



The author's grandmother, Ida Albertine Stein, in Yokohama, Japan. Below: Ida Stein and William Flynn's wedding day, August 14, 1914; the Great Buddha in Kamakura, Japan.

**M**Y GRANDMOTHER HAD lots of secrets. Even her entry into Ellis Island made for a good mystery. Somehow, en route from London in 1909, she lost her steamer trunk, arriving in the New World as metaphorically naked as Shakespeare's shipwrecked Viola. Ida Albertine Stein died before I was born. What I knew about her came primarily from the tantalizing mementos she'd left behind—coins from places as diverse as Siam and Mexico, a silver-and-crystal inkwell that now adorns my desk—and three frayed albums of travel photographs.

Growing up in Andover, Massachusetts, where an exotic destination meant Cape Cod, I treated the albums as if they were *Tales from the Arabian Nights*. Only there weren't any tales—just pictures of my grandmother, a tall, dark-haired woman, with a penchant for big hats and the Victorian equivalent of Manolo Blahniks. Whether traveling by ocean liner or oxcart, she favored pointy-toed slippers, in bone or white, with bows.

Those shoes took her everywhere—India, Egypt, Japan, Hong Kong, China, the Caribbean. What was she doing in these far-off places? My mother speculated that she might have been a nanny or a traveling companion but wasn't sure. Once Ida married my grandfather, William Flynn, she packed away her traveling shoes and went on to spend the next 40 years in Andover as a wife, mother, and devoted churchgoer. As a child she'd had rheumatic fever, and her weakened heart had worsened as she got older; my mother still remembers her difficult climbs up the steep steps to St. Augustine Church.

I couldn't reconcile this image with the free-spirited young woman in the albums. Why didn't my mother know the details of my grandmother's considerably more colorful »

## Vanishing Points

Knowing her grandmother only through photo albums, PATRICIA MORRISROE tries to retrace her mysterious world travels



“spinster” days? “That was the past,” my mother said recently, and if the past is indeed a foreign country, my grandmother, like so many of her contemporaries, had little desire to travel there again. My mother, by nature not curious, followed her own mother’s lead.

As for future generations, if my grandmother had purposely set out to frustrate them with the photo albums, she couldn’t have done a better job. She placed battleships in Vancouver next to Japanese geishas, opened one album with muscular British rowers and closed it with a Caribbean brass band. While she included the exact measurements of the Great Buddha in Kamakura, she neglected to identify fellow travelers, such as the pipe-smoking Cary Grant look-alike in the white linen suit in two of the three albums. Infuriatingly cryptic, she favored such phrases as, “A nice walk (sometimes)” or “After the earthquake—St. Pierre.”

For years I filled in the story for her. Depending on what I was reading, she was an adventuress like Gertrude Bell; a maharajah’s mistress; a British spy. How else did a jeweler’s daughter from London wind up all over the globe?

This I do know: My grandmother passed down her wanderlust to me. Before I left home for summer school in Paris, at 19, my grandfather gave me her India

album and crystal inkwell to take with me. And so, with Ida as my shadow guide, I began traveling, too. I spent a year of college in London—Ida’s departure point—and from there, visited nearly every European capital. With more money and confidence, I later ventured to Russia, Northern Africa, and Asia. Whenever I’d buy a souvenir—a *suzani* in Istanbul or an antique necklace in Fez—I’d think of Ida’s missing trunk, rationalizing extravagance as my rightful legacy.

By the time I reached India, her pictures were so familiar that it practically felt like home. Gazing out my window at the shimmering Taj Lake Palace in Udaipur, I mentally compared the picture to the one she’d taken. Except for the neo-Viking ships on

the water—left behind after the filming of *Octopussy*—the view and perspective were exactly the same. My grandmother had apparently stayed at the Shiv Niwas Palace, too.

When I returned home, I put Ida’s album away. I had my own pictures now. She’d done her job and that was the end of it.

Except it wasn’t.

**N**OT LONG AFTERWARD, during a weekend in Middleburg, Virginia, my husband and I took a side trip to Leesburg to see Oatlands plantation. The 22-room Greek Revival house, built in 1804, is now a National Historic Landmark, its glorious terraced gardens set off by a series of distinctive balustrades. As I walked up the hill, past apple and pear trees, the land seemed hauntingly familiar; I thought of *Brideshead Revisited*’s opening line: *I have been here before*. But I’d never been to Oatlands. I’d never even set foot in Virginia.

Several months later, while doing some unrelated Internet research, it occurred to me to look for my grandmother’s name on the Ellis Island Web site. Fully expecting her to have eluded even the U.S. immigration officials, instead, I easily located her among the passengers sailing west on the *Adriatic*. According to the ship’s manifest, she’d paid her own way, traveled “second cabin,” and was neither a polygamist nor an anarchist. Her occupation was listed as “maid.” (For the sake of a good story, I’d have vastly preferred polygamist.) I struggled with the blurred handwriting to make out her destination. It appeared to be “Oakland.” That was a surprise.

“I didn’t know my grandmother lived in California!” I told my husband that night. “That’s not Oakland,” he said, magnifying the entry on my computer. “It’s Oatlands! Look, it says right here—Leesburg, Virginia.” I couldn’t believe it, and yet why had I recognized the house?

I took my hunch to Andover, and with my 87-year-old mother by my side, carefully turned the brittle pages of the albums. Next to a picture of Ida boating in Japan with a man in a dragon kimono were two other photos of her sitting in a pile of leaves, patting a retriever. In the background was a garden balustrade.

“Bingo!” wrote Elizabeth Simon, the house manager at Oatlands, after I’d e-mailed her scans of the pictures. She also confirmed that the children in the other photo belonged to »

Ida by the sea  
in Newport,  
Rhode Island.



Why didn’t my mother know details of my grandmother’s **COLORFUL** ‘spinster’ days?

Ida Stein traveling by oxcart on the road to Amber, India.



*By the time I reached India, her pictures were so FAMILIAR that it practically felt like home*

Oatlands' owners—Mr. and Mrs. William Corcoran Eustis. His namesake grandfather founded the Corcoran Gallery of Art; her father, Levi P. Morton, was vice president to President Benjamin Harrison and so rich that Washington chronicler Henry Adams referred to him as “a money bag.” Edith Wharton made her debut in the Morton ballroom in New York. Too bad my grandmother hadn't kept a diary. Unlike Wharton, she must have literally known where all the dirty linen was.

Thanks to Ancestry.com and the ProQuest archive of historical newspapers, I was able to track my grandmother's progress from one old-money enclave to the next. In 1910, she “wintered” in Aiken, South Carolina, with Thomas and Louise Hitchcock (William Eustis's sister), who drew the Whitneys, Astors, and Vanderbilts to the sports resort, and whose famous polo-playing son, Tommy Jr., was an inspiration for the aristocratic Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*.

After that, Ida popped up in an apartment at the Dakota, on Central Park West, then in Natick, Massachusetts, where she worked for Mr. and Mrs. William S. Patten—he of the contracting company Holbrook, Cabot & Rollins, which helped build the Times Square subway and the Russian railroad; she from the socially prominent Thayer family, at whose Newport cottage my

grandmother spent several summers before cruising through the West Indies.

My fascination with these characters bore no fruit: none of them could be linked to Ida's foreign travels. But by now I was obsessed enough to plan a trip to London to fill in the gaps.

I had no specific plan; instead, I wandered like a tourist through her life. First stop, her childhood home, on Great Titchfield Street, in Marylebone. “So this is where your grand adventure began,” I thought, walking past rows of red-brick Victorian buildings. Then I reached her block, where a hideous modern building had devoured several pretty houses. Her address was now the Winchester Club. A sign promoted a “Members Only” party: “Summer snacks, blackjack, and the Malibu Girls grooving the night away.”

A man came out and saw me taking notes. “Looking for someone?” he asked. “Yeah,” I said. “My grandmother.” He looked skeptical. “In *here*?”

The next day at the British Library, I hunted for a familiar name in the India Office Records, a massive repository of documents relating to the pre-1947 government. But my grandmother didn't show up, at least not under “British maids, 1906,” the only terms I thought to use. Turning to the private papers, I found the diaries of Lady Curzon, wife of the viceroy. She was from the wealthy Leiter family of Washington's Dupont Circle. Didn't William Eustis once work at the U.S. embassy in London? In my new six-degrees-of-separation world, it seemed possible that the Mortons or Eustises might have been connected to the Leiters. But nothing came up there either. Or in a later search of the *London Times*. Or in two more frustrating days spent wrestling with spools of microfilm at the London Metropolitan and City of Westminster archives.

On a final stroll through Marylebone, I found myself at 2 Upper Wimpole Street, where Arthur Conan Doyle had created Sherlock Holmes. It made me regret that I hadn't been able to make better use of my clues. But what had Holmes said? “When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

Now, on Great Titchfield Street, by eliminating the Malibu Girls, I could see my grandmother, in her dainty shoes, running off to buy her trunk.

Visions and a crystal inkwell—these were her indubitable legacy. ✦



**EXCLUSIVE SLIDE SHOW**

*Flip through more photos from Ida Albertine Stein's worldwide adventures, and find resources for tracking down your ancestors, at [travelandleisure.com](http://travelandleisure.com).*