

# **REMEMBER WHEN . . .**

**MARILYN (SORENSEN) EBNER**

Copyright © 2003  
Marilyn (Sorenson) Ebner

This book was created as part of *Lifescapes*,  
a Senior life writing program sponsored by the  
Washoe County Library System,  
the University of Nevada English Department,  
and the Nevada Humanities Committee.

**Frandsen Humanities Press**  
Department of English/098  
University of Nevada  
Reno, Nevada 89557-0031

## CONTENTS

PREFACE (5)

THE HAY MOW (6)

RIDE EM COWBOY (7)

THE CHURCH CHOIR (9)

UFF-DA (11)

UNCLE AL AND AUNTIE (13)

GRANDMA'S DONUTS (15)

**REMEMBER WHEN . . .**

## PREFACE

The following stories are inspired by my memories of growing up on a farm in Iowa during the 1930's. It is because my descendants have little concept of farm life or what life was like during that period of time that I offer this collection of vignettes.

My parents, Olvin and Esther (Gronlid) Sorenson, lost their first farm and most of their possessions in the early 1930's as a result of the economic instability created by the "Great Depression". With a family of four little girls, when I was two, they began again by renting a farm on a share-cropping basis. Their courage and resilience made possible the eventual ownership of their 120 acre farm that is the "home" of my memories.

Our farm was situated in the scenic wooded hills of Northeast Iowa, two miles from the small town of Waterville and as the crow flies, ten miles from the Mississippi River. Please be aware, I am referring to an era when farms had no electricity and very little, if any, mechanized equipment. Most farm homes had no indoor plumbing, running water or central heating. Access to town and schools was by dirt or gravel roads, sometimes impassible due to inclement weather. Thus, farm life was a comparatively isolated existence necessitating a totally different lifestyle from what we enjoy today.

My parents were hard working, capable, deeply religious individuals who were able to provide a loving, stable environment for our childhood despite the uncertainty which permeated the depressed society in which they lived. I cherish their memory!



## THE HAY MOW

“No T.V., no Gameboys, no Barbie dolls,” exclaimed my six year old twin granddaughters. “But grandma, what did you do for fun when you were a little girl?”

What did we do for fun, as kids, growing up on a farm in Northeast Iowa? Life on a farm during the 1930’s and early 40’s was mostly hard work, and our entertainment was simple, indeed! When compared to today’s standards, we led a comparatively dull existence. But then, I remembered the old hay mow.

Have you ever tried to jump in the hay? Let me explain. Above the first floor of a cow barn is a large storage area called a hay mow (or loft) where hay is stacked to provide feed and bedding for cattle and other livestock during the winter months. During the growing season, this mow is gradually filled with loosely spread hay, better known as alfalfa.

Now, across the width of this hay mow, approximately 15 – 20 feet above the floor, are four heavy square cut wooden beams about twelve inches wide that support the walls and the roof of the barn. Access to these beams was provided by a tall, movable, wooden ladder. Are you getting the picture?

My siblings and I spent many an entertaining hour jumping from these beams into the softly mounded hay below. Depending upon your nerve and the amount of hay harvested, this jump could be anywhere from ten to fifteen feet. The trick was to get from the top of the ladder to the center of the narrow beam before jumping.

The first jump was always the hardest. With heart in mouth, in a semi-seated crouch, pushing off with our feet (and sometimes with eyes closed), we would plummet feet first into the hay below to be enveloped in its softness and delicious fragrance. Today’s parents would have a cardiac incident; ours didn’t give it a second thought, other than to admonish us to be careful! Over and over we would repeat this adventure, clamoring to be first in line while letting our imaginations soar. We were High Wire acrobats with Ringling Brothers circus, jumping through hoops of fire into safety

nets far below; we were “Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy’s” accomplices, pursuing the bad guys through rugged mountain terrain (Jack Armstrong was a popular radio program of that era); we were American spies (World War II was in progress) parachuting



**The Hay Mow**

from airplanes behind enemy lines to retrieve secret documents necessary to win the war. We always counted to ten before pulling the ripcord, but never reached ten before hitting the hay!

These were carefree, wonderful, exhilarating moments of childhood. We had no idea we were getting aerobic exercise as we repeatedly climbed the ladder, burning more calories than we consumed; that we were developing our sense of balance and agility as we traversed the narrow beams and our sense of confidence as we pushed off, free-falling to the hay below! We thought we were just having fun!

## RIDE EM COWBOY!

Memories of growing up on a farm would not be complete without mention of the entertainment provided by my city cousins, the “Puls Boys”! Our farm was located about two miles from a small town called Waterville where the Puls family resided. To my father’s dismay, this close proximity allowed them to make frequent visits to the farm to see what was new with Uncle Ole, Aunt Esther and the girls.

One summer on a sunny Sunday following church, the loud honking of a car horn announced the arrival of the Puls clan. Now, farm children knew without a doubt that Sunday-Go-To-Meeting clothes were changed immediately after getting home from church in preparation for daily chores that needed doing. Thus, we were surprised to see our city cousins pile out of their car attired in their smashing white Sunday Best with shoes to match.

Seeing as how my Uncle Al was a Republican and my dad was a Democrat they were soon embroiled in a political discussion. Auntie and Mom were in the kitchen swapping recipes and family gossip, which left us kids at loose ends, so to speak. After challenging each other with games like “Captain, May I,” “Kick the Can”, and “Antie, I Over”, the Puls Boys were soon looking for more stimulating entertainment.

It so happened that several large sows were contentedly rooting about in a pasture within view of our house. The boys knew that riding our work horses was definitely not allowed, but had Uncle Ole ever said anything

about riding a pig? It was decided each cousin would choose a different pig and once astride, we girls were to count to see who stayed on the longest. We weren’t too concerned as we were sure they could never catch a pig, let alone ride one. And so, the fun began! Now, I don’t know how familiar you are with pigs, but in every pig pasture there is generally a large muddy area called a hog wallow, where pigs roll in the mud to cool themselves and to rid themselves of flies and other biting insects. The pigs our cousins were eyeing had definitely been wallowing! In disbelief, we watched as first Bill, and then Charlie followed by Jim, were soon astride their chosen steeds, hanging on for all they were worth as their slippery mounts raced around and around the pasture at speeds never before witnessed in such slow-moving, sedentary creatures. Of course, the race was accompanied by squeals and shouts of

excitement and soon the entire herd joined the stampede, snuffing and snorting and squealing at an escalating pitch. This cacophony soon brought the uncles and aunts rushing from the house, dumbfounded by the chaos in progress.

To this day, I can’t tell you who won the race or how this pandemonium was brought under control. I do remember discipline because of the danger; laughter when I thought there would be anger; and three Puls boys stripped to their skivvies, their “Sunday Best” somewhat the worse for wear!

Yes life was entertaining when the Puls Boys visited the farm!



**The Puls Boys**

**Right: Dad and Mom on their honeymoon, 1921.**



**Left: The Sorenson Girls (1932) Dad holding Marilyn. Front L-R: Catherine (Betty), Norma, and Evelyn**

**Below: The wooded hills of Northeast Iowa.**



## THE CHURCH CHOIR

At our small town church in Waterville, Iowa, choir practice was held once each week late in the evening after cows were milked and chores were done. I recall lying on an old pew in a very cold church basement, snuggled in a blanket, warm and content, as the voices of the church choir at practice lulled me to sleep.

The basement was heated with a coal heater, small and inefficient, and choir members remained wrapped in coats and scarfs as they practiced. As a small child, it was fun to watch the windows steaming up as the room and the choir warmed up!

The choir at its largest had only six to eight members. Mom sang alto, Dad sang tenor and cousin Otto sang baritone. Actually, cousin Otto was my dad's cousin, making him my second cousin, I guess! Otto was much over six feet tall and his 150 pounds barely filled out his lanky frame. Attired in bib overalls and long-sleeved denim shirt, usually frayed about the collar and cuffs, to my imagination, he was a living, breathing Ichabod Crane. Shy and retiring by nature, it was fascinating to watch him sing. With mouth wide open, nostrils flaring and

Adam's apple bobbing up and down his long, skinny neck, I could never comprehend how someone so spindly could produce such reverberant sounds! Each note was melodious and true to pitch with a resonance pleasing to the ear!

Otto's wife Esther was the church organist. Tall and delicate in stature, she was always soft spoken and a talented accompanist.

Conservatively attired from neck to ankle, her appearance could best be described as "prim and proper". With her hair pulled tightly into a bun at the top of her head and "granny" glasses perched at the end of her nose, she was the focus of our attention as she manipulated the stops and foot pedals of the old church

organ. Occasionally and at her direction, I was allowed to pull some of the stops marked "Viola," "Dolce" or "Melodia", which seemed quite an honor to a six-year old!

What the old organ lacked in quality of sound was made up for in appearance. Decorated with intricately carved wood and areas of finely woven upholstery, its many ivory covered stops and keys were worn



smooth by the pressure of countless hands over many years. We children were taught this was not just a piece of furniture but a valuable instrument which was not to be touched by little hands, and respect it we did - or else!

The choir director, Gabe Peterson, was our town postmaster who operated a men's clothing establishment as well. We Sorenson girls looked forward to a trip to Gabes as it usually meant a candy treat plus an entertaining story from Gabe as our parents shopped. But at choir practice, we soon

learned that another set of behavior was expected. If whispers and giggles became too distracting, Gabe's deep frown and stern glance over his wire glasses immediately brought our shenanigans to an end.

Oftentimes today, as I sit in church listening to the pipe organ and our many voiced choir, my mind wanders back to that little white church and the old pump organ and the people who made these memories so special.

## UFF-DA

My given name was Marilyn Deane Sorenson. I took issue with my middle name, claiming it was a boy's name. Not when it ends with an E, my parents informed me and so Deane it was and is to this day. Uff-Da! I have the distinction of coming from pure Norwegian lineage. Of course that wasn't too unique, as everyone in our little corner of Iowa was Norwegian. Our town banker was a Nelson; our postmaster, a Peterson; our gas station attendant, a Johnson; the feed store owner, a Gunderson; and our closest neighbors were the Jacobsons, Andersons and Gilbertsons.

When I was little, most everyone spoke Norwegian, except me ( and my sisters). Our parents felt that because we were Americans, English was what we should speak. But, at family gatherings Norwegian was the language of choice which kept us kids guessing as to what was going on! I was always told to play with my cousin Ordell. He did not understand English; I did not understand Norwegian. Uff-Da!

We belonged to the Norwegian Lutheran Church. Once a month the services were conducted in Norwegian, and we never missed that service! I didn't have a clue as to what the minister said, but I could tell you how many ceiling tiles there were in that sanctuary, how many people could sit in one pew, the number of bulbs in each light fixture, and even how often Dad dozed off during the sermon. Uff-Da!

Now I should explain, the Norwegians of my childhood had problems differentiating J's from Y's when speaking the English language. Thus Jimmy became Yimmy; cows yumped over the fence; the

color yellow was jellow and we ate jellow yello. And then there were the "Christmas Fools"! An old Scandinavian tradition, a visit from these "Julebrukers" (we pronounced it Yulabrookers") was eagerly anticipated each Christmas Season. Dressed in costumes of every description, carloads of these "Fools" would invade our farm in the wee hours of the morning, honking their horns and yelling "Yulabrook" at the top of their voices. In expectation of their visit, Christmas goodies were in readiness and after much eating and laughter and guessing of who was whom behind the masks, they were off to the next place on their agenda. Occasionally, our parents would join the "Fools" and Mom often laughed about the time, dressed as a man, she had to smoke a cigar to prove her masculinity! Uff-Da!

The Norwegian women of my childhood were great cooks and the church suppers we enjoyed as children are a delightful memory! Bread, fresh from the oven, oyster stew, meatballs, lutefisk, (definite Uff-Da), lefse, rommegrot, kromkake, fattigmand bakkels, and, of course, yello in assorted flavors complimented the menu. Meals were served in the church basement, food was cooked on wood stoves, its preparation in progress for many days. I remember long tables covered with white tablecloths and decorated with lighted candles, rosy cheeked women wearing brightly colored aprons bustling about with large bowls of steaming stew and plates of pastries pleasing to the palate, with seemingly endless lines of people patiently waiting to be seated and served. Those were good times, a more simple time, a peaceful time of growing

up in a predominately Norwegian farming community.

P.S. You won't find "Uff-Da" in the dictionary. But for many Scandinavians, it

is an all-purpose expression covering a variety of situations. For example, "Uff-Da" is probably comparable to Charlie Brown's "Good Grief!"



**A family gathering at the farm circa 1939. Me in overalls, third from left, front row.**

## UNCLE AL AND AUNTIE

I suppose most kids had a favorite aunt and uncle who helped create those delightful childhood memories that are passed on generation to generation. You know who I mean, that person or persons who, in the eyes of a child, seemed nearly perfect, who always said the right thing at the right time and supplied the listening ear and encouragement that parents sometimes were unable to provide. We Sorenson girls had Uncle Al and Auntie Puls who lovingly referred to us as their little country Bumpkins. And love them we did!

Auntie was Mom's sister, better known as Aunt Hjerdis to the rest of the family. Outgoing and imaginative, Auntie could keep us totally enthralled with her flair for drama and her entertaining antics. Times were difficult in those post depression years of the 1930's and poverty was a fact of life. But, as children, we were not aware of the struggle our parents were facing. Our families spent much time together, sharing many a Sunday evening supper. Auntie and Mom never seemed to tire of these times together and were usually in the kitchen cooking up something, and not always food! That they enjoyed each others company was evidenced by their lively chatter, interrupted occasionally by a burst of song or laughter which would pleasantly permeate the house.

Uncle Al was a traveling salesman, a drummer as they were called in those days. His sample cases were filled with an assortment of stationery, books, school

goods, greeting cards, dolls, housewares and the like. Over the years, he traveled by buckboard, horseback motorcoach, train, and sometimes by foot depending on the weather, condition of the roads, and the availability of transportation. Tall and handsome, full of fun, he always sported a big cigar and was famous for the tall tales and rhymes he could invent.

Our Puls cousins were six in number, five boys and one girl, each as effervescent as their parents. A visit from the Puls family was like an invasion! An uproarious invasion peppered with practical jokes, wisecracks, much noise and just plain fun! A very welcome interruption of our sometimes quiet and uneventful life on the farm. Conversely, our city cousins could wreak havoc on a farmer's peaceful Sunday afternoon with firecrackers launched amid a contentedly grazing herd of



Uncle Al and Auntie

cattle and gates carelessly left open accommodating the resulting stampede. Not to mention farm equipment left dismantled after the exploring of many inquisitive fingers. Poor Dad, he tolerated the originators of all the commotion, but dreaded the consequences!

Alas, when I was seven, the Puls family moved to a big city some ninety miles from our farm and their family visits diminished considerably. But, because of his job, Uncle Al made frequent stops at our farm when his business brought him to Northeastern Iowa. This usually required an overnight stay, much to our delight and entertainment.

And so, many years later, those memories  
prompted the following poem written on the  
occasion of his 108<sup>th</sup> birthday:

### UNCLE AL

When I was just a little tyke  
I'd hear my parents say,  
We have the best that life can offer  
On this farm in Ioway.

Early morning, chores and milking  
Life was pretty quiet,  
Plowing, planting, hoeing, reaping  
Was a steady diet.

Donuts, meatballs, chicken, gravy  
Why is mom a cooking?  
Look whose coming down the lane  
It's Uncle Al, a hoofing!

Cigar smoke and lots of laughter  
Wisecracks, games to play,  
A traveling salesman, full of fun  
How he brightened up our day!

Work forgotten, folks a talkin,  
He's just full of the dickens.  
Sample cases opened wide,  
It's a new world for our pickin.

Hugs and teasing, very pleasing  
To sisters three and me,  
Tall tales spinning, us kids a grinning  
As we sat upon his knee.

And, all too fast these years have passed  
And now he's 108!  
Please remember, my dear Uncle Al  
I will always think you are great!

## GRANDMA'S DONUTS

Dad used to say, "Your mother is the eighth wonder of the world!" And indeed she was, especially in the art of baking. Actually, donut making was her forte, and some of my favorite childhood memories are of Mom in the kitchen, wrapped in her brightly colored apron and surrounded by flour and spices and bowls. As the donut pan with lard heated on the old wood stove, she busily mixed and added to and felt the consistency of the dough (no measuring cups for her). Her hands flew as she pinched and smoothed the dough into round balls and soon she was rolling and cutting and we kids knew our jobs would soon begin. She would add wood to the stove, watch until the lard was bubbling at just the right speed (no thermometer for her) and then pop a test donut into the hot grease. If it sank to the bottom and immediately returned to the top of the pan, we kids would take our stations! While she rolled and cut



and popped the dough into the pan, we used long-handled forks to turn the donuts as they became golden brown. The eldest sibling usually turned, being more adept at working around the hot stove and grease. Another took them out and placed them on a large sheet of brown paper sacking and the youngest (me) turned the donuts as the excess grease was absorbed by the paper sacking. Mom would sing as she worked, and we kids soon learned the songs and would try to harmonize as the donuts began to take shape. This is when we learned those old favorites like "Daisy, Daisy", "The Band Played On", and "Down by the Old Mill Stream" to name a few. Thus donut making and singing became a family tradition!

Mom was well known for her great donuts. When our school chums would come to visit, they would first ask if Mom had made donuts. At PTA meetings, church socials, pot-lucks, Esther's donuts were always in demand. Uniform in size and shape, golden brown in color (no powdered sugar, chocolate topping or jelling filling needed), their melt-in-the-mouth consistency made them a delicacy to remember.

As time passed, I married, moved to Nevada and started a family of my own. But alas, even with an electric mixer, measuring cups, and deep-fat fryer I could never get the proportions just right for making donuts. I found I could only turn donuts and sing funny old songs! I quit trying when I overheard my kids' friends comparing my donuts to hockey pucks.

But then, Grandma and Grandpa began to make frequent trips to Nevada to see their grandkids and soon Grandma's donut fame was well established at our household.

Because the delightful fragrance permeated the house, our kids knew the minute they stepped in the house after school that Grandma had performed her magic in the kitchen. Soon all their neighborhood chums knew as well, and our house was the place to be when Grandma visited! Even our Golden Retriever, Amber, was a Grandma's donut advocate. She would lie patiently on the kitchen floor watching Grandma's every move as the donut making progressed and then would faithfully stand guard by the cupboard drawer where the donuts were kept, assuming a point stance each time someone entered the kitchen.

And so, the years have passed and Grandma and her famous donuts are now a cherished memory. Unfortunately, neither my sisters nor I have been able to replicate the famous donut tradition. But these days, as my grandchildren ask to sing those funny old songs at bedtime and join me in a rounding rendition of "Down by the Old Mill Stream", I realize that part of the tradition continues. And, in heaven, I'm quite sure you could now hear the angels say ... "Have you tried Grandma's donuts?"

As for us, well, there's always Krispy Kremes!