

Rolfe High School Alumni Essay  
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A blog-like letter by Helen D. Gunderson of Gilbert, Iowa, and soon-to-be of Ames, Iowa

Rolfe High School Class of 1963 and RHS Web Site Editor

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updated on September 12, 2006

*Helen explains that there is still a ton of material to post from the RHS class of 1928 time capsule and tells, in a meandering fashion, why she hasn't yet gotten around to posting it all.*

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Dear RHS alumni, faculty, and other Rolfe loyalists ...

A few weeks ago, I made great headway in posting materials from the RHS time capsules. I have finished posting items from the 1917 capsule but have made only a dent in all the files that I digitized from the 1928 capsule. Fortunately, it is a big dent. But rest assured, there is much more to be posted from the latter box. And I will get the job done in the next few months.

In many respects, harvest season is here. A week ago, I was in Pocahontas County and picked windfall apples and fruit still on the limbs of an 81-year-old Wealthy tree at the abandoned Gunderson homeplace farm where my grandparents had lived in Roosevelt Township. My grandfather, John Gunderson, died in October 1956. My grandmother, DeElda Gunderson, moved to town a couple of years after his death.

How do I know it is an 81-year-old tree? Well, my father Deane Gunderson (RHS class of 1935) celebrates his 88th birthday on September 16, and he remembers that the tree was planted when he was seven years old. He also recalls that his father mowed the yard at the homeplace with a team of horses and a sickle mower and oftentimes, a young tree would accidentally be cut down by the mower. So it is indeed fortunate that one of those trees survived, especially since the Wealthy tree has such an interesting history and is becoming an heirloom tree. I suspect that Dad would love hearing from some of you. He still lives on the farm where I grew up southwest of Rolfe, and his address is:

27408 480th Street  
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I had originally gone to Pocahontas County that weekend to attend the funeral of Bob Sernett. Bob and his wife Monica (Hronek) Sernett had lived across the road from my grandparents, and I have fond memories of them and their family. They were of Bohemian descent and always seemed to have more fun than we Gundersons of Norwegian heritage had. I recall Bob and his son Mike and a friend, Jerry Zeman (who had worked for my dad), taking my father, my brother Charles (RHS class of 1962), and me on a fishing trip to Lost Island Lake near Ruthven. I never had a better time fishing. The Zemans were also of Bohemian descent, and their homeplace farm

was in the same rural neighborhood as the Sernett, Hronek, and Gunderson homeplaces. Mike was a year or two older than me and became a Roman Catholic priest, then a monsignor. My sister Clara (RHS 1960) and I have always thought him to be a handsome person. In fact, decades ago when the book, *The Thornbirds* (published in 1977), became best-seller, we could not help but think of Mike and how he would be great for the lead role in the subsequent movie—not so much because of the role of the priest in that novel (I can hardly remember the plot) but because of his handsome looks and gracious, fun personality.

Jerry also became a priest and served parishes in northwest Iowa but was at least a decade older than Mike and me. Jerry died within recent years. His brother John Zeman was a hired hand for our family for about two decades and is also deceased.

It was fascinating to see Mike co-officiating with Fr. Kollasch of the Resurrection of Our Lord Catholic Church at the funeral mass for Mike's father. And oh my, can the people of that parish sing. Admittedly, the songs of that service were not ones of the Reformed Tradition that I was raised in. But I was deeply touched by the spirit that rose in song and liturgy in that cathedral-like sanctuary.

I was also impressed with an image from the end of the service. About 60 priests from the Sioux City Diocese had attended the mass, partially in support of their brother, Mike, but also in respect to Bob. They processed out of the sanctuary ahead of the cross-bearer, casket, Bob's family, Msgr. Mike, Fr. Kollasch, and Bishop Nickless. I was standing near the center aisle, and as they passed by, I could hear individual singing voices—many, but certainly not all, were exquisite and could have been the pride of any choral group. A few minutes later, I looked through the glass of the church doors and saw the entire fellowship of priests standing at the foot of the steps, half of them on one side of the sidewalk. The other half on the other side of the sidewalk. It was a beautiful, blue-sky day. The sun bathed the faces of the priests, making them appear like an angelic choir in their white clerical robes, chanting and welcoming the casket, the men and women who carried it, and the rest of the people who followed. What better benediction than that? I believe that I saw the Roman Catholic tradition at its best, and it was right there in Pocahontas. Not my hometown, but the next thing to it.

I recall that Bob and Monica were the best dancers that I ever knew. They could certainly do a fancy polka step. Used to be that there were plenty of dance halls in the county and surrounding area where people such as Bob and Monica thrived socially. Unfortunately, most of those went out of business in the past few decades with perhaps one dance hall remaining in Fort Dodge. It was also unfortunate that Bob developed health problems several years ago and could no longer dance. That did not keep him and Monica from making an appearance at my 50th birthday party held at the Rolfe gym with a potluck Sloppy Joe and Jello dinner and barn dance. I would have loved it if I could have danced with Bob, but as I said, his health would no longer allow him to dance. But I did get to dance with LeRoy Nelson (RHS class of 1927) in a fun mixer called the Patty Cake Polka. LeRoy and Bob are two of my favorite men of an earlier era of rural life in my home county.

Bob had been a childhood crony of my father and was 90 when he died. Monica was born on the same day in the same year as my father and on a farm just a few miles away from the Gunderson homeplace. When she was still in good health, she was one of the best kolache-makers I knew.

Bob and Monica moved from their farm to a small home in Pocahontas in 1989. In 2004, they moved to the Rolfe Care Center during the time that my mother Marion Gunderson was a resident there. I recall one of the first nights when Bob and Monica were at the center. I looked in the dining room to see if they were there. The staff pointed me to the social room across the hall where Bob and Monica were sitting by themselves at a table, and the neatest thing was that they were each having a glass of dark red wine that the staff had served them. I would say that Bob and Monica were a couple of love birds. Monica is still at the care center.

One of the things Mike remarked about was his father's good looks. Mike said that he would be doing well when he turns 70 to look as handsome as his father did at age 90 and living at the Rolfe Care Center. It has been more than a year since I visited Bob and Monica, but yes, even in Bob's fading years, he was still handsome. And indeed, Mike, who is in his early 60s, is as handsome as ever except for putting on a few pounds since he was a lanky farm kid living across the road from my grandparents. But I have put many more pounds on my own frame than he has put on his. Now that I think of it, I recall Monica saying a few years ago that she had to cut back on the number of kolaches that she made for Mike. They sure are tempting pastries, though, with different fillings: prune, apricot, cherry, and poppy seed.

I should not not forget to mention that Bob and Monica had other children: Marilyn, Elaine, Diane, and Chuck. Following the interment ritual for Bob, the family ambled across the cemetery to Chuck's grave. His is an interesting story that I do not feel comfortable writing about in its entirety, partially because I do not know the whole story and partially because it is a private and painful one. But I will attempt a short summary of what happened. Chuck served in the Vietnam War then returned to Pocahontas County to farm and raise a family. However, the trauma of his Vietnam experience lingered and led to his death. Eventually, the Sernett family traveled to Washington, D.C. for an event in which (I believe but am willing to stand corrected) the United States government acknowledged that the deaths of veterans such as Chuck were as much a tragedy of the Vietnam War as that of service men who died while engaged in the war.

I choose not to comment very much on this tragedy except to say that the Sernett family members are very supportive of each other. Also, to see them gather around Chuck's cemetery monument reminds me not only of the Vietnam era of our nation's war history but of the large number of deaths of Iowa service personnel, including at least one young man from Pocahontas County and several others from northwest Iowa, in our nation's recent war history. And that gets me to thinking about the extreme power of our military-industrial complex and related reasons for going to war. And then I find myself humming the tune, "Where Have all the Flowers Gone," made popular by Peter, Paul, and Mary in the 1960s. And then I can't help thinking of the lyrics, "When will they ever learn, when will they ever learn."

This week, I spent a few nights peeling, cutting, and freezing apples from the homeplace so that I can make 11 apple pies in the upcoming months. Or perhaps I will have my friend Joy here in Gilbert, who is more competent than I at making crusts, bake the pies for me if I get lazy.

Last spring, I went to an ISU Extension workshop and learned to graft apple trees. With what I learned there and on-going advice from Tom Wahl at Red Fern Farm near Wapello, I succeeded in starting about two dozen new trees, using scionwood from the Wealthy tree at the homeplace. I did not know about grafting until recent years, and even then, I thought there was a mystique to the process—that someone such as myself with no green thumb would never be able to do grafting. But I did succeed. And this past week, I delivered six new Wealthy trees to friends in the Rolfe area and 15 to friends in central Iowa. If it had not been for the siege of rain today, I would have planted three in the yard at my new home in Ames. Last night, I measured the yard and put flags out to mark where the trees will go, but the actual job of planting them will have to wait until the ground dries.

There is a grape vine at my new home. It should not be surprising that I am reminded, as I write, that Bob and Monica had both an apple tree and grapevine at their farm. Memories and current life activities occasionally make full circle loops.

On Thursday, two friends (Duffie and Mary) helped me pick the Concord grapes. Then Duffie and I worked what seemed like a marathon both on Thursday and Friday, making grape conserve. She had made conserve before. I had not. So it was a learning experience. One of the jars did not seal completely, and Duffie kept it in her refrigerator. But already, she has opened it and used the conserve on waffles and says that the consistency is great—the conserve actually jelled—and so is the taste. I am a bit concerned about the sweetness of the conserve. There are three cups of sweetener to four cups of grapes. Fortunately, we had a source of honey that was harvested just last week by another friend, Joanne. So we substituted honey for half of the sugar. But even so, that is a lot of sweetener—and the conserve is not something to be consumed every day or in great quantities. However, I know some family members and friends who would delight in receiving a jar of it—perhaps in their Christmas stockings. Also, Duffie and I will put some of the jars on this fall's auction at our church. And maybe I will host a meal or two with an "all-Iowa" menu and serve the conserve with hot bread along with the rest of the main course and apple pie for dessert. (Had to check my dictionary to see if that should be spelled "desert" or "dessert." Oh, such details.)

I have always been impressed and a little envious when I heard that someone was a "Master Gardener." And I never suspected that I would do something such as taking a Master Gardening class. But with a nudge from my friend Sylvia of Pocahontas, I signed up for a MG class taught by ISU Extension and attended the first class on Thursday night at the Story County Extension Center. One of the class sessions will be for all the students from around the state who are enrolled in the class, and Sylvia will come to Ames, and we will go together to the class at the new 4-H building on campus.

Things are going slower than anticipated with moving into my new house. Actually, it's an older house built in 1951 just five years before my parents built the "new" house on the farm where I grew up. Our house was built by the Long Brothers—I believe their names were Bill and Dale. In June, at an artwalk in Ames, a fellow came up to the table where I was sitting and displaying my photo notecards. And lo and behold, he was Dale's son. Sure wish I could recall his name. Those kinds of connections with people from my heritage are fun and meaningful. I was reminded of Earl Spiker who worked with the Long Brothers. And I recall the time that I picked up a staple gun and with a lot of nerve but also naïveté, I pointed it at his seat and let fire. Thank God he was a decent man and did not swing at me in knee-jerk retaliation. But I certainly learned great respect for staple guns.

Anyway, back to the progress at my house. The hardwood floors are now refinished. The recessed lighting in the bedroom that is to be my office area has been installed and the wiring in the rest of the house has been updated. The workers painted some rooms this past week. And I painted the interior of a closet this afternoon. I wish I could push the entire process along and get moved in soon. But it seems wise not to rush but to get the job done right before moving. Once upon a time in the late 1970s, I had a small house in Fargo that was similar in many ways to my new one in Ames. Otherwise, I have been an apartment dweller. I like apartment living, but I also look forward to being in a house again—especially to have the large yard at my new place. I cherish much about my agricultural heritage, and in many ways, am attempting to create a new sense of having a "homeplace" with a Wealthy apple tree and garden but instead of in the country in Pocahontas County, in a residential area of north Ames. And in doing so, I am reminded of my grandmother DeElda and her garden. I am also reminded of the neighborhood women of my childhood who gardened. One of those was Mary Jane Jordan. She died in the 1995. Others were Marjorie Harrold and Velma Ives. They continue to live on the same farms where I got to know them during my younger years. One of Velma's daughters, Kathy Ives Dahl (RHS 1965), and husband Gary Dahl live about a quarter mile from Velma. Kathy and Gary have a small orchard along with all sorts of other forms of diversified agriculture and gardening. And on my recent trip to the Rolfe area, I gave them two of the Wealthy trees that I grafted last spring. Anyway, I hope to live out the last decades of my life at my new homeplace but connect to the spirit of my rural heritage as well as in person with like-minded people such as the Dahl family and others who were recipients of my new trees.

Being from the RHS class of 1963, it would not be hard for someone to guess that I am 61. I had begun looking for a new home in May of 2005, shortly after turning 60, and found the one I wanted in May of 2006. At first, I did not realize that having a large lot was so important to me. But at some point, I decided that I was not getting any younger, and that if I was ever going to have a sense of being "a farmer"—as in having a large yard right outside the back door of my house—I better do so now and not later.

I apologize if any readers are bothered by the rambling nature of this letter and inclusion of bits and pieces from my personal life. But I don't have a blog page, and expressing myself through this medium of the RHS web site, is one way for me to share some thoughts and a bit about what is happening in my life. And there should be some perks that go with serving as editor of the site.

Last night, I got an email message from Dan Sweet (RHS class of 1984). He and Doug DeWolf (RHS 1983) had done a sensational juggling act for Rolfe's all-class reunion in 1990. Dan had written to say that he had made a new entry in the "where they are now" database and asked that I delete his old entry. Turns out that he is with the American diplomatic service and had been serving in Sydney and is now in Khartoum and has a blog called Nomadically Correct. I wrote him back to say I had made the deletion and asked if he was indeed the one who teamed with Doug for the juggling exhibition at the reunion. Dan replied, "Yep that was probably me back in the day. Don't juggle as much but I make time to occasionally practice. It's been fun traveling but still think of Iowa often."

My friends Linda and Mark, who received two of my new Wealthy trees, have a seven-acre farm called High Hopes Gardens near Melbourne in central Iowa. They also have a blog and posted an entry about my delivering the trees. They also have an entry about Linda's mom, Joanne, who started growing bees a year ago. Joanne is the one who provided the honey for my grape conserve project.

I suppose I could have a blog, but I am not up to the work of making regular entries.

Interesting, though, how writing works. I had intended to simply write a short note, telling that there was still a ton of material to post from the time capsule left by the RHS class of 1928 and that I would finish the job sometime this fall or early winter. But there are times when one sentence leads to another—an initial paragraph leads to several more—and so on.

I guess I could just as easily have spent the last three hours or so posting more material from the 1928 capsule. But then you would not know all my "good" reasons for the delay in posting those items. And as it is, I enjoy reading the activities and thoughts of common people and not just newspaper columns, magazine articles, or books by people with enough prestige or influence to get the green light from establishment publishers.

So here is hats off to blogs and other ways of sharing the stories of our lives. Essentially, from the inception of this web site, I had hoped that lots of RHS and Rolfe people would write and send us pieces to post. You can still do that. To learn more, go to our index of essays. It has a link to our writing guidelines.

Looking forward to hearing from some of you.

Enough said for now.

Helen