

Memoir reflects Geisel family life in Springfield before Dr. Seuss books written

Comment

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SPRINGFIELD - In preparing for his mother's funeral earlier this year, Ted Owens, grand-nephew of Theodor Geisel, author of the Dr. Seuss books, came across a 20-page, handwritten high school composition by his mother that offers a rare glimpse of what growing up was like in the tight-knit Geisel household on 74 Fairfield St. in Springfield's Forest Park neighborhood during the early 1900s.

The late Peggy Owens, niece of Theodor Geisel, wrote a high school composition, offering a snapshot of life in Springfield during the early 1900s.

The June 11, 1943, essay, written by Peggy Dahmen Owens when she was a student at Classical High School, is a loving retelling of childhood stories told to her by her mother Margaretha "Marnie" Geisel, sister of Ted Geisel, who wrote his string of popular children's books under the name of Dr. Seuss, his mother's maiden name.

The composition includes references to Marnie's younger brother Ted, a "haunted house" behind the Geisel homestead, Fourth of July fireworks, fond recollections of summers at the beach, a family trip to Europe to visit Theodor Geisel when he was studying abroad – and the death of Marnie and Ted's baby sister Henrietta.

The Geisel homestead is headed for protection with a purchase underway by the Springfield Museums Association, which also plans to open The Amazing World of Dr. Seuss Museum on the Quadrangle. No specifics plans for the house have been outlined.

This snapshot of Margaretha "Marnie" Geisel was taken by her brother Ted Geisel during a family excursion in Europe. Ted Geisel, not yet known as Dr. Seuss, was doing post-graduate work at Oxford University.

The essay also recounts Peggy Owens' mother's academic career – from Smith College to the University of Wisconsin to Radcliffe College and her attainment of a doctorate in German – and her courtship and marriage to Lloyd Dahmen, a Harvard law student.

The composition ends with a reference to Marnie's short-lived marriage to Dahmen, including her move to her husband's hometown of Jamestown, N.Y., and the birth of Peggy. The couple divorced when Peggy was still a toddler. After the divorce, Marnie moved back to Fairfield Street family home with Peggy.

Peggy Owens, who died on Feb 3 at the age of 87, followed her famous uncle to California when she was in her early 20s. Both she and the famed children's author never forgot their Springfield roots, Ted Owens said.

Owens' composition, "The Story of My Mother," received an "A" with the comment "superbly done" written on the cover page along with a request from the teacher to use portions of the composition in her teaching.

Marnie died when Peggy Owens was just 17.

Ted Owens, a New Mexico maker of documentary films on energy efficiency, said Geisel dedicated his book "I Had Trouble Getting to Solla Sollew" to his niece Peggy. He also drew a sketch of her titled "Peggy the Hooper." The year Ted Owens was born, Seuss dedicated "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" to his grand-nephew.

Dr. Seuss drew this sketch of his niece Peggy, who ran errands for the famous author, when she was a girl.

Geisel dedicated "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas" to Ted Owens when he was born.

The composition begins with a scene-setting flashback, but is written mostly in chronological order beginning with Marnie Geisel's birth and early childhood.

The home at 74 Fairfield Street in Springfield where Theodor Seuss Geisel grew up.

Here are some excerpts:

The introduction of 10-year-old Marnie to the reader:

"The attic was hot and stifling. Surely it was not an inviting place with the hot July sun beating down on the slanting roof. . . Yet there, curled up in an old armchair, was a young girl, her dark hair pulled back . . . in two braids. At the moment, she was resolutely trying to balance a book on her lap while turning the pages, and still keep both of her ears blocked with her hands in order to shut out the noise that was rising from the street below. Yes, this was the 4th of July . . . It was her tenth birthday . . . but now she was more interested in . . . reading instead."

The move to Fairfield Street when Marnie was 4 or 5 years old:

"It was a year later that the family moved to the house on Fairfield Street that is still their home . . . She and her little brother Ted romped all over the big lot in back of their new home, little thinking that someday this wonderful place to play would be the site of other homes and a busy street. The only house in the field that stretched behind the homes on Fairfield Street then was the old 'haunted house,' which all the children whispered about and admired from a distance."

The birth and death of Marnie's younger sister, Henrietta:

Marnie entered kindergarten, then held in what is now Forest Park Junior High School. That, in itself, was an occasion, but even more important was the new little sister Henrietta, who was so dearly loved . . . it was a year and a half later when Marnie was pursuing the intricate studies of first grade that it happened.

During the winter, little Henrietta fell sick The sounds of the baby's cough seemed to reach to every corner of the house. The bad cold grew worse and became pneumonia. Nothing could be done. The funeral was to be held at home.

To comfort her mother, who was crying, Marnie came out of the room where her little sister was lying and ran to fling her arms around her dear mommy. 'Don't cry, Mommy! Henrietta just winked at me' . . . Marnie never forgot her beloved sister but, because she was so young, the death did not change her life. The happy years that followed sped by."

Marnie's recollections of days at the beach with brother Ted:

"Friends were made and school days progressed. Every summer was a great event to be looked forward to, for as soon as school closed the whole family went to the beach. There Marnie and Ted met more friends and learned to swim like fish. Many were the intriguing games that were played in the sound and on the beach."

Marnie's teenage years:

"It was a busy life. Besides school and homework, there were two hours of practicing to be done each day, so many books begging to be read, the beckoning tennis courts just a few blocks away. . . These were the days of the first World War and many were the afternoons and evenings that Marnie spent with her girlfriends, talking things over while busy fingers knitted sock for the soldiers."

Graduation and college years:

The year after the Armistice was signed, Marnie graduated from high school. The proud young girl received a magna cum laude pin, which was the only kind of honor pin awarded at the time."

The latter part of that year, 1919, found Margaretha Geisel a freshman at Smith College:

"And so her college years sped by, happy and full. Christmas times and occasional weekends there were joyful visits home with a friend or two who came from too distant places to return to their own families. There were dances and one winter, the Dartmouth Carnival. The German Club was started again . . .

Summer in Europe:

"She went to Europe with her parents. She and her father and mother sailed in the early part of June 1926 and upon arriving in England went to meet her brother Ted, who was doing postgraduate work at Oxford University (Ted is now the Dr. Seuss of cartoon and book fame.)

That trip to Europe was a wonderful experience. They traveled through England, France, Switzerland and Germany. Of all the places they visited, Marine loved best the funny little obscure villages in Germany where distant relatives lived, and the marvels of nature in the Swiss Alps.

The trip was filled with humorous happenings, but the funniest of all took place in Switzerland. One day Ted, armed with a camera, had Marnie pose for him on the back of a cow . . . while he snapped her picture. When the two of them went to the place where they had left the film to be developed . . . the developer informed them that he was connected with . . . a manufacturer of chocolate products. This company, it seemed would pay them for the right to place the picture of Marnie on the cow on the wrappers of all their chocolate goods. Marnie and Ted refused after they recovered from their first gales of laughter. But she never ceased to wonder what it would be like to have a picture of herself . . . on the wrappings of famous chocolate products."

Marnie marries Lloyd Dahmen and moves to his hometown of Jamestown, N.Y where Peggy was born. A year later she divorces Dahmen.

"On Nov. 1, 1927, their child was born. She had been named, ahead of time Theodor (after her maternal grandfather), but as she was a girl, not a boy, . . . she was called Margaretha after her mother.

When (she) was one-and-a-half-years-old, Marnie went with her baby and her own mother to Reno, Nevada and obtained a divorce there.

Marnie and baby daughter Peggy move back to Springfield from Jamestown, N.Y., following her divorce:

"After their return to Springfield, Marnie and Peggy lived with her parents. Marnie became a substitute teacher of German in the Springfield Schools. Besides this, she tutored in German and French. She also began to take a business course at Bay Path, studying first typing and stenography.

In 1931, one of the greatest sorrows of her life came to Marnie. Her mother, always her dearest friend, died. Because of this Marnie had to give up everything to keep house for her father and to take care of her daughter who was then still a little girl."

In conclusion:

"Well this is about the end of Marnie's biography. I've heard lots of stories about things that have happened in her life, funny and sad, but I like to think of her best, playing croquet in the backyard, discussing books and things with me, retelling all those little experiences like the one about the cow in Switzerland . . . All in all, the way I like to think of her best - and what more could any girl ask - is just as my mother, my pal."