

I Remember
by Ruth Wilson Martin

I was born March 27, 1909 in a home on Pleasant Street on the University of Minnesota Campus in South East Minneapolis. The time of my birth was approximately eight o'clock in the morning. I was the fourth child; the eldest was Helen Annette, then Viktor Ottman, and third was Ivan Edward. The house where I was born had been replaced by the School of Mines and the name Pleasant Street had disappeared by the time I enrolled as a student in September, 1928.

My father was graduated from the School of Dentistry at the University of Minnesota in June, 1909 upon earning the degree of Doctor of Dental Surgery. After his graduation the family moved to Parker's Prairie, Minnesota where he opened an office. He also practiced in Henning, taking the train for the twenty or thirty miles distance. This was a common practice when travel was by horse or train. My family built a new home in Parker's Prairie, and we lived there until 1913. There was another baby born there, Edgar Oceander Wilson, Jr.

This is about the time I began to remember events. When I think about those events in Parker's Prairie, they all seem traumatic and were certainly scary to a sensitive little girl.

One thing I remember vividly was the howling of the wolves on cold winter nights. I do not remember seeing them, but the rest of the family do.

Mr. Hallin, the druggist, who was a neighbor, always had large fireworks for his family and ours on the 4th of July. Once he left a very tall fire cracker standing in the middle of the lawn that had not exploded when lit in the morning. When evening came he decided that it was a dud, but when he went to pick it up it went off causing him to lose an eye. From that time on we were allowed to use small fire crackers and sparklers only. I remember feeling some envy of our friends who had Roman candles and sky rockets. However, we did get to see the displays at the Fair grounds which were usually grand and did not begin until it was dark.

When our baby brother was five months old we all had the measles, rubeola, and were quite ill. The curtains were drawn, and we were kept strictly in bed. Mother

would bring pitchers of hot Horlick's Malted Milk, which I liked very much. I suppose my fondness for it came from having been fed it from birth.

The baby also became ill with the measles and died of what was called convulsions. When I came downstairs in the morning my father showed me our baby in his buggy with pennies on his eyes to hold his lids closed. I remember the funeral held in our home, and that I sat next to my mother. Then my parents took him to Kasson where he is buried in Maple Grove Cemetery. I do not remember who else went along on the train. There was probably no one, because we had a full time maid.

When I was four years old we moved to Montevideo, Minnesota. Montevideo is situated on a hill overlooking the valley of the Chippewa and Minnesota Rivers which join there. You can see far beyond the rivers and across the prairies. Montevideo means "I see from the hill" in Latin. It received its name from some early scholarly Congregational minister. Montevideo had about 5000 population and was a railroad division point with a roundhouse and railroad business offices.

At the time we moved to Montevideo there were many churches – one Congregational, one Methodist Episcopal, one Baptist, one Swedish Lutheran, two Norwegian Lutheran, one German Lutheran, one Roman Catholic, one Church of God – and a good number of citizens who considered themselves atheists.

Montevideo, is really the town that all of us think of as "home" despite the fact that Helen was eleven at the time we moved there and went off to college when she was seventeen, Vik spent nine years there and Ivan about ten or eleven.

When we first went to Montevideo the only house available was a very small one next to the first Baptist Church and across the street from the old Chippewa County Courthouse and the county jail. The sheriff's home faced our street with the jail attached behind it. That small house was very cold and unsuitable, so we moved to a lower apartment in a fairly large house next to Chinhinta Park.

That park was a deep ravine with a pretty stream running through it, and the hillsides were covered with trees. Children played in the park at all seasons. In winter we had deep snow and the older kids would ski off our front porch and down into the park. One time Helen fell into deep snow and lost her petticoat which they could not find

until the snow melted in the spring.

One summer we lived in a five room canvas bungalow with windows and screens, awnings, and hardwood floors. It was a really nice cottage.

There was a man, Joe Strommer, who was a policeman and worked for a dray line who lived near us. He used to do wood-working in his yard in the summer time, and once he had some pieces of two by two left over. I thought they were just right for the legs of a doll table which I wanted very badly. So, he said he would make me one if I could bring him a piece of wood for the top. At our apartment we had an outdoor toilet, and I was very impressed with Mother's scrubbing it thoroughly and having a new lid for the seat. The lid was not attached and was just the right size, so what was more natural for a little girl to get than that fine piece. Well, I had the table – proudly carried it home – and into trouble. However, they didn't take it away from me, and I played with it for a long time. They got a new lid, and I think they finally thought it was funny.

I also acquired a kitten, but when we moved the kitten ran away.

Windham College, a school sponsored by the Congregational Church, was located at the far north end of town. I don't know the number of students, but I do remember the cold night the college burned. I was awakened by the most alarming sound – the siren at the roundhouse. The whistle was blown regularly at the change of shifts at the railroad yards, at 12:00 o'clock noon, and at the 9:00pm curfew. We were used to that. But when there was a fire in town the whistle blew a very terrifying siren – chiefly to call the volunteer firemen to duty – but on this night the siren went on and on.

The summer that I was six years old we lived across the street from the high school. A new school was being constructed to house grades one through six for the children of the northern and central part of the town and the senior high school. The new school was connected to the old high school which became the junior high with grades seven and eight.

My mother had been a school teacher and my father a county superintendent of schools. Their experiences had convinced them that children should not attend school until they were eight years of age. My sister Helen entered the first grade when she was eight and graduated at 17, the youngest in the class. My older brother, Viktor,

started school at eight and graduated when he was 18. The younger of the two boys, Ivan, began school at seven and graduated at 19, a normal 12 years in school.

All my playmates, my age, were going to school on opening day in the beautiful new building. Nothing was more natural that I should go too, so I did. My mother missed me and when she couldn't find me she became worried. It had not been my parent's intention that I should go to school that year. It finally occurred to her that I might be at school. So, she came to the first grade classroom, and there I was. My first small step to independence. Miss Jones, the teacher, persuaded her to let me stay.

My friend, Ruth Engebretson, lived down town. It was really "down" from our house with a long block of steep steps called Lincoln's Parkway, a pretty place with big trees and wild flowers growing on the hillside. Then a block called Bank Hill continued down to main street. Every little town seemed to have a Main Street. Officially in Montevideo, Main Street was 1st Street.

Ruth and her parents lived in an apartment on the second floor of Engebretson's Department Store. When I went to play with Ruth we would cross the foot bridge over the Little Chippewa River, which ran behind Main Street, to play in Smith's Park. In the spring, the park would be covered with beautiful, large yellow and blue violets. We would each pick a bouquet to take home.

Between the river and the backs of the store buildings on 1st Street a spur railroad track and a roadway ran as far as the flour mill. There were often horse drawn dray wagons on the road. One day when we were going home the horses were standing at the foot of the bridge, so that we had to pass right in front of them. Ruth was afraid of the horses and would not cross. She chose to walk about two blocks through the park to another street and bridge over the river and then around a sharp corner by the flour mill to Main Street. I crossed the footbridge and went on home, whistling all the way.

In Montevideo we had a young man named Harry Poppe who drove his automobile very fast. As he sped around the mill corner he struck my friend and killed her.

Shortly before I reached home Mother received a telephone call that I had been killed at the corner by the mill. She could tell the caller that she could hear me coming, so it couldn't be her daughter. That was probably one of the few times she was glad she had a "tom-boy" daughter.

Strange that I should still recall the callers name – a lawyer named Gjerset. I always tried to avoid him.

Many people walked to Smith's Park on Sunday, including my parents and me. On one of those Sundays I was wearing a blue dress with a velvet ribbon sash. I loved that dress. Harry Poppe passed so close to me his wheels left grease on my dress which Mother could never get out. I don't remember ever walking that way again.

Lots of exciting things happened downtown. A major event was a run-a-way when a team of dray horses was startled by something. I never knew what. The horses ran thundering down the street with the wagon careening behind them. By the time they had run the length of main street they would have slowed down and men could catch them. The horses eyes would have a wild look we could see as they came toward us. It was frightening, but they went by so fast it was soon over.

When we were young, dogs never had to be leashed. Consequently, we were acquainted with all the dogs in town. There were two bulldogs who belonged to one man who allowed them to roam. When they went down town they would meet the bull dogs who lived there. When a fight erupted and neither dog gave up his grip on the other's jaws, men would light matches and hold them to their noses, and the burning would end that episode.

My brothers belonged to a group of boys who called themselves "Company A". (This was before the Boy Scouts came to Montevideo.) A farmer gave them a brindle mongrel – somewhat like a terrier. They named him Teddy and passed him around so each boy would have Teddy stay with him. They used to take him to have ice cream with them. They also bought him coffee with cream.

Sharing the dog lost its charm, and Teddy ended up living at our house. He was a bright, friendly, happy little dog. My father and mother liked him as much as the kids did, and my father always bought his license.

Once when Teddy was sleeping on the open side porch the two roaming bull dogs attacked him. About that time their owner rounded the corner in his big open Reo car with our neighbor and his seven year old son Jack with him. When Jack saw what was happening he jumped over the side of the car, running toward our house hollering "Those damn John dogs. Those damn John dogs."

Jack needn't have worried about Teddy, who got hold of the biggest dog's long tail and bit hard. He held on as the dog ran across the street dragging Teddy, who had his feet braced. Eventually the bulldog got away. Teddy had a mouthful of skin. He simply came home, cleaned his mouth and face off and went back to sleep. A really courageous pup.

He lived with us. He walked the children to school, Dad to his office, stopped on the way home to have coffee with Grandma Freeberg, and met me after school to race me home. When Mrs. Freeberg got old and couldn't see well, and Teddy got old and feeble, he changed his address and went to live with the Freebergs. The Freebergs had a wire from their back steps to the garage so Grandma could walk outside. Teddy accompanied her each time she went out.

I think the only place and time this could happen was in a small town when we were children, we all knew each other, and we were free to play everywhere. I think it was a wonderful childhood.

When I was in the second grade, Miss Powers was our teacher. I can't remember ever pleasing her. But, my downfall came during reading lessons when I didn't seem to follow other pupils as they read but was always reading ahead. One day I was so absorbed with the material that I got caught having lost the place completely. To my chagrin I was sent to stand in the cloak hall for the remainder of the afternoon. Of course, I carried that secret shame until I was grown up. I never did tell my mother.

Somehow when I was in the third grade I seemed to have caught on how to get along well in school. As I recall we had many fun things, celebrating Thanksgiving, a Valentine's Day party, and a Christmas play in which I played the part of a queen.

My mother had a red table cloth which we used for picnics, and Mother, in conference with Miss Greep, fashioned that into a royal robe, and I wore a cardboard

crown covered with gold paper. I was very happy to have such an important role, but I haven't a clue what the play was about. Perhaps my parents had a point about children starting school too early.

In the winter time the two longest hills in Montevideo were great places for all ages of children to slide. It seemed every child had a sled. Some sleds held one child, some carried two, and a few were large enough for three.

Clay Hill, the first street hill in the north end of town, was about three city blocks long and steep enough to give sledders a good fast ride. Of course, you had to pull your sled back up the hill again. Third street hill was also three blocks long but for some reason was not as popular as Clay Hill. There were other shorter steeper hills which served neighborhoods. When the sliding was good we spent everyday on the hill.

People owned automobiles, but they did not drive them in the winter when we were children. The cars were put up on blocks in the garage to save the tires which were made of hard rubber. The only transportation on the hill were farmers' horse drawn sleighs and bob-sleds with their heavy runners which were wide enough to stand on. Some farmers would let the children ride up the hill on the runners which was almost as much fun as sliding down the hill. There were little projections on the sleigh where we could hitch our sled rope. I remember one farmer who didn't ever let anyone ride on his runners and would flick his whip to keep everyone off. I expect he believed his horse had enough work to pull the sleigh and its load up the hill.

The sled that eventually became mine had been used by three older siblings. I remember it well – a Flexible Flyer – the fastest sled on the hill – whether the sled was better than others or the Wilson kids were better racers our sled always won the races.

By the time the sled became mine half of its steering bar was gone making it necessary to ride down on your stomach, head first, steering by dragging your feet to slow down or turning by dragging one foot or the other. I could do all that successfully avoiding all other sleds.

A day came when a friend persuaded me we should ride down the hill together sitting up. We really had no way of steering. The way down was always on the right

side of the hill. And when you went up you walked on the right side of the road. Well, of course, our sled managed to find its way across the road, and as we came flying down the hill who should be there in the way but my two brothers and several of their friends. One in particular, Almon Bock, didn't get out of our way but stood there flailing his arms at us and jumping up and down – always the funny one. So naturally we hit him. He flew up in the air and over us, and we went on. Let me say that he was not hurt much.

But, I knew I was in trouble, so I didn't go home. I kept sliding down the hill and walking up. It grew dark and everyone else went home. There weren't even any people walking home for dinner. I was freezing and my feet were two solid lumps of ice, so I finally had to go the eight blocks home. By the time I arrived dinner was over, and my brothers had plenty to say. I don't remember my mother scolding me. She took care of my frozen feet.

One day in my childhood – it could not be described as a best day nor a worst day, but it was an exciting day.

The weather was warm and sunny when we were allowed out of school early one afternoon, because a troop train was expected to stop in Montevideo. Our home town was a division point on the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Puget Sound railroad, and the troop train was coming from the west coast. The engine would take on fuel and water, so it would be in the station for quite a while.

During World War I everyone was trying to be part of the war effort, hence all the school children plus some adults went to the station to cheer the soldiers. So there we all stood – a very civilized, well-behaved group of kids – awestruck, I think by this great long train full of soldiers – a whole regiment of artillery units bound for France.

Troop trains were not colorful things, no flags, no banners, just men, hundreds of men, in olive drab uniforms. Very few of them got off the train. Actually I don't think there was much room for them to walk around if they had – it was an ordinary depot with the customary platform.

My friends and I were in the front row, since we were the youngest and smallest. If I remember correctly we were waving at the soldiers.

An officer got off the train, came over to me and invited me to come on the train. I agreed and was picked up and carried onto the train into the cars where the officers were traveling. I was carried through several cars and even met the general. I was thrilled and forgot about my friends.

Finally the whistle blew, the conductor called "All Aboard", and I was carried off the train. I waved good-bye until the train was gone. Then I turned and to my dismay found everyone had gone home. When I got home I was so excited, I talked and talked about going on the train.

About a week later I received a letter from my soldier and so did my mother. He was 1st Lt. Roland R. Lane in the Field Artillery, and he asked her permission to write to me, which Mother allowed.

All during the war and as long as he lived after the war I received interesting and beautifully written letters and received lovely gifts. After Roland Lane died his wife wrote to me and sent me gifts. Of course, Mother always helped me with letters and gifts. I remember one gift in particular that we sent to his little daughter Betty— five lovely little porcelain dolls that stood up. Each was beautifully dressed in a different pastel shade of organdy, a ribbon sash, and a little organdy hat.

Eventually Roberta Lane died and the correspondence continued with her daughter Betty until 1990.

When I entered high school as a freshman I was really excited – I apparently had grown a good deal over the summer so my mother made me some new clothes – slightly more grown up in style. The only flaw in the new me was my long curls which I never seemed to get rid of.

Another thing I noticed was all the boys who had annoyed me in junior high had become very attractive, especially the sophomores.

I liked my Latin class except that my brother who was a senior was repeating Latin I – not for lack of brains but too fond of sports and a good time. We were seated alphabetically, so I was between a Wilson and a Thompson, who was also a repeater. I tried to hide my work from those two six footers which was difficult.

My brother was also in study hall when I was. All of the football players sat in

one section of the hall – they never lacked for entertainment, and it was hard not to see their fun.

There was one embarrassing moment early in the year when I had stayed after school for some long forgotten reason. The principal was in the front of the hall, and he walked over and pulled at my curls. I remember feeling embarrassed and moved away quickly. A couple of months later he caused a big stir. His office had a connecting door to the English teacher's room. They apparently became very friendly after school hours. One day the superintendent walked into the principal's office from the teacher's classroom. He and she had carefully locked the office door to the hall. You should never make love in a school house. The next day they were both gone. The woman left town over night.

The principal and his wife had two sons, so he was around town for a while. That family attended the same church as we did. The wife came to see my mother. Mother never said what they talked about. But, kids always know about things, by osmosis I think.

I also had some really good times. I made the glee club and was in the operetta the "Pirates of Penzance". I went on my first real date – to the the DeMolay dance – with a boy newly come to America from Greece. His brothers had brought him to America to avoid army service. Strange isn't it. His brothers had come to avoid the Greek Army, and both served in the U.S. Army in World War I.

I was persuaded to take Home Ec. I made a dress. My mother thought it was just fine. Mother was always the one to encourage us. I thought it was a disaster – the wrong pattern, the wrong collar, besides the dreadful sewing. I wore it once. Period.

On the whole it was a great year.

Transcribed and edited by David Martin.

Ruth omitted one activity that she occasionally talked about – her participation on the Montevideo High School's Girls' Basketball team. She really disliked girls' basketball rules, which were very restrictive. She and her brother Ivan were named to the Montevideo Public Schools Athletic Hall of Fame in 1985. No female had been

named previously.



Ruth is in the front row on the left.

This reminiscence was assembled from three originals. They were undated, but I believe they were written over a period of at least ten years. Original 1 was inspired by an Otterness family picnic and probably was written before 1980; it was incomplete and spaces were left for material to be added later. I believe original 2 was written after Ruth and Fred had moved to Rose Pointe, a senior apartment complex in Roseville not far from their former home in St. Paul. It started in Parker's Prairie and ran through the story of Roland Lane. Original 3 was a revision of version 2, but also included all of the material after Roland Lane. The title came from original 2. I have included all of the vignettes that occurred in the three originals. When the same vignette appeared in more than one version, I combined them.