back in my chair and stared at the teapot. It was fully a hundred years older than I'd expected. And since the way it was made reflected silversmithing practices that were used early on, the women in my family had apparently been polishing this teapot for more than 260 years.

Stretching back in my chair, I tried to envision what that meant. My family came from Sheffield. They had lived there when it was a small, rural metalworking village nestled among the Yorkshire hills. The techniques its metal workers developed in their homes had, along with those at various mills, given rise to both a British middle class and the Industrial Revolution. But anti-industrial violence in 1813 had ripped the village apart. Failed crops in 1816 had resulted in starvation. A cholera epidemic in 1832 had killed 402 people. A flood in 1857 had wiped out a third of the town's populace.

My great-grandfather, Emily's husband, had apparently had enough. He married Emily, packed the teapot, and headed for the United States somewhere, I suspect, in the 1870s. Now here I was, gently touching a teapot that had been hung over the kitchen fire by some seven generations of women in my family.

Holding the teapot in my hands, I can feel its strength and sturdiness. I can run my fingers over its dents, study the cracks in its bone lid ornament, lightly stroke the scorch mark on its side. Was it ever dropped on a kitchen hearth? Thrown across a room in anger? Washed by a woman's tears? Given the chaotic world through which it has traveled over the centuries the answer's pretty obvious.

The thing is, it survived. And I'm willing to bet that despite the fire, brimstone and bullets that circle our planet today, this glowing little teapot—and the women who travel with it—will survive into the future, as well.

Gently, I place it back on my kitchen shelf.

Award-winning author Ellen Michaud frequently writes about the everyday blessings we all tend to overlook. Share your stories with her at ellenmichaud@gmail.com.

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