

Grampa George

By Nancy Martz

In the summer of 1949, Grampa George drove down the gravel road from the small Iowa town 2 and 1/2 miles north of our farm for the last time, for he died later that summer of a botched appendicitis surgery. We girls were playing on the grassy island separating the house traffic from the farm traffic. Dad was working on the combine with tools spread on the ground around him, and Mama was struggling against the wind to hang white sheets on the clothes line south of the house. San twisted in the swing Dad had hung from the big oak, and Diane and I fed imaginary cookies to my doll from a tiny pink plastic plate. When we noticed Grampa's black 1943 sedan turn into the drive that went to the house, San jumped out of the swing and we three girls ran to him as he got out and grinned, lifting a small brown sack we knew was full of candy. We also knew only Grampa's hand could enter the sack. We knew he'd pull out one piece for each of us and then tell Mama to hide the rest away, but then he'd take another look at us and reach in the sack once or twice more for each of us.

Grampa liked the old German traditions and preferred females in his presence to be low profile, but he gave special consideration to his noisy toe-headed five, seven and eight year old granddaughters. Behind his round wire glasses, his blue eyes twinkled back and forth on San, Diane and me, and he kneeled down to cuddle us, kissing the tops of our heads.

Grampa hadn't always been such a sucker for kids. He raised his own eight to do increasingly harder chores as they grew up, tolerating no nonsense and claiming daily that none of them would ever amount to a damn. Grampa believed in self-reliance buying next to nothing; he had watched old Doc Hammond deliver his first baby, then delivered the next seven himself. Certainly he purchased no bags of candy for his own kids. I don't know how my dad and his brothers and sisters all turned out to be such generous, loving souls, or how Grampa transformed after we grandkids were born.

Grampa did concede to his better judgment when he and Gramma babysat us at their house in Sioux Rapids. As soon as Dad's Desoto left their house, Grampa would get out the scratched up old sauce pan and set it on the stove. Out would come the milk and sugar, plus a strange dark bottle of amber liquid from which Grampa poured several jiggers into the heated mix, and even before sunset, San, Diane and I would quit shouting and tearing around the house and had to be carried upstairs to bed.

When Grampa sold Dad the farm, he had to admit Dad surprised him by amounting to something. He liked to see Dad's straight rows of corn and beans clean of any weeds, and how often Dad shoveled out the livestock yards and made a good living for his family. He even accepted without comment the pony Dad had bought us kids.

Most of the stories about Grampa George I heard much later as I was too young when he died to appreciate them. But he must have amounted to something because he built every building plus the house on his farm, he had a shed full of blue ribbons for his vegetables, he taught himself to play the violin and piano and harmonicas for barn dances all over the county, and most of all, he had the good sense to marry my wise Gramma and bring my dad, aunts and uncles into this world for us kids to adore.