

Death at the Sunday School Picnic
by MariLu McGinnis

In the hot thirties the Ruth and Boaz Sunday School Class always had a summer picnic on the banks of the lovely Raccoon River, not too deep in those days, except where the current ran down the middle, about 20 feet from the shore. On this day in July, every family had brought along something to eat or drink. Ethel was known for her potato salad, Leck made sauerkraut in the fall and still had some. Leonard and Glen were making ice cream in a wooden ice cream maker, the kids taking turns, turning the cranky handle. The rest of the kids were down by the riverside with the rubber duck paddle boats, venturing out a bit under the eye of a parent.

What everyone really looked forward to was Anna Garwick's chocolate cake! It was a marvel of four layers with white seven minute frosting and bits of candy on the top. She made it in ten inch round pans that no one else had. She was silent about the source of those pans. Where she got them no one knew. There her cake was, that Saturday, in the center of the table, which was covered with four or five flowered luncheon cloths. Newspapers were tented around it to keep fingers and bugs away.

I sat talking to the ladies seated close to the sliced tomatoes, baked beans, homemade bread and Sadie and Duke's ham from their farm. We were all very excited about meeting Ken Wallerstedt's new bride. His former wife, Mildred, had died a couple of years ago and he had been very lonely. Now he was eager to show off Barbara, somewhat younger than the middle aged Ruth and Boaz Sunday School Class. But he had told Leck and Roy that she could really cook! We were all dying to see what she would bring. Here they came! Everyone turned away a little, shyly peeking.

"She's a looker!" someone said. Barbara was about five feet six inches tall with blond hair done up in a bun, but with a huge peony in it. Really! Ken was carrying a large pyrex dish, 12 by 18 inches at least. I had never seen such a large pyrex dish. It looked like another chocolate cake! It had white frosting too, but with chocolate roses every two inches all over. Ken held it up and announced, "Chocolate Date Cake for everyone!" There was a murmur of approval. No one was looking, but Anna's face was a study. She was silent, but her stout frame seemed to sag a bit and her face was a darker color. We proceeded with intros and greetings and welcomes from all, but not Anna.

Barbara helped fix the table and tend the ice cream makers, then wandered toward the paddle boats. Anna roused herself and walked with her. When they reached the shore and the boats, she showed her how to paddle and push off in the mud by using a plank, there for that purpose, and she showed her just how to securely use the valve so that she wouldn't sink.

Lunch was a success, as usual, the cakes were yummy. The chocolate date cake was a huge success. Barbara was surrounded by admirers, requesting recipes and asking about future get-togethers.

After lunch, a feast really, most everyone napped. The kids played games, some of the men played horseshoes. Even Ken Wallerstedt took a nap. He seemed a little worn out. But Barbara took a walk. She wanted to explore the river. By the shore, she pushed off in the boat just as Anna had instructed. She was soon in the channel and floating right along past the picnickers, when Leck looked up and saw her waving and sinking and going faster and then disappearing! If someone had looked at Anna they would have seen her open one eye and peek at the river. Ken leaped to his feet and splashed out into the water, but couldn't swim and almost drowned. The bride was gone and with her the Chocolate date cakes!