

Henry and Hilda Boethling, as Hilda told to me ... Cornelia Widmer

(I'll write this in the first person, so as not to lose any of the charm of Hilda's reminiscing in 1976.)

I was the first white child to be born in Bismarck, Dakota Territory. Let's see that was way back in 1880. There were a lot of Indians roaming around in those days. My father, John Sheldon, was a railroad man, but he also was a freighter between Bismarck and Rapid City. He drove a twenty-mule team freight wagon. My mother died when I was quite small and my father married again. The most beautiful young lady in the world and how I loved her. She was very good to all of us. Stepmother is a beautiful word to me.

I remember the Bismarck N.P. Depot being built from chippings left over from the newly built Minn. capital building in St. Paul. Grover Cleveland was president the year Dakota Territory was split in half and N. Dakota became a state with Bismarck its capital. I remember Sitting Bull was at the celebration. It was better than any 4th of July you ever saw and I will never forget it. That was 1889! I can also remember one time when the Indians held a war dance in Bismarck for three days and three nights. They sent for the Calvary from Fort Snelling. The army took over and things quieted down with no one getting killed. We were all pretty scared.

When I was twelve years old we moved to Washburn. My father drove stagecoach, or freight and also worked on the railroad. He helped build the big trestles over the Missouri River. I has a very gay, carefree life in Washburn. I was a mischievous little girl and my friend, Lulu, and I got into many scraps. I remember one time when a tribe of roaming Indians came into town and camped for several days. We had a lot of cats running around Washburn, mostly strays, so we caught a bunch of them one day and put them in a gunny sack and decided we'd see if we could sell these cats to the Indians. The first one we asked said, "Ugh". We told him that in payment we wanted two pair of moccasins from the things he was trying to peddle. He handed us the moccasins; we handed him the cats. We hadn't thought to tie the sack and the minute he took hold of the sack all the cats started jumping out and running away! We never heard if he ever got any of the cats. He high tailed it for home. Were we ever scared! For two days we didn't dare go out, we were so afraid we see that Indian again, so we stayed inside until they finally wandered onto a new town.

We use to go down to the river and watch them load the boats. The riverbanks were lined with where houses full of goods to be loaded on the river boats. One day we decided to slide down the shoots that carried the goods down to the boats. Finally, after several slides, I got mixed up with some of the freight and fell into

the river. A big Negro man pulled me out. We stayed away from the river for a few days then. That year on Halloween, Lulu and I and another girl tipped over a stagecoach, took all the wheels off and hid the nuts and bolts. Someone must have known it was us! You see, a stagecoach was government property and to tamper with government property was a federal offense then, as it is now. They threatened to put us in jail, but when we told them where he hid all the parts, they let us off. But it took the men half a day to put those wheels back on the stage so they could use it again. They had a schedule to meet then, just as trains and planes do now. Guess we been pretty naughty girls. It taught us a lesson, though.

In 1900, I was second cook at the Grand Pacific Hotel in Bismarck. It was the leading hotel in that part of the country. We served many fancy guest and some great men in history. The head cook was a big Negro man. I knew he was going out with a beautiful mulatto girl. One day Jim Crow, that was his name, came in and said to me, "I done it. I done it." I said, "What did you do?". He said, "I killed her. I killed her dead." Then he added, "When you get married and have daughters, don't ever sell them like her folks sold her to me. She was mine. I paid hard-earned money for her, but she didn't want me. She ran off with another man, but I caught her." He wasn't violent acting, just very sad! He just finished telling me all this when the outside door and the dining room both flew open and the sheriff and his posse grabbed poor old Jim Crow and took him away. They had a trial for him, but I watched them hang him three days later. Before they hung him, I stood up there and started to sing. It sounded a little like the old song, "Who Killed Cock Robin", but the words were changed and I never heard more beautiful singing.

The next cook they hired was a little Chinaman named Joe Wong. He had the longest pigtail I ever saw. Most of the time he had is wound up under his little Chinese cap he always wore. One night he made the biggest mistake of his life. He went into a 'blind pig' which was what they called a saloon at that time. Next time I saw him, he was crying bitterly. Some men had held him while another man took a knife and cut his pigtail right off. 'I'll never be able to go back to China, Hildy', he said, 'My honor is gone. I'd be too ashamed.' Poor Joe Wong.

While I was cooking at the hotel, they built Fort Lincoln. We fed between 300 and 400 men every meal. Most of them were army men. We really knew how to work in those days. I thought the Fort Lincoln buildings were so beautiful. I wonder what the fort is like today. Maybe I should say here that the Grand Pacific Hotel, in Bismarck was torn down a year ago. Wallace Shaffer was boss of the demolition crew and he brought me a brick from the old hotel as a souvenir. It brought many

memories back.

Shortly after this, I met a railroad man named Henry Boethling. He worked on the trains between Bismarck and Minneapolis and his family lived in a small town named Oakes. I better stop my own story here and tell a little about Henry's family.

Fredrick Francis Boethling was born in Hofdreiburg, Mecklenberg County, Schwerin, Germany. In 1869 he married Pauline Marie Doumec of Paris, Bassetyrennei, France. They had seven children when they immigrated to America in 1884. They had Hortense, Marie, Susanne, Anna, Henry, Charlotte, and Frederick. They spent the first winter in New York then decided to move onto San Francis California in 1885. On a train coming across country, they heard of all the land available in Dakota Territory. They stopped off at Lisbon where they were told homestead land was plentiful in Dickey County. So with their large family Frederick and Pauline filed a claim and built a sod house on land not too far from where the J. Nelson farm is now. Pauline had never worked a day in her life, having come from a wealthy French family. She didn't know what to do when Frederick told her she'd have to now do the family wash by herself. When the family was settled finally, Frederick went back to New York, where he found a job at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. He spoke seven languages fluently. Frederick's old maid sister came and lived with the family while Pauline and daughter Marie also went to New York, where Pauline took a position as governess for the Rothschild's and McCormick children. Marie served as her assistant. Frederick's health began to fail so he came back to North Dakota. Following his death Pauline took in washing. Sold her land to Anderson, grandfather of Alvin and Earl. She purchased an old long shed from the lumber company for very little money and made a home for her family here. She became a midwife and undertaker also, and when the Home Hotel was built, she cooked meals for the railroad men. Life was very hard for Pauline, but she managed to keep her family together.

In 1902, I went to Oakes to visit Henry's family. We were married in 1903 in the Boethling home in Oakes. This is still the same shed that Pauline bought from the lumberyard and is now the home of Mr. & Mrs. Clarence Titus. We settled down in Oakes and I've lived here ever since. Oakes was quiet the town in those days. Six passenger trains stopped in Oakes everyday on their way either to Minneapolis or Bismarck. We had four big hotels. One was called the Vinkle House and it is the Star Hotel today. The others are all gone, either burned down or torn down. Two of the hotels had taxis that met every train, hauling passengers either way. They were really surreys drawn by prancing teams of horses. Oakes was really a railroad center.

In those days, we had gaslights on the street corners and a lamp lighter made the rounds at dusk every evening. There were three churches here then, the Catholic, the Swedish Lutheran and the Presbyterian. The Salvation Army was here too. They held their meetings in Gorder Hall, a building, which later was known as the Robin's building and was torn down about a year ago.

Every woman in Oakes attended Ladies Aid. It didn't matter which church you belonged to; you just went to Ladies Aid when one was held. A lady took me with her to the Swedish Lutheran Aid. She was the only one I knew. I was still a newcomer in town. All the ladies there looked me up and down, but kept on talking to each other. No one spoke to me. They were all talking in Swedish or Norwegian language. Finally the lady who brought me said to me, "What is your nationality?" I said one half Swede and one half-Norwegian. They were pretty quiet after that. They knew that I understood every word that I heard. They didn't say anything bad that I remembered but I was sure laughing to myself.

In 1907 the block on Main Street where Rexall Drug and Terri-Lee's stands, burned to the ground. They were old wooden buildings with big old boardwalks in front of them. The block was rebuilt in 1908 and if you look over at Oakes Insurance you will see the date 1908. I remember most of the old merchants in the block yet. Let's see, the old Oakes National Bank on the corner, a drug store, and the Palace Clothing store run by a Jewish man. He loved my apple pies. He said, "Don't tell any I eat them. I'm not supposed to eat lard." I kept his secret for years. I can't remember for sure what was in the center of the block, but Dr. Boardman had his office about where Joe's Barbershop is now. Where Huagen-Baldwin's Furniture store is now was Boardman's Furniture and Undertaking parlor's run by the doctor's brother Mark. A blacksmith shop was on the corner where T.S.C. is now. I remember too the first telephone office was upstairs over where Red Owl is. Our first hospital stood where Dr. and Mrs. Lisko's home now stands. Oakes has always been a good town. It had its places where no lady ever stood inside, but then every other town had those same places.

Hilda was a Lutheran until her marriage to Henry when she joined the Catholic Church and has been a faithful member all these years. Hilda and Henry raised seven children. Pauline, Mrs. Fred Roney, Florence who died at an early age, Alyce, Francis, Henry, Marguerite and Johnny. Henry Sr. passed away on January 31, 1950. Hilda has lived with the girls Alyce and Marguerite since that time keeping house for them, until the telephone office where they were both employed was discontinued in Oakes. The later years she has been content to allow her daughters to take care of her. Every year on Hilda's birthday Pauline, Alyce and

Marguerite hold an Open House. This is not publicized or an invitational party, but literally half of Oakes comes to wish her happy birthday and to be cheered for a whole year by just knowing here. On March 20th 1976, Hilda celebrated her 96th birthday.

God bless you Hilda for the lady you are. There is only one word to describe you ... beautiful, just beautiful.