

A black and white portrait of Fred Rogers, smiling and wearing a white collared shirt, a dark tie, and a light-colored cable-knit sweater. The background is a plain, light color.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

THE
GOOD
NEIGHBOR

THE LIFE AND WORK OF

FRED
ROGERS

MAXWELL KING

The Good Neighbor

The Life and Work of Fred Rogers

By Maxwell King

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CHAPTER 1

FREDDY

NANCY MCFEELY ROGERS had come back to her parents' house in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, forty miles southeast of Pittsburgh, when Fred Rogers was born. She wanted to be sure that she had as much help and support as possible for what might be a hard delivery. Nancy's first baby was coming two and a half years after her marriage to James Hillis Rogers, a handsome, dark-haired young man who had finished his engineering studies at Pennsylvania State University and the University of Pittsburgh. Rogers and his young bride, also dark-haired and attractive, made a striking couple in this small but growing industrial city in western Pennsylvania in the mid-1920s.

Fred McFeely Rogers was born on March 20, 1928, in Latrobe in the McFeely House, a handsome, old brick home at 705 Main Street. Her doctor had warned Nancy Rogers that the baby's birth could be hard for such a small woman. The labor was a long and arduous ordeal. During much of it, Ronnie, the family's Pomeranian dog, was huddled under the birth bed, adding its voice to that of young Nancy as she struggled. By the time Nancy's son, named after his maternal grandfather Fred McFeely, was born, she was exhausted. The family doctor advised her not to think about having another child, which might be not only difficult, but devastating — even fatal. It was advice that Nancy and Jim would follow.

Born in the home of his maternal grandparents, Fred and Nancy Kennedy McFeely, young Fred was to become their great favorite. Nancy Rogers was immediately protective of her new baby, smothering him with maternal love and guarding him against the outside world. In one of the photographs from that time, she is seen hugging the young boy close to her, one arm wrapped around his frame and the other protectively holding his arm. She is slight, with an angular beauty; he is a bit chubby, with a quizzical look on his face.

Sixty-five years later, Fred Rogers would say in a television interview: "Nothing can replace the influence of unconditional love in the life of a child ... Children love to belong, they long to belong."

More than anyone else in Fred's life, his mother gave him that unconditional love. Certainly, her over-protective mothering contributed to the little boy's shy and withdrawn nature; but what is even more clear is that her absolute love and devotion, along with her extraordinary generosity and kindness, contributed essential ingredients to Fred Rogers' developing character and gave him the resilience to overcome a shy, sometimes sickly (with severe asthma), and sheltered childhood. His mother was renowned throughout the family and the city of Latrobe for her giving nature and her boundless kindness. Her son took his character from this loving woman.

Nancy Rogers came from a wealthy Pittsburgh family that moved to Latrobe, an industrial city bisected by the Main Line of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Her father Fred B. McFeely built the family business, McFeely Brick, makers of silica and fire clay bricks for furnaces, into an important Latrobe manufacturing firm. Westmoreland County had abundant coal and other natural resources; and the proximity to Pittsburgh, a major river-shipping center, gave the city additional commercial advantages.

Nancy McFeely Rogers spent the rest of her life giving to the people of Latrobe. During World War I, the fourteen-year old girl knitted sweaters for American soldiers from western Pennsylvania who were fighting in Europe (knitting was one of the great passions of her life; she continued knitting sweaters for family and friends — including a new cardigan each year for Fred — for over six decades).

The next year Nancy lied about her age to get a driver's license, so she could help local hospitals and doctors' offices during the terrible flu epidemic of 1918. Her father Fred McFeely needed to sign off on paperwork to allow her to drive. To discourage her, he informed her that first she'd have to learn to re-build an engine in case the truck broke down on the road. With the help of local mechanics, the determined young woman learned quickly, and was soon on the road. Though she spent months hauling away used bandages and other medical waste, she managed to escape falling victim to the flu herself.

By the time her first child was born, she was regularly volunteering at the Latrobe Hospital, and Fred was often left with a caretaker while Nancy pursued her work. She'd once dreamed of becoming a doctor, but that was an impractical ambition for a young woman in western Pennsylvania in that era. She contented herself with a lifetime of volunteer work at the hospital.

A longtime friend of Nancy Rogers, Latrobe Area Hospital nurse Pat Smith, later recalled, "She would come into the nursery and just work. If a baby were crying, she wouldn't hesitate to assist with the feedings or tenderly rock them in her arms in the nursery rocking chairs. She wouldn't leave until she was certain that all was secure, and that included making sure the staff had time for dinner, usually at her expense."

The Rogers' home, a huge, three-story, brick mansion at 737 Weldon Street, was in the affluent area of Latrobe known as "The Hill." Fred Rogers grew up with a cook to make his meals, and a chauffeur to drive him to school. He was a cherished only child until his sister Nancy Elaine Rogers Crozier, called Laney, was adopted by Nancy and Jim Rogers when Fred was eleven. Given the age gap between them, she recalled in an interview that she always saw him as "a very grown-up playmate."

Years later, Fred Rogers told Francis Chapman of the Canadian Broadcasting Company that "his parents adopted his sister, Laney [Elaine], as a present for him. ... I don't know whether Fred had requested a sibling or not, but Fred thought that his parents thought that it would be nice for him to have one."

Given his family's wealth and stature in the community, Fred Rogers' formative years were spent in an environment in which his family had an extraordinary influence over his friends and neighbors, and almost everyone in Latrobe. By the time Fred Rogers was born, the city's population had shrunk by over a quarter to under 9,000. But Latrobe is still recognizable today as the very attractive cityscape of brick and stone houses and commercial buildings that Fred captured in his *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, trolley-track town. With its tidy homes and many parks and playgrounds, it looks like quintessential small-town America.

To put the wealth of Fred Rogers' family into perspective, it helps to examine not just the industrial heritage of the McFeely family, but also that of Nancy McFeely Rogers' maternal ancestors. They included William J. A. Kennedy of Pittsburgh (a salesman) and his wife, Martha Morgan Kennedy, who worked as a housekeeper for a leading banker, Thomas Hartley Given, in an era in which the Mellon banking fortune was built in Pittsburgh. Martha divorced Kennedy and married Given, who provided, through his investment genius, a huge family fortune that carried down through subsequent generations. Records at the McFeely-Rogers Foundation indicate that when the estate of Thomas H. Given settled on June 30, 1922, his fortune was valued roughly at \$5,509,000, or about \$70 million in today's dollars.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Martha Kennedy-Thomas Given romance is that Given built most of his considerable estate as a very early investor in Radio Corporation of America. And RCA, of course, made huge profits for its investors, including Given's heirs (about half his fortune at the end of his life was in RCA stock), through the development of television, where Fred eventually made his career.

Fred Rogers grew up keenly aware of the influence of his family, derived from the exceptional largesse and charitable works of his parents, and from the fact that Jim Rogers played a leading role in many of the large businesses in Latrobe.

A childhood friend of Fred's, Ed "Yogi" Showalter, remembered that even in grade school Fred Rogers seemed to be adopting his parents' penchant for good deeds. "I think he inherited that from his family." Showalter

explained that Fred reported to his parents that kids in his class were discussing the fact that a young classmate's parents couldn't even afford shoes for him. Within days, the boy showed up at school in brand new high-top shoes.

Showalter also remembered that all the children in class at Latrobe Elementary got out of school early on Fred's birthday so that they could go downtown to the movies, courtesy of Nancy Rogers. Another classmate, Anita Lavin Manoli, recalls that the Rogers family would travel to Florida each year, often for a long winter vacation. When Nancy Rogers got back to Latrobe, she had presents in hand for Fred's fellow students and teachers.

The Rogers family philanthropy, and the religious basis for it, became two of the most important strands in young Fred Rogers' life. His mother organized a consortium of local church volunteers to help her scout out poverty and need in the community. As often as not, the solution to a problem involved Jim and Nancy Rogers writing a check, which they did on an almost weekly basis.

For Nancy, the centerpiece of her giving was the Latrobe Presbyterian Church: the Scots-Irish Rogers and McFeely clans were staunch members of the church, located on Main Street in the center of town. Her whole family attended. .

In her role as a community watchdog, she could find out which families needed help. Nancy Rogers organized a consortium of several Latrobe churches — including the Presbyterian, the Lutheran, the Methodist and the Episcopal — into a network of ministers and volunteers called "Fish," according to the Rev. Clark Kerr of the Latrobe Presbyterian Church, whose father was one of the ministers with whom Nancy worked.

The name "Fish" was picked because of its Christian symbolism: the symbol of the fish was used as a secret sign by early Christians; Jesus referred to fish and fishing throughout his teachings; and several of Jesus' twelve apostles were fishermen. Nancy Rogers gathered intelligence from the ministers of the churches, from other volunteers, from her husband's workplace connections, and even from her own children and their

experiences at school. When she learned of a family in need, she would bring this information to "Fish" and the group would make plans to help. If money was needed, Nancy could be counted on to dip into her own funds to buy clothing, food, or medical care.

In Jim Rogers' role as key manager of several of the Rogers-owned companies — including Latrobe Die Casting and the McFeely Brick Co. — he could watch out for the families of employees and step in with a loan or a gift when needed. Jim Okonak, secretary of the family holding company, Rogers Enterprises, Inc., and executive director of the family philanthropy, the McFeely-Rogers Foundation, remembered that scores of employees from several Rogers companies would come on payday to the pay window outside Jim Rogers' office to pick up their cash wages. Often, some of them would be back the following day to take out loans from Jim Rogers because part of their wages had disappeared in the many taverns and bars that lined the streets between the steel mills and other manufacturing plants. These loans were all chronicled in a great ledger book; when Jim Rogers died, the book recorded thousands of "loans" that were never collected.

Okonak also recalls Jim Rogers' habit of chewing tobacco, which he only indulged when he walked the floors of Latrobe Die Casting, McFeely Brick Co. or other Rogers-led firms. He would put a chew in his cheek, loosen his tie and walk through the rows of manufacturing machines, addressing each employee by name, inquiring about their work and about their welfare. Back home, Rogers would report family problems to his wife, who would organize community aid efforts. The very young Fred Rogers went to school with the children of these families, and carried a constant awareness of how special his family was in this small, tight-knit city. He was proud of his mother's good works, and at the earliest age shared the family devotion to the Presbyterian Church; but he was also increasingly self-conscious and shy.

In the early twentieth century, this kind of "enlightened capitalism" was not confined to the Rogers' family. George F. Johnson of the Endicott Johnson Company in upstate New York initiated what he called a "Square Deal" for his workers that provided everything from parades to churches and libraries to "uplift" workers, encouraging loyalty, and at the same time, discouraging unionization. The company had a chess and checkers

club, and funded health and recreational facilities. The family trust also supported the construction of local pools, theaters, and even food markets.

Ironically, the very generosity that made Fred Rogers' parents so popular with adults sometimes made Fred a target of other children. Because he was so easily identified as the rich kid in town, and because of his sensitive nature, he spent part of his earliest years as an outlier in Latrobe. And he suffered from childhood asthma — increasingly common in the badly polluted air of industrial western Pennsylvania. During some of the summer months, Fred was cooped up in a bedroom with one of the region's first window air conditioning units, purchased by his mother to help alleviate his breathing problems.

ALL THE WAY BACK to the eighteenth century, before the French and Indian War helped accelerate the dispersal of the indigenous Indian population — mostly Leni Lenape, or Delawares, as the whites called them — the area around Fort Ligonier and what would become Latrobe was mostly wilderness. Only the hardiest scouts, explorers and trappers ventured into the new territories well west of Philadelphia and north of Virginia.

That part of western Pennsylvania had been one of the earliest and long-sustained areas of human habitation in North America. A little more than fifty miles west of present-day Latrobe is Meadowcroft Rockshelter, believed to be one of the oldest sites, perhaps the oldest site, of human habitation recorded on the continent. The massive rock overhang was used for shelter as long as 16,000 to 19,000 years ago, by primitive peoples, some of whom were the ancestors of the American Indians who later dominated this territory before the coming of the British and the French.

At the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, a torrent of new settlers poured into the area. In fact, few regions in the world saw such rapid expansion, extraction of natural resources and industrial development as the territory now known as western Pennsylvania.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, settlers arrived from Germany, Ireland, Scotland, England and parts of the eastern United States. Among them was a group of German Benedictine monks who founded Saint Vincent Archabbey and Monastery in 1846 in Latrobe under the guidance of Father Boniface Wimmer. It is the oldest Benedictine monastery in the U.S. About the same time, the monks founded Saint Vincent College, which later bestowed honorary degrees on both James Hillis Rogers and his son Fred, and has educated thousands of Pennsylvania's native sons and daughters.

One of the largest contingents of settlers from the Old World was composed of Scots-Irish Presbyterians — an ethnic group with roots back to Scotland and Northern Ireland — who were discouraged by misfortune in Ireland: a series of droughts, increasing land rents from their English landlords, and disagreements with the Protestant hierarchy in Ulster. Some of the Rogers, McFeely, Kennedy and Given families were represented.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Latrobe flourished very quickly once a new rail line through the site connected Harrisburg and Pittsburgh. One of the very first businesses in town was the new Pennsylvania Car Works, which manufactured rail cars for the Pennsylvania Railroad. More, diverse business followed quickly: the Loyalhanna Paper Company, Latrobe Tannery, Whiteman & Denman Tannery, the Oursler Foundry, other iron works and foundries, as well as numerous coke works, brick works, and agricultural businesses. The founder of the Pennsylvania Car Works, which also repaired railroad cars, was Oliver Barnes, who got rich buying land around and ahead of the route he laid out for the railroad's expansion into western Pennsylvania.

Located just north of the best coal and coke fields in western Pennsylvania, blessed with an abundance of rich and beautiful farmland all around, only forty miles from the confluence of the Monongahela, Allegheny and Ohio Rivers in Pittsburgh, and built around rail yards on the main line linking eastern Pennsylvania and the Atlantic Seaboard to Pittsburgh's new "gateway to the West," Latrobe simply couldn't miss as an industrial and commercial center.

(Continues...)

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