



1925: Lillian with all the children except Anne

That Most Famous Dozen

By DAVID FERGUSON

Introduction

In the movie, *Belles on Their Toes*, the last scene depicts Lillian Gilbreth (and Frank looking on from heaven), watching as the last of the Gilbreth Dozen graduates from college, thus ending the film story of this family. While the books, starting with *Cheaper by the Dozen*, and movies all came out within the same few short years at the middle of the century, the public certainly has not forgotten the Gilbreth family.

Since forming The Gilbreth Network, the most frequently asked questions concern the Gilbreth "children." *Where are they now? What did they do for a living? Did any of them have large families?* After the web site was created, the requests for information increased to the point where, if I sold this story, I could have retired on the sales.

I want to express my thanks to Ernestine Gilbreth Carey, for supplying much of the information contained herein. We discussed this article and had to weigh your interest against the family's desire for privacy. If we could say one thing about the Gilbreth family, it is that they're no different than any of us, in that they like their privacy. After all, we all get too many calls, asking us to switch long-distance phone carriers, without adding to the problem.

The Gilbreth Dozen

The children of Frank B. Gilbreth and Lillian M. Gilbreth were born between 1905 and 1922. While their father died at the early age of 55 (a month shy of his 56th birthday), his children, for the most part, took after their mother, as far as longevity is concerned. As the new century dawns, 8 of the Dozen are still with us.

One question I frequently get is about little Mary Elizabeth Gilbreth. Mary, along with some of her siblings, came down with diphtheria, in 1912. While the others recovered, Mary didn't and died on January 31st. However, you will find few references to Mary's passing, in the Gilbreth books or even in their papers, at Purdue.

The family never got over the loss of Mary and continued to refer to the Dozen, even though all twelve were never contemporaries. The story of the Dozen continued through the

books and in the movies. This out of the family's long sadness over her loss and their feeling that Mary was still with them, in spirit.

While the death of a child is never easy to accept, we have to recognize that the Gilbreth Dozen bucked the odds in their childhood and throughout their life. Keep in mind that eleven of twelve children went on to grow up, serve in (and survive) World War II and go on to careers and raising families. They grew up in an era before widespread childhood disease inoculation, penicillin or even Dr. Spock. They also survived the Spanish Flu/Influenza epidemic of 1918. With 5 brothers serving in World War II, all came home. I think few of us (and I include myself) could not tell family stories of some brother, cousin or aunt, living at this time, who hadn't died from some prevalent disease or the flu, during this era. There is no question the Gilbreths were of hearty stock.

All of the remaining Gilbreths went on to college, careers and families. However, after raising their families, Anne, Martha and Bill have all passed on.

What Did They Do?

As found in *Belles*, all of the Dozen went on to graduate college, as was their mother's and father's wish. Now, let's not gloss over this fact. If you are not from a large family, count up all of your siblings and cousins. What percentage of your family's generation went to college? If I include all of my cousins (most of whom were girls), we had an even dozen. With our dozen, a little over half graduated from college and none of us were from single parent households, as were most of the Gilbreths when they entered college (Anne was about to start her second year of college when her father died). This achievement says a lot for both Lillian Gilbreth and the children. It not only took money, but ability and a lot of perseverance.

When World War II broke out, 5 of the Gilbreth sons joined the service (the 6th was turned down for health reasons). The boys followed the example their father set when he enlisted after the US entered "The Great War," in 1917. Frank was 49 when he practically shamed Uncle Sam into taking him. Thankfully, they all returned home.

As to careers, none of the children ever followed in their parents footsteps. This was not due to a lack of interest as much as the fact that their mother preferred to see them follow their own interests. Also, she had first-hand experience with the disappointments she and Frank had experienced, trying to pioneer a new form of business management and didn't encourage her children to enter the field.

Ernestine went on to a career as a retail buyer and later author of more than 5 books.

Frank Jr. was a journalist, newspaper executive and author of more than 12 books.

Bill, Fred and Jack did, in part, follow the family interest and were engineers.

Dan until very recently, ran a business as an importer/exporter.

Bob was a teacher, school principal and member of the New Hampshire legislature.

Anne, Martha, Lillian & Jane married and raised their children (and their husbands) and were active in various community service organizations.

When they finally settled down to retire, due to jobs, families and circumstances, the Gilbreth family was scattered all over the country. Anne and Ernestine both ended up living in California, Frank Jr., in South Carolina, Martha and Jane, in Washington; Bill settled in Maryland; Lillian in Delaware, Fred, in New York, Dan and Jack both in New Jersey (and until a recent move, both had lived in Montclair); and Bob, in New Hampshire (whenever I do a list like this, I always find myself counting on my fingers and toes).

While the Gilbreths may have moved to the far corners of the US, the majority of the family still had a warm place in their hearts for Nantucket. According to Ernestine Carey, all of the sons continued to make almost yearly visits to Nantucket and eventually 5 had their own homes there. If you read Frank Jr.'s book, *Innside Nantucket*, you will find out how Bob and his

wife came to own and operate the Anchor Inn, on Nantucket. Also, there were several Gilbreth sailboats to be found around the Nantucket waters.

Of the daughters and their mother, only Anne was a devotee to the island. The others would come over for family gatherings.

Yes, The Shoe, is still there, or at least one of the lighthouses and the New Shoe. The old Shoe was torn down in the 1950s, before it fell down (read *Innside Nantucket* for details). The Anchor Inn is also still in business, although long ago sold by Bob and his wife. The present owners are quite proud of the Inn's previous heritage/owners, as I found out when they were bidding against me for a copy of *Innside* on the e-Bay auction site.



The Gilbreths in "foolish carriage"

As to another family tradition, people ask about the Gilbreth Family Council. Ernestine Carey reports that only one of the daughters tried to carry on the Family Council in her family. However, her husband's lack of enthusiasm spread to their children and the idea was soon dropped. I can remember in my own family, after we had seen *Cheaper by the Dozen*, tried holding our own family council. We weren't too successful, as I remember. I guess it works best with large families.

But, I must report, that when the Dozen get together, the Family Council is alive and well. I was lucky enough to spend a day with two of the Dozen, in addition to a son and daughter and daughter-in-law and one or more grandchildren (I began to lose count). When it came to deciding how to spend the day, the Family Council went into action. The meeting contained a number of "points of order" and final votes, generally coming up with plans which satisfied most of

the group. However, I remember the issue of what to eat for lunch was wisely solved by stopping at a spot with three restaurants side-by-side, with sub-groups of our party at each.

What About Another Dozen?

Despite all the fun there must have been growing up in a large family, none of the Gilbreth children chose to continue the tradition, either out of practicality or sheer terror. They also may have gotten the point, when their mother, upon selling the Montclair homestead, moved into a small apartment. I've always thought that she did this so the children wouldn't all move back in with her.

In any event, the Dozen all had modest families: Anne, Frank, Fred, Dan and Jack each had 3 children. Ernestine, Bill, Lillian, Bob and Jane each had 2, and Martha led the pack with 4 children. All totaled, there were 29 grandchildren for Lillian Gilbreth. This was likely another good reason for Lillian to keep her little apartment.

I don't have a count on the great-grandchildren, but every time I meet up with the Gilbreths, I meet more of the next generation or heard of new additions. We can, however, project the size of the next generation of great-grandchildren. If each of the 29 grandchildren marries and decides to have children, and we take the national average of family size, of 2.5 children (the previous Gilbreth generation averaged 2.6), that would mean that we could see 72 great-grandchildren. You can only imagine the size of a hall they would have to rent for a family reunion (when you added in spouses, etc.). All of this in less than 100 years since Frank and Lillian Gilbreth said "I Do," in 1904. With a generation, every 20-25 years, by the end of this century, there will be more than 7,000 people with Frank and Lillian in their family trees. I think that they'd both be proud.

Read More About Them

For those of you who want to read more about the Dozen, or their individual lives, there are a number of books which might be available through your library, inter-library loan or at used book sellers.

Rings Around Us, By Ernestine G. Cary, tells of her early years of marriage.

Innside Nantucket, By Frank Gilbreth, Jr., tells the humorous story of Bob Gilbreth and his wife buying and running Nantucket's Anchor Inn.

Time Out For Happiness, By Frank Gilbreth, Jr., is the final chapter of Lillian Gilbreth's life with her grown children, her many retirements, and the background stories about *Cheaper* and *Belles*.

As I Remember, By Lillian M. Gilbreth, is a recently published manuscript telling about her childhood years and of raising her family. You can still purchase this book--see our web site for details.

Living With Our Children and *A Homemaker and Her Job*, both by Lillian M. Gilbreth, were published in the late 1920s. While they were meant to be books about how to raise a family and manage a home, there are many stories about the family. You may still be lucky enough to find a copy of these books, but they've been out of print a long time.

Ancestors of the Dozen, By Frank Gilbreth, Jr., was actually a privately published book intended for the family. However, if you check the Internet book sites, you may find a copy or two available. This book tells about the family trees of the Gilbreths and the Mollers.

Of course, *Cheaper by the Dozen* and *Belles on Their Toes* are still available from new and used book sellers and in every good library.

In addition to all the fun we can have reading about the Gilbreth family, there was a very important side to the story. Frank and Lillian Gilbreth made very important contributions in management, engineering and Motion Study. You can read about the serious side of their lives in the following books.

Quest for the One Best Way, By Lillian Gilbreth, is Frank's biography. It is available through libraries or for purchase from the Society of Women Engineers.

Frank and Lillian Gilbreth: Partners for Life, By Edna Yost, may be a little difficult to find, but is well worth the effort. It tells the story of Frank's and Lillian's life together and their business.

Managing on Her Own, By Dr. Laurel Graham, tells of Lillian Gilbreth's life and work in the 1930s and '40s.

If you are interested in management books written by the Gilbreths, we have a list on our web site.

[Web editor's note: Since this article was published, two of the Gilbreth "dozen," Frank, Jr. and Lillian, have passed away.]



The Gilbreths at "The Shoe" in Nantucket, 1923