After my grandfather died in 1994, I received some pictures from his second wife, Isabelle. It took me awhile to go through them and then with the move, etc. I sort of forgot they were there. As we were unpacking and settling into our new house, I rediscovered the photos. Much to my amazement, I found a picture of my grandfather’s family and a picture of his younger brother, Gail. It was then I realized my great uncle – my grandfather’s brother – had Down Syndrome. This discovery has become a powerful connection to the past!

The photo to the left shows the entire family. My grandfather, Emmett, is about 10 or 11 years old. His younger brother appears to be about 5 or 6. Since my grandfather was born in 1903, I believe this photo was taken about 1913, but there is no identifying information on the back of photo. There was one other photo of Gail (lower right) standing by himself on what appears to be the front porch of the family home. I would date this photo at about 1910. This photo was made into a postcard, as was customary in that time, and has his name on the back, but no date.

There are several things that amaze me about these photos. First, my great grandparents thought enough of this child to have his picture taken and then put it in the traditional format of the day to share with family and friends. Second, they kept him at home and obviously included him in their family. He is well dressed and appears very comfortable with his family. My grandfather, in the obvious throes of adolescence, appears more uncomfortable in the family portrait than Gail.

I have only heard stories about my great grandmother. She died before I was born. According to my paternal grandmother, she was
someone to be reckoned with. If she came over to their house (her son’s home) and things were not in order, she would be sure to tell my Grandma and want it taken care of right away. My great-grandfather lived into his mid-90’s, so I knew him and remember him well. He was very old, especially to me, but I remember him as mentally sharp – enough to talk with my father about his sermon and the text behind it – and a kind man. My grandma was always somewhat bitter in that he came to live with them as he got older and she had to take care of him. Later, when my grandparents divorced, my grandfather placed him in an adult foster care home in Seattle for the remainder of his life. What I see now, from my perspective and place in time, is two parents who lost a child, which is always tragic, and two parents who were compassionate and had a child with a disability. And I have many unanswered questions.

I always knew my grandfather had a younger brother. I also knew his name was Gail and he died at the age of 12. What I didn’t know was that he had Down Syndrome. But, now I knew and I called Isabelle to see if she could fill me in on any details. Perhaps, the most pressing question in my mind was, “Was this the reason Grandpa had always been so proud of me?”

Isabelle was unable to offer much information. It turns out my grandfather mentioned Gail in passing, but not often. Isabelle knew that Gail was not “mentally all there,” to which I replied, “Yes, he had Down Syndrome.” My grandfather had not evidently not even used the term *mongoloid*. I questioned her about if she knew what the family attitude(s) had been. Why wasn’t he placed in an institution? According to Isabelle, it turns out not many children were at that time. Institutionalization really came later — in the 30’s, 40’s and 50’s. Families simply coped.

She also told me his brother and my choice of a career in special education was not the reason he was so proud of me. Grandpa never went beyond the 9th grade. He was proud of my educational accomplishments and what I had done with my life. His acceptance of me as an individual was more than likely born out of his childhood experience with his younger brother -- nurtured, I hope, by a family who simply cared about their youngest son for who he was and grieved when he was gone.