

George and Marietta (Gilman) Aschenbrener
Raising a family in the Wisconsin Northwoods in the Early Twentieth Century

*A compilation of stories from George and Marietta's children,
along with photos collected from Marietta's scrapbooks and from her descendants*

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George B. Aschenbrener and Marietta Gilman were married on June 17, 1903, just after the turn of the twentieth century in the little town of Stetsonville in northern Wisconsin. Their first child was born nine months later. They would go on to have a family of eleven children, nine boys and two girls. A family group sheet, found at the end of this story, gives the names of the children, along with their dates of birth, marriage, and death. The family was raised in the Wisconsin Northwoods. It would only be after they retired that George and Marietta moved to the southwestern United States.

The early twentieth century was a different era in America. When George and Marietta married, people traveled by horse, rail, boat and foot. Children were born at home and families were quarantined when there was an infectious illness. Houses were lit by kerosene lanterns. Entertainment was homespun. Marietta lived to celebrate her one-hundredth birthday. During her lifetime, she saw the invention of automobiles, airplanes, and television. Electricity and telephones were introduced into homes throughout the country. America fought in five wars: the Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. The United States also put a man on the moon.



*Top row (L to R) Harold (Mike), Eldred (Al), Aloysius (Loy), Bernice, Harris, George Jr. (in Harris' lap), Fred;
Bottom Row (L to R): Edmund, Robert, Richard, and Harriet. Photo taken c. 1924.*

There is a German saying, “Die Arbeit macht das Leben süß”, or “work makes life sweet.” George and Marietta Aschenbrener worked hard and were true entrepreneurs in the Wisconsin Northwoods. They also had a deep faith in God and a strong commitment to providing a good home for their large family. In this they succeeded admirably. Many years after the Aschenbrener family had left Fifield, Rena Lake, a local historian, reported, “It seems that there was never a time in all the years I can recall when [Marietta] wasn’t working as well as raising her family of eleven children. She stood behind the cage at the post office window sorting and handing out mail for several years, always cheerful and very much a lady. Then she would go home to spend hours with laundry, ironing, cooking and housework. Yet she somehow found the time to teach her children all the finer things in life.”

After she retired, Marietta put together a number of scrapbooks. She was proud of her family. Framed portraits of her eleven children were hung high on the wall of the living room at the home in Lac du Flambeau. When Marietta moved to Encino, California, the portraits came, too, and found a place above the windows of the sun porch. Marietta liked to tell stories about her children and she kept a dish of family photos on her coffee table. I think she would be very pleased to know that many of the photos and stories have been collected, to be passed down to future generations. I can picture her now, chuckling at the idea, her eyes twinkling just a bit.



*A photo of the older Aschenbrener children, taken c. 1916:
(Back row, L to R) Loy, Al, Bernice, George Jr. (baby), Harris.
Standing in front: Mike (dark hat) and Fred (light colored hat)*

Managing a household of eleven children was not an easy task. From the earliest days of their marriage, George and Marietta worked together in the family businesses. The first child arrived a year after they were married and they kept on coming, every year or two, for the next twenty years. Robert remembered that Marietta always had a girl, generally someone from one of the nearby farms, to cook and to help take care of the young children at home. Generally, these girls lived with the family. There was a maid’s room in both the house in Fifield and the house in Lac du Flambeau. Young children are often hungry. A pot of oatmeal was kept going on the stove: the equivalent of today’s fast food!

The older children started school in Park Falls while the younger ones began their education at the school in Fifield. This was a two-story brick building which housed the elementary school on the lower floor and the high school on the upper. The high school was small. According to Robert, the entire student body, freshmen through seniors, numbered no more than forty. Fred remembered his school days: “I started school when I was 5 years old, but it

didn't last long, because I happened to reach over and cut the hair of the child ahead of me. [I] got caught by the teacher, who sent me home and told me I could come back when I was 6 years old. I did come back when I was 6 and got along very well." All of the Aschenbrener children but Robert graduated from Fifield High School. Robert graduated from Minocqua High School. Like his older brothers, he enjoyed playing basketball. He later recalled that people used to say that there was always an Aschenbrener on the team at Fifield. Unfortunately, when it came time for him to play, Fifield High School decided to disband the team. At this point, Robert and Richard chose to live in the family home in Lac du Flambeau and attend Minocqua High School, which had a championship team. Robert got to play ball, although it meant that he and Richard had to drive 15 miles to school each day, a tough drive in the winter. Richard decided to return to Fifield, where he graduated in 1940.

George and Marietta were determined to send all of their children to college, and this they accomplished. Not all graduated, but all had some college education. This was a noteworthy achievement, especially for that time and place, and with so many children. Harris received his undergraduate degree from Marquette University and a Masters degree from the University of Chicago. Bernice attended St. Mary's College in Milwaukee. Loy graduated from Marquette University. He obtained a law degree from the University of Wisconsin. Fred and Mike graduated from Loras College (originally named Columbia College) in Dubuque, Iowa. Loy, Al, George Jr., Edmund and Robert also spent time at Loras. The obituary for George, Sr. that ran in the Dubuque newspaper in 1953 makes note of the fact that "Mr. Aschenbrener visited Dubuque many times, having had seven sons attend Loras College from 1925- 1943." Robert graduated from the University of Missouri following his military service during World War II. Harriet graduated from Clarke College, also in Dubuque. Richard attended Quincy College in Illinois.

Washing was done on one day of the week only. It was the custom to dress young children, both boys and girls, in white dresses. These clothes needed to be boiled on the stove to get them clean. Then they were hung out to dry. In the winter they would freeze on the clothesline. According to Robert, by the time they were living in Fifield, Marietta had a wringer washing machine and a mangle to iron the clothes. In a letter he wrote in 1972, Richard noted "a time when mom had 53 shirts to wash and iron for father and the boys, after a day of work in the post office."

As the children grew, they were expected to help out at home and in the family businesses. While there was plenty of work to be done, there was also time for fun. A small river ran through Fifield and a popular swimming hole was located under the two bridges (one for cars, the other for trains) which crossed the



Edmund, born in 1916. Photo c 1920



Winter play: Fanny (the horse) with the Aschenbrener children

river. In the summertime, this is where all the children could be found. In the evenings, it stayed light until past 9:00 P.M. The Aschenbrener children joined other children at a street corner to play games like hide and seek, ducky on the rock and can-can. In those days, the streets were a relatively safe place for the children to be.

Winter and summer, play often involved the family's pets. The Aschenbreners had a beloved collie named Ranger. They also had three horses that were kept in a barn behind the house in Fifield: Fanny, Little Bit and Beauty.

Winters were long and it would get dark about 3:30 P.M. There was a lot of snow and all of the children had snowshoes. Robert remembers having a pair of large, wooden skis. There were no high hills, so the children would build small ski jumps to entertain themselves or they would ski cross country through neighboring farms. Sometimes they had their horses pull them on their skis. Fred noted that "kids during a heavy snowstorm would climb up on one-story buildings and jump off into the snowdrifts, without being harmed in any way because the snowdrifts were in the neighborhood of 15-20 feet high." Ice skating was another popular winter activity for children in northern Wisconsin.

In high school, the Aschenbrener boys played basketball. Fred, George and Mike, in particular, excelled in the sport. Sometimes the boys had to make a considerable effort in order to play the game. One story Fred told: "As I became older and was able to reach the pedals of my dad's car and truck, I became a driver. We were not taught how to drive. We just learned on our own hook. . . . We liked to play basketball, but before we could go to practice, or have anything to do with it, we had to make sure that my father was taken to Lac du Flambeau in the morning before school. This necessitated our getting up around 5:30 or 6:00 to drive [Dad to work], come back to school, and after school drive back to Lac du Flambeau to get him, bringing him back to Fifield, and then we could go to basketball practice. But it was usually 10:00 before we returned home and we went to bed."

Harris was sixteen and Mike was ten when the house in Fifield was under construction. Both must have spent a lot of time on the lot while the house was being built. Building held a fascination for them. Harris later built a log cabin with a stone fireplace on the lot behind the big house. According to Loy's daughters, Joan and Mary, the log cabin still stands, although it has since been moved to another location. Mike, too, enjoyed building things. It was he who built a little cart for their pony, Fanny.

Hunting was another favorite pastime. Robert liked to hunt with an older brother, Edmund. This brother would hide his rifle on the way to school, to be retrieved after school when they would go hunting. In Lac du Flambeau, Robert enjoyed hunting with his Indian friends. The Chipewa

were allowed to hunt any time of year; whereas, the white residents were allowed to hunt only in season. For this reason, when Robert was along, they always had one less gun than number of boys in the group. They hunted deer, but more often, partridge and rabbit.

Religious practice was an integral part of their family life. George and Marietta followed the religion of their ancestors. The Germans from Markt Eisenstein, Bohemia and the French Canadians were devout Roman Catholics. Everyone went to Mass every Sunday and sometimes during the week. People fasted from midnight on, in order to receive Holy Communion at Mass the next morning. These were the days when the Mass was in Latin, Holy Days were observed, and meat was not eaten on Fridays. People went to confession, often on a monthly basis. During the Lenten season, the family would gather together to pray the daily rosary. The Aschenbrener children attended catechism classes and the boys served as altar boys. When it came time for college, they went to Catholic colleges. A deep spirituality and a commitment to the Roman Catholic faith was instilled in each of the children and remained with them throughout their lives.



(L to R) Robert with his sister Harriet c. 1922

In early twentieth-century small towns, people recreated as a community. They got together for masquerades, organization dress balls, lecture courses, circuses, home talent plays and even operas. By 1912, Fifield had a Brass Band. An octagonal bandstand was erected in 1914 and served the community until sometime in the 1930s. During the 1920s and 1930s, dances were the rage. People had cars by this time and there were dances at one hall or another every night. Local orchestras provided the music. Elva Lessard, a local Fifield historian, observed that, “In very early times people often danced until 5 o’clock in the morning, went home and to work or church. Wedding dances often lasted 3 days and nights.”

Families attended events together. If there was a dance on a Friday or Saturday night, parents and younger children were there, in addition to the teenagers. When the Aschenbrener teens went to parties, their mom and dad were very likely to be there too. Robert remembered the family picnics by one of the nearby lakes with Uncles Edward and Lawrence Aschenbrener and their families, who lived in Park Falls.

Music and dance were popular in the Aschenbrener household, as well as in the community at large. Mike played sax, trombone and drums. Loy, George, Al, and Edmund played the sax. Robert played the tenor sax and clarinet. Fred played the clarinet. Mike was particularly good at

organizing small bands (3, 4, or 5 piece combos) to play in the nearby roadhouses and nightclubs. During the high school and college years, these combos frequently included George, Edmund and Robert. Loy also played in a small Saturday night band.

Aschenbrener family travel was generally limited to trips to visit extended family: brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins. Marietta and George rarely traveled together. One stayed home to mind the stores, while the other was accompanied by one or two of the children. Robert recalled the train trip with his mother to North Dakota to attend Aunt Martha's funeral. Robert also remembered a trip to Fond du Lac to attend one of the Fox family weddings (Marietta's cousins). In later years, George and Marietta were able to take a more extended break from their businesses. Vacations were usually during the winter months, when business was light, and again they were not always taken together. At the end of a stressful summer season, George would take a couple of months to relax in a warmer climate. George's sisters, Louisa and Anna were living in Pomona, California. George traveled out to California to visit them. He also made trips to Florida and Texas, one of the boys always traveling with him. Marietta usually stayed in Wisconsin and managed the two stores and the household. From time to time, she took the train and traveled out to visit George. Robert said that one year she arrived in California for a surprise visit at 2:00 in the morning!

From all accounts, summers at Lac du Flambeau were a special time in a special place. George and Marietta, along with their children, worked long hours accommodating the vacationers from the south. After work, it was time to relax and recreate with family and friends. The Aschenbreners were frequently invited to steak fries, canoe rides, and other fun activities at the home of one or another of the summer residents. Or they met at one of the nightclubs in the area. Taverns, roadhouses and nightclubs were an integral part of the culture and social life of the Wisconsin Northwoods. In the 1930s and 40s, the Grunerwald Roadhouse, Rudy's, Muskie Jack, the Homestead and the Tower Nightclub were popular with the Aschenbrener family and friends. Fred noted that "these experiences [in Lac du Flambeau] were so great, that even after we finished college, for many years, all of us went back there during the summer months just to work in the store."

Mike returned permanently to Lac du Flambeau after graduating from college. There, he carried on the Aschenbrener legacy of work and play at the lake until his death in 1996. There had been a continuous Aschenbrener presence at Lac du Flambeau for almost 75 years.



Mike and Robert in the cart being pulled by Fanny. Mike made the cart.

Our Family History

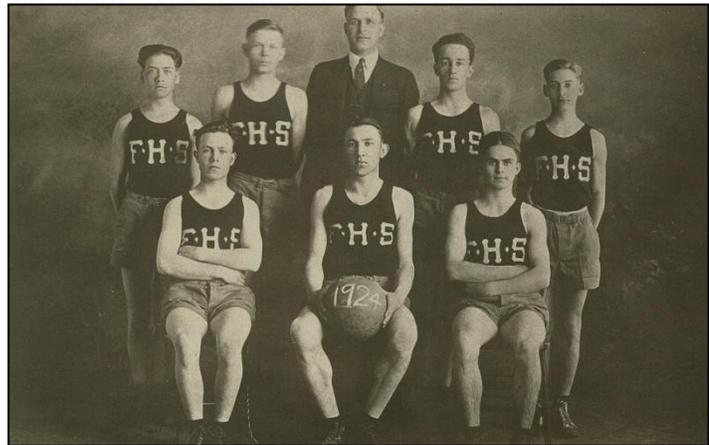
And Then There Were Five --
The Older Aschenbrener Children c 1915



L to R (Youngest to Oldest) Mike, Al, Loy, Bernice, and Harris

Our Family History

The Aschenbrener Children at Play



Photos clockwise, beginning with top left: Eldred (Al) taking the lead on skis, with younger brothers in tow (The boys are shown at the back of the Fifield home.); Fred, lettered in basketball; Fifield High School Basketball Team in 1924 with Loy, top row, far left and Eldred, top row, far right; Edmund riding Fanny, with Ranger alongside.

Summer Fun



*Bernice at Flambeau River in Fifield with brothers Mike (standing);
Seated, L to R: Fred, Al, and George Jr.*



At the lake: Bernice with younger sister Harriet (in hats), L to R are brothers Edmund, behind Robert who is holding Richard's hand, George Jr. (in the center with dark hair and trunks), and Al (right of George); Others in the photo are unidentified.

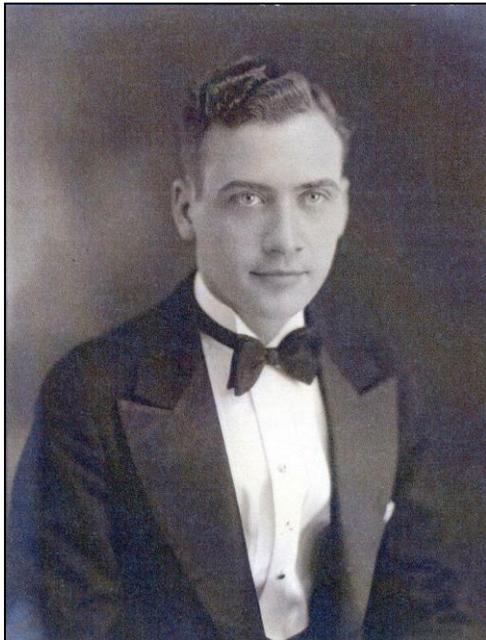
Our Family History

Aschenbrener Snapshots



Photos clockwise from top left: Bernice; George Jr. on the saxophone, with Robert at his side; Loy in jodhpurs, Richard, Loy on the saxophone, and Edmund. The photo of Edmund was taken in his first year of college at Columbia College (later named Loras College) in Dubuque, Iowa. Edmund died at the end of the school year, on May 23, 1936, of cerebral meningitis.

Aschenbrener Couples



Couples from the top left: Fred and Annamae; Harris and Virginia; Robert and Ann; Elaine and Loy

Aschenbrener Couples



(Clockwise from top L: Fred & Annamae, George Jr. & Lorraine, Robert & Ann, Dick & Harriet)

Our Family History

The Wedding of Bernice Aschenbrenner and Clarence Gibfried in 1929
(Bernice was the first of the children to marry.)



The wedding party included Robert and Harriet as flower folks, Richard as ring bearer and Fred (far right).

*The car was a wedding gift from
the parents of the bride.*



Automobiles in the Aschenbrener Family



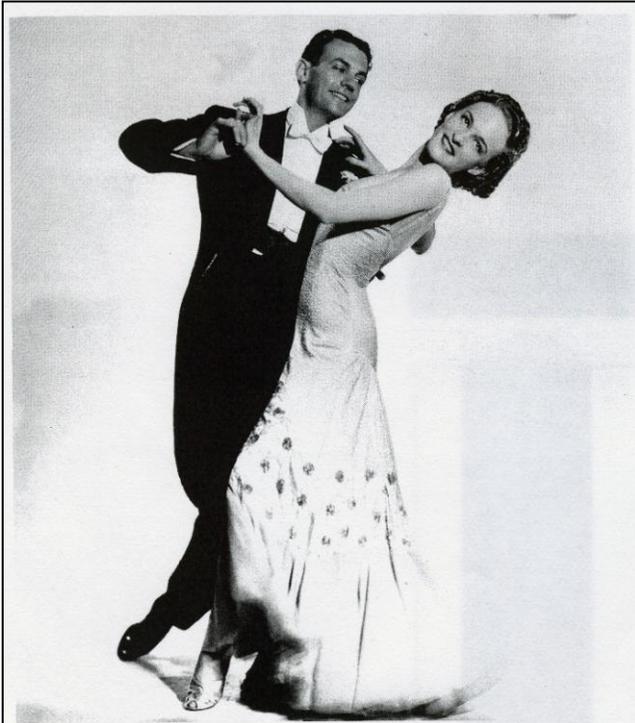
George and Marietta rarely drove their cars...The boys were the family drivers.



Clockwise from top left: Fred with the family's Chevrolet (c. 1935); Marietta's Pontiac (1935); Robert on the dashboard and Mike at the wheel of the Aschenbrener delivery wagon (a Ford, c.1936) at Lac du Flambeau; Harriet at the door and Robert inside the family's Studebaker (c 1923).



A Couple of the Brothers Danced Professionally in the 1930s and 1940s
(The Big Band Era)



The Ashburns at Edgewater Beach Hotel, Chicago. Harris Aschenbrener and dancing partner, Virginia Browning. Pic. 1938.

The Ashburns on Tour -- Harris and Virginia (Browning) Aschenbrener

Harris was a veteran of two round the world dance tours, one in 1937 and a second in 1939. Stops included Mexico City, London, Paris, Shanghai, Singapore, Manila, Bombay, Cairo, and Italy, as well as venues across the United States. He met Virginia Browning when he was dancing in Shanghai, China. She became his dance partner in 1939 and later married him.

Harris also appeared in a number of Hollywood movies. He doubled for Jimmy Stewart in dance scenes in the motion picture *Dance Team* and appeared with Joan Crawford in another film.

Eldred (Al) teamed up with Betty Bliss and Ed Lewis to form a tap-dancing trio during the era of the Big Band, when dancing was the rage. Later Betty became his wife. In 1932, the trio appeared in Boston with Eddie Duchin, a popular pianist and band leader in the 30s and 40s.

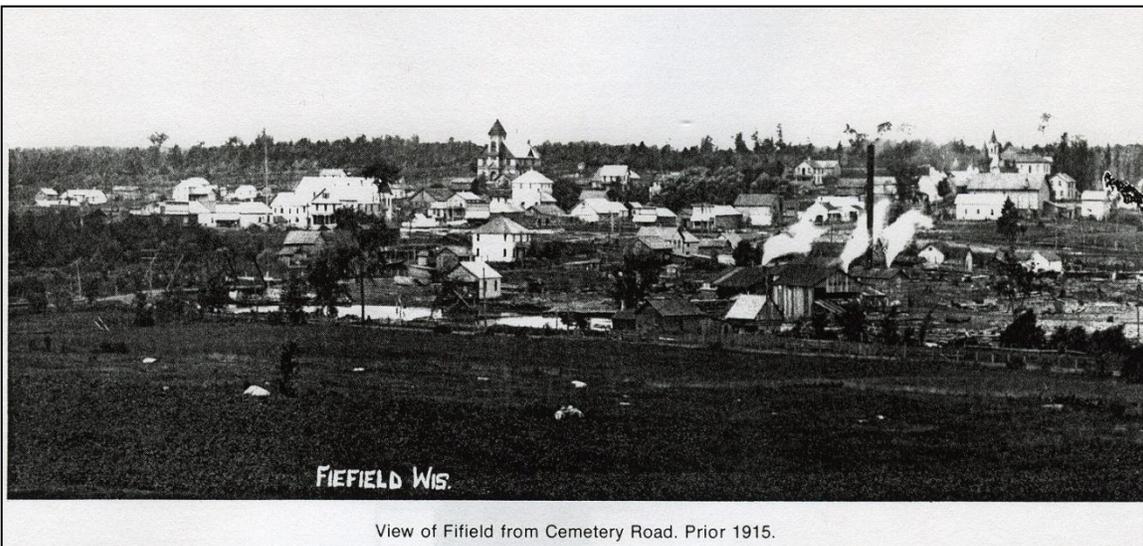


Left dancer Eldred Aschenbrener of team Bliss (center), Lewis & Ash. Far left, band leader Eddie Duchin. Pic. Boston, 1932.

The Aschenbrener Home in Fifield, Wisconsin:
Built in the 1920s



*Photos above taken in the 1920s
Photo on the left taken in 2005*



View of Fifield from Cemetery Road. Prior 1915.

*Fifield in the early part of the twentieth century
The photo of Fifield comes from the publication "Fifield 1876-1976."*

The Family of George and Marietta Aschenbrener

Husband: George B. Aschenbrener	
Birth: June 19, 1881 in Stetsonville, Taylor Co. Wisconsin	
Death: January 25, 1953 in Tucson, Pima Co. Arizona	
Marriage: June 17, 1903 in Stetsonville, Taylor Co. Wisconsin	
Father: George Aschenbrenner	
Mother: Monika (Bradle) Bredl	
Wife: Marietta Estelle Gilman	
Birth: November 23, 1880 in Stetsonville, Taylor Co. Wisconsin	
Death: March 17, 1981 in Park Falls, Price Co. Wisconsin	
Father: Joseph (Anglemene) Gilman	
Mother: Barbara Ann Fox	
Children:	
1 M	Name: Harris George (Aschenbrener) Ashburn Birth: March 28, 1904 in Little Black, Taylor Co. Wisconsin Death: December 09, 1980 in Granada Hills, Los Angeles Co. California Spouse: Virginia Evelyn Browning
2 F	Name: Bernice Lucille Aschenbrener Birth: September 30, 1905 in Stetsonville, Taylor Co. Wisconsin Death: May 23, 1989 in Grand Rapids, Kent, Michigan Marriage: September 25, 1929 in Fifield, Wisconsin Spouse: Clarence Martin (Bud) Gibfried
3 M	Name: Aloysius Joseph (Loy) Aschenbrener Birth: January 24, 1907 in Eau Claire, Eau Claire Co. Wisconsin Death: September 17, 1998 in Pasadena, Los Angeles, California Marriage: April 24, 1937 in Villa Park, Illinois Spouse: Elaine Geidel
4 M	Name: Eldred Lawrence (Al) Aschenbrener Birth: November 22, 1908 in Park Falls, Price Co. Wisconsin Death: December 15, 1996 in Thousand Oaks, Ventura Co. California Spouse: Betty Lee Bliss
5 M	Name: Harold Edward (Mike) Aschenbrener Birth: November 24, 1910 in Park Falls, Price Co. Wisconsin Death: June 18, 1996 in Woodruff, Oneida Co. Wisconsin Spouse: Irma (Bud) Nelson
6 M	Name: Frederic Willard (Fred) Aschenbrener Birth: March 12, 1913 in Park Falls, Price Co. Wisconsin Death: January 06, 1977 in Dubuque, Dubuque Co. Iowa Marriage: July 16, 1938 in Dubuque, Dubuque Co., Iowa Spouse: Annamae Weber
7 M	Name: George Bernard Ashenbrener Jr. Birth: May 19, 1915 in Park Falls, Price Co. Wisconsin Death: February 21, 1995 in Phoenix, Maricopa Co. Arizona Spouse: Lorraine A Elliott

Our Family History

8 M	Name: Edmund Earl Aschenbrener Birth: September 08, 1916 in Park Falls, Price Co. Wisconsin Death: May 23, 1936 in Fifield, Price Co. Wisconsin
9 F	Name: Harriet Louise Aschenbrener Birth: March 27, 1919 in Fifield, Price County, Wisconsin Death: January 16, 2012 in Newport Beach, Orange, California Marriage: 1944 in Los Angeles, CA, USA Spouse: Richard Bolster Whitney
10 M	Name: Robert Wayne (Ash) Aschenbrener Birth: November 22, 1920 in Fifield, Price County, Wisconsin Death: July 02, 2009 in Cameron Park, El Dorado County, California Marriage: August 20, 1945 in Clark AFB, Philippines Spouse: Ann (Laura Ann) Middleton
11 M	Name: Richard Francis (Dick) Aschenbrener Birth: June 28, 1923 in Fifield, Price Co. WI Death: May 19, 2002 in Park Falls, Price Co. Wisconsin