

This is your life - Marian Irene Sturges

(written by Irene Sturges in 1993)

I was born the 4th child of Ned Peter and Anna Hansina Busk Nelsen. There were twelve of us -- four boys and eight girls. Listed in order they are: Amy Benson, Ethel Cohrs, Leslie Nelsen, Irene Sturges, Vivian Schauer, Lloyd Nelsen, Vera Larson, Donald Nelsen, Nina Franz, Ardys Dennis, Betty Ann Nelsen, and James Nelsen. As I write this in 1993, we are all living with the exception of Betty Ann who passed away at age four with a ruptured appendix. We are a long life family. Dad was just three weeks short of being 97 and Mom was 89 when they died. Not so with our mates, as five of us girls are widows -- Amy, Ethel, Vera, Ardys, and me. All of the sisters-in-law are still living.

My really first clear memory is going to school. We attended a small country school $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from home. Ages at school were from 4 to 16. I started school a couple of months before I was 5. One thing I can't forget was the first year of school. I was to give the welcome speech at the Christmas program. It was only two lines but I barely got out the first word and I burst out crying. Tears have always come easy. People always said they never saw me unless I was either laughing or crying. But to this day, I don't enjoy children's programs. If they make the least hesitation, I get a sick feeling in my stomach and the tears start to roll.

We had a lot of fun going to school. Things were a lot different than they are today. Our lunch was carried to school in a $\frac{1}{2}$ gallon syrup pail. It usually consisted of a couple jelly sandwiches and, if lucky, a home grown apple and a cookie. We had to go to a farm place and carry drinking water. In the winter time we had to set our dinner next to the stove or it would be frozen solid by noon. We had outdoor toilets.

Our recesses were usually spent playing ball, tag, pump-pump pull-away, and then during fall season we had to try smoking corn silk. In winter we would slide down the hill south of the school. We used to carry water from the farm place to make better sliding. We had our spelling bees, Christmas programs, and end of the year picnics, but nothing like today. I remember one school picnic when we all showed up with chicken pox. Clothing wasn't a problem. Boys wore blue chambray shirts and bib overalls and us girls had two dresses. We wore one, one week, and the other the next. When the weather would permit, we went to school bare foot.

In a family of mostly girls, us girls did a lot of outside work. Amy was the runt of the family and didn't care to work outside. Ethel was more of a tomboy, so she and I worked outside. I started to milk cows at the age of five because I would rather do that than dishes. Spike had to help dad with the horses and pigs.

Leslie got the nickname Spike because he always ran away with the carpenters' spikes when they built the barn. This nickname really stuck with him all through school and later. I still think of him as Spike, but Lu didn't like it so he is called Leslie more now. Ethel got the nickname Nellie when she took nurse's training. Amy was known as Sis, and I acquired the name of Ikey. But after getting married and moving to Slayton, it was dropped.

We were a healthy family, with the exception of Betty Ann dying from a ruptured appendix, Ethel having her appendix removed, Ardys having had two tumors removed when she was 16 (one weighed 10 lbs), Lloyd had a broken arm, and I had what they thought was diphtheria. I think it was when Ethel was in the hospital that she decided to take up nursing.

Amy became a teacher. I was only 16 when I graduated from high school and the folks thought I was too young to go off to school so I never went any further. My younger sisters always blamed me for them not getting to go to high school. Dad couldn't see any sense in going if you weren't going to use it. So the only one who went to high school besides us four was baby brother Jim, the folks were living in town by that time.

Leslie and Lloyd became farmers. Don farmed a few years and then worked at the post office. Jim worked for the telephone office. Nina and Ardys worked at a defense plant and as cooks in the cities school system. Vivian was a farmer's wife for several years and then started working at Toro's. Vera and I just worked various places until we were married.

I would have liked to have gone on to school as I always wanted to be a secretary. Typewriters have always fascinated me. About 15 years ago, I started to do volunteer work and part of my dream came true. I have worked in the SW Senior Federation Office. There was a typewriter there so I started to use it. Haven't learned how to type like I should, but I don't do too bad a job with my pick and peck system. I do all the typing, even to putting out a monthly news letter which I have to type on stencil and run off on a mimeo machine, assemble, staple, label, sort, bundle, and mail -- about 300 papers a month. I enjoy every minute of it.

Don and Jim both served in the army. Don quarreled with a girl friend and enlisted in the National Guard. A couple of months later Pearl Harbor was bombed so he was in the army.

I always liked going to school and some of my happiest times were when I was there. Of course it wasn't when I was in high school and a bunch of us who had to bring vegetables to school for biology started a ball game in the assembly room during the noon hour and the superintendent walked in just as I was throwing an onion across the room. He scolded me and that night I told mom I wasn't going back to school, but she thought differently. So the next morning when I arrived at school, there stood Mr. Anderson right at the top of the stairs.

I squared my shoulders and put on my nicest smile and said sweetly, "Good morning, Mr. Anderson." From that day on I got by with just about everything.

He walked in the assembly room one day just as I placed a tack on the seat of the boy next to me. He kind of grinned and walked to the back of the room and waited until the boy came in and sat down. When he jumped up, Mr. Anderson started to laugh and walked out of the room.

Some other things that stand out during my high school years were:

- Being the Statue of Liberty in a class play even though I had to walk seven-plus miles home after practice.
- All the small deviltries we could find to do when the teacher was out of the room.
- One thing we learned early in life though was that the teacher was always right and if we were punished in school we could be sure that we would get it again when we got home.
- We never heard of teacher abuse. In my opinion, they were very fair. We were taught that we were to obey people in authority -- parents, teachers, Ministers, law officers, and elders. I still think that the kids today should be taught a little more about obedience and respect.
- The day we lost the crank for a Model-T touring car when we went to Dutch Charlie's during our four hour wait during state board exams and had to push it to get it started and found the crank by the cemetery on the way back.
- We didn't have a prom our senior year. We had a roller skating party instead. Four girls couldn't join us because they wore slacks.

Back to early childhood. Dad was deaf for as long as I can remember. He had a large threshing machine and he would stand by the big wheels that were taller than he was and he could hear us but we couldn't hear him. There wasn't too much communication because of it.

Mom was always a quiet person who seemed perfectly content with what life gave her. When I was about 11 or 12, I decided I didn't want to live after 40 because it seemed so dull and drab. The only scolding I ever remember getting from mom was one day when she told me to quit balancing a broom on my finger before it fell and broke some eggs in a basket. Of course, just another minute and the broom fell and broke a couple eggs. Don't remember ever getting punished by dad. Don't know if it was because I was so good or just didn't get caught.

During corn picking, dad and I had one wagon and Spike and Ethel another. They just loved to tease me and make me cry. Of course, dad couldn't hear them so they would keep on until they got me to cry or throw corn at them. The only

time I ever hit them was when they dodged. Still the same today -- anything that stands still is safe.

Dad always started picking corn on my birthday. We would miss two weeks of school and then as we finished they would give us two weeks corn-picking vacation. Dad might not have been able to hear but his other senses were all there.

When we went to high school, we would get up at six so we could get our chores done before we left. We milked the cows, fed the calves, separated the milk, washed the separator, made our beds, then got ready for school only to go out to the car and find dad warming up the car. We couldn't leave until the oil was warm. Finally ready to go at 10 or 15 minutes to 9:00 and dad would say don't drive too fast. It was seven-plus miles to school and school started at 9:00. Somehow we were never late. When the roads were blocked, the neighbor kids and us would spend all Sunday afternoon shoveling snow so we wouldn't have to miss school.

Our first house was a small one. It consisted of a kitchen, a front room, and a bedroom downstairs, and two bedrooms up stairs. The folks had the downstairs bedroom and us kids the upstairs ones. Us girls had the larger room with two double beds. There were six of us, three in each bed -- the three boys in the other room. Scandalous, according to today's standards. Dad built the new house in 1924, the year I graduated from the eighth grade.

As I passed all my eighth grade tests in March, it was my place to stay home and help mom cook for the carpenters. That's when I learned how to cook and bake. Ardys was born that February, so was busy. I also learned how to wash clothes. There were 10 of us to wash for besides bedding and things. We had a gas engine washing machine that had to have its drinks mixed just right. If you got either too much or not enough oil mixed in the gas, it would refuse to go.

Being just 12 years old and a trifle shy, it was a chore to wait the dinner table. Mom usually was feeding Ardys at that time. Dad would sit on one end of the table and Rodney Howard at the other end. They wouldn't ask for what they wanted but just point and you had to guess what it was.

It was a great day when we finally moved into the new house. We now had a kitchen, a dining room, a front room, a bedroom with closet, and a pantry, both a back and a front porch, four bedrooms upstairs with their clothes closets, a bathroom, a storage room, an attic, and a basement.

We had a hand pressure system to force the water upstairs. When we wanted to bathe, we had to go down in the basement and pump up the pressure. About that time, someone would beat us to the bathtub. But it sure beat the old washtub in the middle of the kitchen floor with all using the same water.

I remember the first winter we lived in the house, one of mother's brothers and his family came and spent a month or more with us. Dad had put in all

hardwood oak floors and they were all varnished and waxed. Our cousins had those shoes whose soles would leave big dark marks on the floor. Seemed as all we got done was to remove them. Can't say we were sorry to see them go. Dad had wired the house for electricity, but we never got it while I was home.

Dad only owned 160 acres but he managed to raise us all and save some money besides. Dad was a saver and wouldn't buy anything he could improvise. I remember how one day, a year or so before mom died, he needed a strap for his pocket watch. Instead of going and buying one, he spent all afternoon trying to cut one out of the top of an old shoe. If we bought and gave him clothes and if he had more than two of that article, he would give it away because he didn't need it. His greatest fear in life was that something might happen and he might have to go on welfare. He never had to face that as after he was gone and all the bills were paid, each of us 11 kids received some \$3,000. Not too bad for a man with just going to third grade and having a severe hearing problem. He didn't believe in buying things if he couldn't pay cash for it. Don't think he would get along in the world today where people owe more than they own. Dad was set in his ways and it was hard to change his mind. Could call him stubborn or bull-headed -- one trait I took after him in. But when you're right, you're right.

There wasn't very much outside entertainment while we were growing up. We had to make our own fun. Had a few game parties, played ball, and went to town on Saturday nights. Our big event for the year was the Cottonwood county fair at Windom. We would get up early to get ready to go and the whole family would go. Each of us kids were given a **whole quarter** to spend. It was really a day we looked forward to. But when we got home, we would have to change our clothes and go out and do the chores. Of course, we could sleep a little later the next morning as we had done chores so late the night before. That quarter for the fair was the only money I ever remembered having until I earned it myself.

When I started to work, helping out doing housework, I got \$3.00 a week. Worked one summer in a restaurant for \$8.00 a week. Did get my eats but had to pay room rent. It was while I was working in the cafe that I met Rus. He was brought up a whole lot differently than I was. His folks weren't nearly as strict as mine were. He would go out four or five nights a week. He would drink and smoke some and danced. He could do just about as he pleased -- like he done the rest of his life. His family was different in money values. They would get what they wanted and then worry about how it would get paid. They always paid their bills, but it seemed as if they always owed somebody. Most of our arguments would be about money. I was like dad, I wanted to pay for things as I got them unless they were necessities.

We were married on March 5th, 1932. It was 20 degrees below zero the night we were married at the Methodist parsonage in Slayton. We moved onto a farm next to Rus' folks on Highway 59. We helped his dad. In return, we used their equipment to farm our 80 acres. We had to pay \$8.00 an acre cash rent.

These were depression times. We sold corn for 8¢ a bushel, eggs were 8¢ a dozen, and most other things were priced accordingly. Two dollars or three dollars a week would feed us. We bought dresses and shoes for a dollar, coffee was 3 lbs for 25¢, and sugar was 5 lbs for a quarter. Oh yes, gas was about 3 gal for 50¢ and cigarettes you bought for 3 packs for 25¢. Quite a difference from now.

We had gotten a snow white collie which was my pride and joy. I would spend 2 or 3 hours washing and brushing her and the minute I let her outside she would run out in a newly plowed field. One day when we had been gone and come home, she was missing. We never did get her back.

Our farming years weren't too successful. We moved to the old Krusemark place and Rus worked for John Beech for \$1.00 a day. It was a big old house and cold as a barn, but it was down by the creek and there were plenty of trees so we could cut them down for fuel. We would use a two-man saw. The winter we spent there, we had so much snow I didn't get off the place for 3 months. Bonnie was born on that place. In the spring we moved in with Rus' brother-in-law after Opal died. Just couldn't hack that as Leon was so badly spoiled and Mick was impossible.

Then we moved to Burns Island, now known as Edgewater Beach and Rus worked on WPA. I washed clothes on the washboard for the transients who used to live where the Lutheran Bible Camp is now.

Trying to keep the kids away from the water when you are surrounded by it was almost impossible. They would sneak down every time I turned my back. One day I let them go down there and I followed them. I took and dunked them head first in the lake. That cured them.

The house was so full of bedbugs they almost ran off with it. I would get them pretty well cleared out of our part of the house but Sadie, the old lady we were taking care of, would not let me do anything in her room. She had so much junk in it that they would come right back in ours.

We then moved back to Rus' folks place and helped with the farming. When Miles hurt his leg and got blood poison in it and died, Rus helped his mother until she, Dorothy, and Leon went to Oregon. Then we went back to farming 50/50 with J.K. Bennett. David was born down on that farm. We stayed there until J.K. died and then Gordon wanted all the money right then so we had to quit.

We moved to Currie and Rus started to drive truck until John Silvernale started up the tile factory. Rus worked for him until he sold out to Vern Suby. Rus continued to work there until he retired and we moved to the Westside Apartments in Slayton.

Rus' big hobby was fishing and he used to get up early and do up his work and then go out fishing for an hour or two and then back to work. As soon as he was through at night, he would go back out there.

Rus had an old van and he treasured it as if it was worth a million dollars. He would drive 300 to 400 miles a week checking out the fishing. He started having trouble with his eyes but wouldn't go to the doctor because he was afraid he couldn't drive. So he waited until he couldn't pass his eye test for the driver's license, but by that time it was too late. He had glaucoma and it had killed his one eye and badly damaged the other one. So he was restricted to a 20-mile radius. He started going down hill fast then but wouldn't go to a doctor until I forced him to. But by that time he had failed so much he had to go to the hospital and then to a nursing home. He didn't last too long after that. It was just 5 days less than 6 months when he passed away. He died on Mom's birthday -- the 20th of August.

Dean had rheumatic fever when he was in grade school. The doctor said he would never be able to do any hard work as his heart was damaged. So when he wanted to quit school and join the Air Force, I agreed as I figured he couldn't pass the physical. But he did pass and so he joined. After he served 4 years, he came out because he wanted to be able to tell his boss to go to ****. He found out that didn't work any better in civilian life than it did in the service so he reenlisted and spent 20 years in the service. One of these was in Korea. He was in Korea when Jerry and Terry were born. He got married while in service and had 1 girl and 2 boys. But service life did not help their marriage and they got a divorce. Later he married a divorcee with 3 kids -- 2 girls and a boy. They have 2 girls between them and also adopted Vera's grandson.