

Aunt Dena Saaijenga

Aunt Dena, my dad's sister, was one of nine children (Folkert, Hilvin, Dena, Bertha, George, Hattie, Rosa, Clarence, and Harold -- all have passed away) and dedicated her adult life to teaching. A good many of those years were spent in Galesburg, IL at a high school there. The love of her life was teaching and she could not always understand when her students did not share her passion. She had a "take charge" manner and that sometimes spilled over into her personal life. Despite all this, she was our aunt and we enjoyed her. My cousin, Sylvia, and I often share thoughts of her and wonder what she might have thought of the youth of today.

After Aunt Dena retired from teaching, she took several courses in writing at a local collage and I was fortunate to receive one of her autobiographic stories. I will copy her work in its entirety for you to read and, perhaps, you will better understand the way life was in the farm country of Northern Illinois in the early 1900's. Dena's father was a farmer but he also had a photography/printing business in a studio in an upstairs bedroom on the farm.

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GREAT HEARTS

By Dena Saaijenga

(A small album of candid shots gleaned from the passing parade of memory)

During the early years of World War II, I was living in Harvard, Illinois and teaching in a small town high school five or so miles from there.

I had a shiny new Chevrolet to take me to and from school and to take me to see my mother. My mother had been widowed since 1925, leaving her with nine children; the youngest only three. She had moved back to the country after Pa died. "I cannot raise these children in town. Besides, I have done what Pa told me to do: I bought the Stratman farm when it was put up for sale. That eighty acres came with a good roomy house on it. I'd like to live there."

You will remember from another writing that Pa sold his land in South Dakota, bought a house in German Valley and moved there with Mom and six of their nine children. Folkert and I were left on the farm to keep it going. Hilvin got a job with the Stephenson County Farm Bureau Agent. With the help of an attorney, the son of a long-time friend, also an attorney, Mom had made it through the worst of "The Great Depression." Out of the goodness of his heart, Mr. Manus had not charged Mom for his services, and he made her feel she was welcome and that whenever she needed him, he would be there for her. Mom did not feel beholden.

Helping others had been her way of life. Take a look back to when life for her was free and easier. Let's say from 1912 and on. Mom and Dad had five children and everyone was well and happy. Life on a farm was wonderfully independent and relaxed. Any chance visitor was a welcome break in the routine: News, news, news from the outside world!

Sometimes the welcome links to the outside world were the traveling vendors with displays of pharmaceutical wares from a well-known, trusted company in some more or less remote city. The McNess man, the Raleigh man, and the Watkins man, each presented the wares of his company. The regular visits of these men were a welcome respite from the everyday tedium as well as sources of instant merchandise. These men truly served as pharmacists on wheels. There was a mutual respect. There were other peddlers --- fish peddlers. We bought fish and enjoyed them

even though Mom worried about the bones. She spent most of the mealtime making sure each morsel for some child was boneless. Where did the man get those large fish? And where in the fish did small bones fit? A peddler with fresh beef from German Valley came early enough in the morning so that the purchased meat could be prepared for dinner. Sometimes, fresh fruit in season was available at our door. Some of the excitement of it was the surprise availability of these wonders.

Mr. Fromm, a Jew from Chicago a hundred miles away, walked with his pack of notions on his back to get to the German Valley area. He was the most interesting for us children, at least me. He would untie his pack on the kitchen floor, and we children would gather around to see his display such as safety pins, needles, bandanas, socks, especially men's Rockford socks, children's stockings ("Kinner hoeskes, kinner hoeskes" he spoke in Low German) ...garters, hair ribbons, lengths of lace, barrettes, celluloid hair combs, hair pins ... the selection was almost endless! Mr. Fromm liked to have us young ones around as these items were displayed. That way, childish claims of "needs" were made as they were seen.

"En beische, Frau Saaijenga, a little," he'd say. That was my mother's philosophy exactly. She didn't have the heart to turn anybody away, hardly. She would say something like, "Let's buy at least a little. They have to live too." All of the above, except those who carried edibles on ice, especially, had plenty of time and could depend on being invited to eat a nourishing, well-balanced hot meal at the table with our family, if they showed up at twelve noon, sharp. That's when we ate. Our men working in the fields did not need watches. They had built-in time clocks. The entire family was thrilled to have a guest with us for dinner. The conversation, too, was interesting and relaxing and the hour went by in no time at all, it seemed.

Tramps, of whom we were afraid, Mom fed, but never let into the house. Tramps often slept in a barn or by some straw stack, whether by permission of the farmer or by sneak. One once asked Mother whether he could sleep in the lumber wagon standing nearby in the driveway -- there, under the stars, and she let him. He was gone when we got up the next morning.

Now and then some gypsies went by. They never asked for anything, but helped themselves to chickens or whatever they saw. If they asked, Mom would have given them as many chickens as they needed. She had a large flock of them.

Fresh fruit, right off the bush, vine, or tree, they certainly would have been welcome too. We young ones had heard that gypsies sometimes snatched children and took them. That was something else; we kept our distance! As you may have noticed, Mother generally had to deal with the wayfaring folk since Father was away working in the fields, fixing fences, working in his blacksmith shop or helping out a neighbor with repairs on some piece of machinery or such. Sometimes he was working in his studio upstairs in the house. Mother's policy was to buy a little, if possible, as Mr. Fromm so often urged, "En beische, Frau Saaijenga, en beische." "They have to live too," she would explain to us later, and Dad never said, "Nay."

My parents enjoyed sharing with neighbors as well. After butchering, the first thing to do was to prepare a market basket lined with snow white linens and put into it a little of just about everything: a ring of sausage, a length of tenderloin, some bacon, liver sausage and more, until the basket was filled. Then a pair of lucky kids got to deliver the basket to Stratman's. One reason, in addition to the pleasure of presenting a gift to Stratman's, that we liked to be the ones to deliver,

was that each time we went to Stratman's we got a treat, whatever they had. I remember the "Oma" they had living with them then. She lived until she was 99, plus. As long as she was able, she would pass candies, popcorn, peanuts, whatever she had available. Next in line to give out the treats were the grown children, Denie or Henry, whoever was there. Later, Oma, having died, and the older children having left home, Carrie, the mother, did the honors. Sometimes it was a slice of freshly baked bread with home processed dried beef on it, or a dish of home-canned peaches. As I think it over now, I believe it was Henry who enjoyed giving us the popcorn because he had made it. Denie, however, enjoyed giving each of us a large oatmeal cookie with raisins in it because she had made it.

Promptly, after Stratman's had butchered, a basket of fresh sausages and meats came to us. Whenever any of us had a birthday, if he was old enough, he could go to Stratman's to invite them to come celebrate with us that evening. Aunt Carrie would say, "Some of us will come." Without fail, as far as I can remember, Uncle Henry and Aunt Carrie could be counted on coming. There was a true giving and true love: what is mine is yours, and what is yours is mine.

Later, a family of immigrants fresh from Germany came to live in a small house about one-fourth of a mile to the west of us and about as far to the south. One day the mother of the family and her small daughter, about the age and size of Rosie, came walking through the fields to see us. They were very poor and before they left, among other things, Mom wanted Rosie and me (the mother and I were about the same size) to each share one of our dresses that they could wear to church. I gave Marie, the mother, my dress of a shade of soft blue, finely checked, washable silk, which I thought she would enjoy as much as I did. Rosie, much younger, asked Mother which one she should give. Mom characteristically answered, "Oh, give her the prettiest one you have." Now Rosie had recently gotten two dresses: one, a sturdy school dress and the other a pretty white voile embroidered all over, here and there, with beautiful yellow roses with green stems, to wear for best, only best, hear me! Now I thought Rosie had other dresses, one of which would have been just fine, or, of course, the practical new school dress she had just gotten, never worn, would have been above the call of duty. I do not know how my mother felt when she saw Rosie come down with that very special new dress, the white voile with the embroidered roses, but I know how I felt.

A few days later, I drove Mom over to the Smith place. The children said their mother was working in the potato patch and with that they went to get her. We waited in the car. It was a good thing I, at least, had not gotten out. I suddenly got very weak when I saw Mrs. Smith come out of the potato patch wearing what had been my soft-blue, finely checked, washable silk dress! That was one of the earliest lessons I had on the importance of not jumping to conclusions.

Each year, during the late spring or early summer, "Oma" Meyer (Low German word for grandmother) ...no relation, made her appearance for a stay. She was welcome. She had no relatives. We all were excited when we saw her coming down the road to the east, carrying her lightweight satchel. We did not need Mom's admonition, "Be good to old people and when you are old, people will be good to you."

Oma Meyer had huge pockets in her multiple skirts. Out of one of them, before she had even reached the house... (Of course, at least George and I had gone to meet her) ...before she reached the house, I say, out of one of those huge pockets came what we were looking for: old-fashioned,

4X (XXXX) peppermints. Her main supply of those candies was in her night cap; every night I would see her with them. It was a good thing Mom did not know that. She did not even like it when Oma wiped our faces with a dishrag!

Mom always treated company as company. She spent time with them; especially listened to them, whatever the burden, and served them coffee or tea, depending on the time of day. In the forenoon, it was coffee and in the afternoon, tea, or lemonade on an extra hot day, and sometimes something good to eat with it. Her specialty was a slice of her nutritious homemade bread with sweet home-churned butter and some of her jelly or jam, sparkling from one of her footed glass dishes. She often had round slices of bread with golden crust all around!

More precisely, this company could have been with my mother alone and her nearest and dearest friend, Carrie Stratman. Carrie, almost a generation older than Hilka, my mother, had served as midwife to help the doctor when each of us children was born and she returned each day to care for the child and mother, as long as that help was needed. No wonder, as you have seen, the bond between those two families was so close.

O Mom, how I wish I had someone like you, now that I am old and alone!

Mother had a china closet full of pretty dishes and glassware. Any company was a good reason for her to get some of these dishes out. I used to like to go down to the cellar to get a jar of home-canned pickled beets, because that meant I could use that wonderful tricorn, three-footed dish of embossed glass and of an absolutely marvelous light blue-green color, to put them in. Picture now: shiny red beets in a shiny, light blue-green tricorn dish!

In Freeport there was a Little's China Store. In front, it had a tower decorated with white china, (for all the world it resembled china), white china plates, a few inches apart in graduating sizes. Before going home, after Mom's frequent visits to her lawyer, she would go to browse in Little's store to relax. One time a squat, quart size blue and white pitcher caught her eye. After that, whenever she got to Freeport she had a special urge to go look at that blue and white quart size pitcher again; a pitcher just right for milk. Could it really be Delft? She wondered.

One day she had enough money so she could buy that treasure, to use and keep. She did use it all the time; it never did sit in that china cabinet.

I can remember well, during one winter's "flu time" when we, as usual, had contracted it. One evening seemed especially bleak, but the medicine the doctor had given us in varying doses made us all sleepy and we had gone to bed for the night early. At about 4AM the next morning there was a knock at the door. Mom looked out of the window and sure enough, Dr. Martin's car was parked in the driveway. He had been there the day before and so she was not expecting him any earlier than that evening, but she let him in gladly. He was the nephew of the doctor mentioned in previous writings.

The doctor explained that he had been on a night call and since he had been passing by, had stopped to save himself a trip. In the meantime he announced that he was hungry and asked would Mother prepare him some breakfast while he took a look at the sick ones. Mom obliged happily. There was always enough food on hand, so she fixed him the best: coffee, eggs, meat and toast with sparkling jelly, served in a pretty footed glass dish, cornflakes and whole milk proudly served in her Delft, straight from Holland, blue and white pitcher.

She was sure by now that Dr. Martin had finished examining the children, had helped himself to

clean glasses from the kitchen cupboard, had put in them the appropriate powders out of vials in the small flat black case he carried with him, had filled the glasses with water, and stirred. Last he affixed the labels with instructions.

Finished with all that, he washed his hands and sat down at the kitchen table ready for breakfast. Mom served him and sat down with him to keep him company. Dr. Don loved beautiful things also and the pretty dishes were appreciated. Inevitably his eye fell on that unusual milk pitcher, as Mom's had so long ago there in Little's Store in Freeport, Illinois.

Mom treated Dr. Martin as though he were her son. Why shouldn't he be treated thus? Consider a little of the past of that relationship. I will give you five concrete examples, all except the first, from the days of her widowhood.

1. When my father finally lay deathly ill of the cancer that had spread throughout his body, Mom called the specialist from Freeport who had operated on him. Dr. Snyder came, took one quick look and said, "He is a very sick man, but he's been very sick before." Then he turned on his heel, walked to the table to write a prescription (which had to be filled in Freeport fifteen miles away) and left. Mother sent Folkert and Hattie in Folkert's Model T Ford after the medicine. Next, frantic and having none but me, the younger children and a widowed neighbor lady to turn to, she called Dr. Don Martin. In the meantime, Folkert and Hattie came walking in, obviously shaken. On the hill east of town (Didn't know why he had gone east; Freeport is north and west) he had lost control of the car and had rolled it. Hattie had been hurled out of the car, missed an obstruction that might have killed her, so got up, got over or under ..I don't know which....climbed the bank out of the ditch to the car to open the door so Folkert could get out. He was not hurt either and they were able to walk home.

By that time, Hilvin had recovered from the faint that he had fallen into upon seeing a basin of clotted blood Dad had just vomited. And Dr. Don had arrived. He saw too, that Father was actually in the process of dying, and knowing there was nothing to do, he told us the facts and stayed a while to cry with us. A while after he had gone, with only the widow lady who kept feeling Dad's pulse and looking into his eyes, to help (Mom, practically in shock, stood helplessly by) when Dad rallied enough to request that someone rub his back to ease the pain, "It doesn't matter who does it," he said. So I grabbed a bottle of rubbing alcohol and used some of the contents to massage my father's blue blotched skin. I hope I comforted him a little, as well as eased some pain. Soon after he slipped quietly away.

2. One time later Mom got very ill and weak. Dr. Don brought her a jar of home-canned beef, "...to strengthen her" he said. Actually, say I, he did it to comfort her and to make her feel that someone cared enough to do something personally. Oh, I know pigeon broth was given to my father when he had typhoid fever and was weak and near dying, it seemed.

3. At another time, Dr. Don came while we children, some not so young by then, were popping corn. He showed us how to make caramel corn. That was fun and he stayed to eat some of it with us. We all did still miss our father so much!

4. Some years later, all nine of us, all except Mother (she must have acquired immunity when she was young) ...we all, some were over twenty years old, had infectious yellow jaundice (hepatitis?), which Clarence had picked up from a schoolmate. And on top of that jaundice we had whooping cough! Those nauseous, yellow-eyed kids needed medicine for their coughs -- and

George's croup was acting up and he needed something for that dangerous complication. I tried to keep the doctor from noticing that I had the whooping cough by going outside when I had a spell while he was there. Dr. Martin did the best he could with what he had the first time he saw us, but the next time he came, he brought a half bushel or so of red beets in a gunny sack. "Now wash some of them" he directed, "and boil them until they are tender, peel them and cut into small cubes, add water and sugar (I've forgotten the quantities) and set on the kitchen range to simmer; use that liquid as needed for coughing. Dena, a little of that will help you too. Discard and make a new batch when needed," he added. The cough medicine was effective and we did not run out of beets.

5. I will give you one more example, as promised. This time we were all in varying stages of the "flu". Hattie had what the doctor called pneumonia. Early one Sunday morning he came in, took one look and declared, "This crowd needs cheering up!" and with that he went to the piano and as only he could, played the accompaniment as he sang in his beautiful tenor voice, songs like, "I'm a Methodist Till I Die" and renditions of rollicking musical comedy numbers. It made even Hattie smile. After the entertainment, he looked us all over; Hattie, very carefully, and figured out some medicines and gave them to Mom with directions and advice. All of us were cheered by that demonstration of caring.

Is it surprising then, I ask, that Dr. Don felt free early that morning, to ask Mother would she care to sell him that milk pitcher? Whether or not she accepted anything for that pitcher, I do not know. My guess is that she gave it to him with love, as to a well-deserving son, so to speak I was thrilled that we had something he really liked and that we could give it to him.

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That's Aunt Dena below in 1971:

