

A TRIBUTE TO MY GRANDMOTHER

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

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THE INTRODUCTION

Maybe it was because I would soon be flying to Wisconsin to visit family and friends that I haven't seen in several years. Maybe it was the recent conversations with my mom's mother over some health issues she has still unresolved. Possibly it was a story I just read that my sister wrote in college for a creative writing class about the passing of my Grandma Colbeth. Whatever the reason a flood of memories crowded my head acting out on a stage in my mind where I was the only audience reliving each of the moments just the way I had recorded them.

It is the heart of America, Wisconsin the Dairy State, the miles and miles of fields in the summer months yield crops for the cattle whose pastures will soon be covered in snow. The harvest is stored in red barns and silos creating the infamous cliché of the Midwest landscape.

I was raised as a "city boy", well that's what the country kids called me, but with the population of the towns where my parents decided to settle well below 1000 people I can hardly believe I was a "city boy". Both sides of my grandparents were still farming in those days, both had instilled wonderful memories, but now the only living reminder of those memories is my mother's mom, Grandma Anderson. Grandma lives in Woodburn, Oregon where she settled after a chain of events in her life led her back to the country where she was raised. Now that I'm older and know what I think I know, Grandma probably wasn't born to be a farmers wife but love does crazy things to a person and she ended up in Wisconsin on a farm married to a farmer. My mother moved to Wisconsin from Oregon City, Oregon, where she was raised, to be with her mother and sister during the months prior to Uncle Chris's birth. While out dancing one night at a local dance hall mom met my father; 3 months later they were married. And so began the

years of raising children in the “Dairy State” far from their native land in the Pacific Northwest.

My parents were self-employed entrepreneurs. On one of our adventures my parents purchased a business, “The Velkommen Inn”, in Woodville, Wisconsin just a few miles from my Grandparents farm. Our restaurant/store/gas station was the first business entering town and my grandparents farm was one of the last as you were leaving Woodville, of course that depends on which way you came into town.

NEWFOUND INDEPENDANCE

I still remember that morning lying awake in my bed. Mom is sitting at my side and the sun is just barely starting to find it’s way into the basement window of my bedroom. We are carefully going over the details of the journey I was about to take upon myself; for today I would ride my bicycle to Grandma’s house! I don’t remember how old I was but I couldn’t be much older than 6 or 7 years at the time, which today might seem unnerving, but in those days the small town life was still safe and predictable. It was only a couple short miles to my grandparent’s farm and still early enough that there were only a few cars on the roadway.

The sun was now high enough in the sky that I could tell it was going to be a beautiful sunny day. The grass was still wet with the morning dew as I made my way across the backyard to my bicycle; the birds singing and the freshness of early morning air added to my excitement. I had traveled these roads many times in the car with my parents but today things looked different when not framed in by the window of a car. Under the train tracks and past the retirement center I rode, past the church to an intersection where I had to make my first decision, left into town or right up the hill? Even though I knew which

way I needed to turn before I got to the intersection the thrill of navigating that turn on my own still stands out in my mind. A gradual slope through downtown allowed me to simply coast and enjoy my newfound independence across the bridge, following the road as it made a turn to the right and headed out of town.

This end of town was less familiar to me. Usually by this time I'd be sitting in the car, lost in thought deciding what thing I would do first when I got to my grandparents. The huge trees that grew in the boulevards on both sides of the road touched their branches over my head shutting out the sun's light. I pedaled on past the cemetery and out of town where the grass in the ditch grew wild. I could now see ahead of me in the distance the curve in the road, the creek and the open fields; I would soon be there.

A WARM GREETING

Two big silver painted wagon wheels on either side of the mountainous driveway welcomed me as I hopped off my bike and walked it up the steep hill to the house. Grandma came running from the house and grandpa walked up from the barn where he had been keeping a watchful eye. I'd be smothered in kisses and then swept inside to phone home and let my parents know I arrived safely.

THE FARM

Grandma and Grandpa's place was a fun place to visit. Inside the house grandma had different colored glass votive candles lined up in the front windows that sparkled in the sun's light. The dining room

floor was a brick mosaic pattern and when combined with my imagination, was an excellent playground for hot wheel cars.

The living room was on the backside of the house and it's windows looked out onto the front and backside areas of the yard where I usually didn't play. These areas of the yard were still left unexplored and it sometimes looked like I was peering out into some foreign land. A large bird feeder that grandpa had built was mounted right smack in the middle of the front yard. He used the top of an old hot water heater jacket and fastened it upside down to a wooden fence post. Grandma would keep the feeder full of her secret concoctions and soon the word was out among her bird friends that "dinner was served". There were birds of every color feasting and carrying-on when all of a sudden something would grab my attention again and pull me back inside to my place, gazing out the front window.

We didn't go in the living room very often as it was reserved for the adults who came to visit and was just someplace us kids didn't need to be. The carpeting seemed as though it had been over stuffed so each step was like walking on air. The couches appeared brand new and unworn. The coffee table usually had a "Guidepost" or two neatly displayed, as well as the glass grapes. The orange glass grape cluster that adorned the coffee table was most intriguing. In times of contemplation and boredom I would look at those oversized glass grapes with their driftwood stem and think about things that needed to be thought about whatever they were...

Grandma and I would go into the living room to relax in between her many chores and I'd curl up on her lap as she rocked me back and forth in the rocking chair singing a nonsensical song about a man grinding sausages. Nevertheless, it was comforting to hear her voice and soon we'd both be out for a catnap.

In this room was an old book stacked neatly on the bottom shelf, the only shelf you dare put it on due to it's size. It contained hundreds of natural remedies and potions for diseases that plague the body. One

time in particular I remember Grandma suffering from a canker sore. I got out the book and poured over it's pages to find a cure for her ailment. I found that the spice "alum" when applied to her wound would accelerate the healing. We tried the remedy and grandma claimed it helped whether or not it really did I'm not sure.

If I wasn't in the mood for reading the "medicine book" I could always practice my talents on the old cherry wood upright piano. When I first started to play the piano I could barely sit in the chair and reach the foot pedals. Grandma and I would practice the "ditty's" she knew over and over until we could play them together. Many years later grandma gave us her piano and I learned to play by ear. My dad, who also played by ear, taught me to "cord" and he and I would play together, he on the accordion and me on the old cherry wood piano.

Upstairs were the guest bedrooms and Uncle Chris's room. From the bottom of the stairs I stood looking at the pie shaped steps that made the sharp turn to the left before they continued to the top. Once at the top I could stand up again and not need my hands to help steady me as I did during the steep climb up. Here the ceilings tilted in toward the peak of the house and although adults walked freely through the upstairs, I always felt a bit claustrophobic. There were pictures scattered atop the dressers some of whom I recognized others I hadn't a clue. Uncle Chris's room was always interesting. From the center light in the room he had an array of electrical cords running down into the room for power and although nothing in particular sticks out in my head, there was always many things to look at from his doorway where I stood. "Stevie! What are you doing up there? You'd better come down here with grandma...", I heard her shout from the bottom of the stairway. Having investigated all I needed to for today I'd sit down at the top step and slowly ride each step down on my butt until I reached the bottom.

Before I was old enough to go to the barn by myself Grandma and I would walk down the hill to the barn. The pathway was marked by concrete that had simply been poured down the hill from the highest point until it found it's way to the bottom then flattened out with a shovel and lines drawn using a pitch fork in the wet cement for traction. The milk house held a huge stainless steel tank that we would ladle milk from to fill our pitcher for the house and once filled we'd set it aside and go into the barn to find Grandpa.

In the barn the distinctive smell of the farm was concentrated and the barn doors were swung open wide to let in the fresh air. As we walked into the barn the fresh white lime crackled under our feet. The stanchions where the cows usually were secured were opened and empty. We were too late for the morning milking and too early for the evening so Grandpa was taking advantage of this time to clean up and restock the barn before it was time to fetch the cows and bring them back into the barn.

Many things were interesting and worthy of investigation: The automatic watering dishes that filled with fresh water as the animals drank, the silo that held the sweet smell of a fermenting corn and oat mixture, the trap door to the hay loft with a makeshift ladder, the calves that didn't leave the barn and the resident bull - complete with horns, pacing in the corner pen. Oddly enough the piece of machinery that I found the most amazing was the automatic barn cleaner. This was used to remove the manure from the barn so it could later be spread on the fields as fertilizer. Around the perimeter, inside the barn was a gutter about 12 inches wide and probably just as deep. When the cows were in their stanchions they would drop their manure into the gutters. Once a day the machine was turned on. A chain with scraper arms attached traveled inside the gutter pulling with it all the manure that had accumulated. As the waste left the barn it made a 6-foot

ascent into the air then dropped into the manure spreader wagon, that had been strategically placed beneath it earlier.

WORKING IN THE GARDENS

Back at the house Grandma and I worked in her gardens. There was a spot by the back door of the house where the coffee grounds were dumped. Occasionally grandma would carry a bucket of dirt she had scooped from that area and mixed that into her soil. We had brought with us from the barn a bucket of old composted manure that we now worked in around her plants with a small shovel. Grandma explained how the compost made “good dirt” and the plants that grew without hesitation in their rich black beds confirmed her words. “Stevie, tomorrow we will take the truck and pick some rock for around this bed that I just dug out.” Although I wasn’t exactly sure what it was we would be doing, it sounded fun and I couldn’t wait!

It wasn’t very often Grandma drove the antique pickup. The old green Ford sported a 3-on-the-tree and it seemed odd to have Grandma behind the wheel. Off we went down the driveway, across the highway, down into and across the creek. I couldn’t believe we had just drove through a creek! Oh this was exciting! We’d follow the tractor tracks around the fields and out by the lagoon. Here earlier a pile of rock had been removed from the fields and was placed out of the way of the plow. We loaded up the treasure and headed back to the house. We would work on putting the rocks around the beds later – we had other chores to do first.

The basement door swung open over the stairway and Grandma began her descent into the basement carrying with her a pile of clothes. She carefully maneuvered each of the steep steps as they creaked beneath her feet. It took me a considerable more amount of time to decide how I'd come down those steps but the excitement of what we were about to do overpowered any fears I had about falling. The part of the basement at the bottom of the stairs was directly under the kitchen. The walls were made of rocks that had been cemented together to hold the weight of the house. Any water that made its way into the basement around the rock foundation drained into the "sump". A pump was activated when the "sump" was full and emptied the water into the backyard. The basement continued under the rest of the house through a doorway. In this room was the old oil furnace. Its octopus arms reached to all areas of the house to deliver heat to every room. Back under the kitchen I could tell grandma had finished filling the Maytag wringer and the clothes now swished back and forth in the tub in a torrent of soapy water. When the clothes had been sufficiently washed and rinsed we would pull each article out of the murky water and run it through the wringer to remove the excess water. The clothes dropped into the wicker basket and when all them had been processed we headed up the stairs and out the backdoor. Over by the vegetable garden a clothesline was strung and each piece was hung securely to blow in the fresh country air out of view from the road.

Just then the tractor started up and I ran to the fence to see what Grandpa was up to. He had the John Deer fired up and was making his way across the driveway toward the house. Grandpa helped me up onto the John Deer into his lap and instructed me what levers to push and pull to make the iron horse go. Away we went! Back across the driveway and out toward the pasture. We were headed to round up the cows – now I'm not sure if Grandpa always used the tractor or if that

was only for my benefit -I'll never know. Nevertheless I sat proudly behind the steering wheel as we traveled across the pastures until we spotted the cattle. "Come Boss!" Grandpa would yell, "Come Boss!" Slowly the animals made their way back to the barn and when we returned to the house I made my way down from the tractor feeling as though I had really been a part of something big.

In the house Grandma had started dinner. As she peeled potatoes at the kitchen sink she would stare out the window, humming quietly to herself. I always wondered what went through her mind during those times. "What are you doing Grandma?" I'd ask. "Just getting dinner ready honey. You get the cards out and we will play a game in a minute." When I had the cards dealt on the kitchen table we would play 500 rummy until it was time to set the table – soon Grandpa would be up from the barn and it would be time for dinner.

CONSLUSION

After dinner it was time for my Grandparents to play cards. I often sat across from them and watched them play. It was obvious to me it wasn't so much who came out the winner as it was time they spent together after a busy day on the farm. They discussed the "goin's-on" of the day and went over plans for tomorrow. Each of them working independently yet together toward their goal: A showcase farm that was both profitable and beautiful. Any passers-by that had taken the exit off the freeway and headed into town noticed my Grandparents postcard farm on the hillside with its bright red barn, pure white farmhouse and Quonset buildings, and beautiful gardens in bloom all around the yard.

There would be many more visits to my Grandparent's farm before Grandpa passed away. Grandma decided to sell the farm and move

back home to the Pacific Northwest. She finally settled in her home in Woodburn, Oregon where she has been now for several years.

When I turned 18 I left my family in Wisconsin and went to live in Seattle, Washington. Each of us has things in our life we wish we could do over with the experience of life under our belt and although Grandma was only 4 hours away we rarely saw each other. As I get older and begin to appreciate the things in life differently I am learning to make time for the things I want to enjoy. It is now my choice to remind myself daily of the good things I have in my life and be thankful for any of the experiences I've been through. Grandma is now considering moving up to the Seattle area where 3 of her 4 children live and I am excited about having her nearby where we can enjoy her company once again.

The End