WHEN I REMEMBER GRANDMA

I remember Grandma. My sister and I stayed with her in 1926, the summer she died. I was eleven years old at that time. She used to sit in her chair by the bay window, watching for the mailman to come. Her chair was a platform rocker on a stationary base, with a footstool she could pull out to rest her feet upon. I saw one at an auction once, almost identical to Grandma's. I bid as high as $300 for it -- my limit, but I didn't get it. Perhaps the new owner also had someone they remembered that used that chair. I hope it brings them happy memories.
While Grandma would sit in her chair, I remember that I would comb her long hair with a fine comb to keep it soft and silky and pretty in appearance. It was still brown, even though she was now 82 years old.

It was there she sat as my uncles tried to dig out the piece of a dried hollow reed that had embedded itself into my leg just above the knee. I had fallen as an old bench broke when I stood on it under an apple tree in the orchard. Oh, how that splinter hurt! I couldn't get it out by myself. I went running to tell my uncles. They took me into the house and made me lie down on the fainting couch in front of the bay window. It was there that Grandpa used to lie and read the newspapers and farm magazines. They tried to pull the reed out with their fingers as I had tried to do, but with no more success. Then they went for some operating tools, pliers, razors, crochet hooks, and tweezers. After considerable probing, they finally succeeded in getting the reed out. It had broken off close to my skin, making it hard to get hold of. I still have the scar, about the diameter of a drinking straw.

I enjoyed looking at the pretty china pieces that Grandma had in her built-in china cabinet. The cabinet had glass doors to the front that opened into the dining room and wood doors to the back that opened into the pantry. Grandma didn't have a dining room table in her dining room, for the room was used for a den. In the room was
another hutch. On it was a large clove-studded apple. It was so large that it must have been their largest wolf river apple. I liked to take it down, look at it and smell its strong clove odor. It must have taken someone a long time to put in all those cloves.

When we were younger, we would often go to visit our grandparents, and one of them would go into their bedroom, just off the den, open the second drawer of their bureau and take out a white pitcher. This pitcher, larger than a cream pitcher, was always filled with pennies. They told us we could have one penny for each number we could count. We learned to count fast and felt rich when we left for home.

I remember Grandma would eat two fried cakes and a glass of milk for each meal. She may have eaten other food, but I don't recall. My mother used to go to Grandma's every Friday and bake all day lone -- eight to ten loaves of bread and a large "Gammel Kakke" or a spice cake. She would bake fried cakes until a large crock was filled. Then she carried it to the basement. It had a large solid cover on it, and stood at the foot of the stairs. I ran up and down
those stairs many times to bring up fried cakes. There were always fried cakes, my mother's specialty. No one could make them any better! It was our favorite dessert.

Grandma longed to see her sister and talked about her constantly. She lived quite a distance away in Minnesota. After her visit, Grandma seemed to lose interest in living. Her desire had been fulfilled. She stayed in bed a week or two, never coming out to sit in her chair in the den. I enjoyed sitting in her chair, looking through their viewer at the different pictures. I hoped I could have a chair like that some day.

My sister and I both stayed at Grandma's. My sister worked outside helping my uncles with the chores and the work of tobacco. I kept the house clean, cooked and washed clothes. I remember looking into Grandma's closet. She had a big bag of overall and shirt patches and a stack of overalls to be mended, work she was no longer able to do. I liked to open the parlor sliding door, go in and dust that room. It was a room with nice furniture and a velvet photo album, which I liked to peek into. It was a room forbidden to use except for special occasions. It was here that Grandma's casket stood after she died.

It was fun working at Grandma's -- just like playing house, though it was hard work scrubbing those long underwear and overalls on a scrub board. Sometimes if I finished before my uncles came into the house, I carried the water out myself, in the pail. The wash water was heated in
a copper wash boiler, on an old black wood stove in the summer kitchen. It was there on the table in the summer kitchen that we washed the milking utensils and hung them on the wall above the table to dry. Then some of the wash water was used to scrub the floor, after I had added Gold Dust Twins washing powder. The floor had neither stain nor varnish on it. I kept the floor scrubbed so clean that every dusty footprint showed. Oh, how I liked to hear my bachelor uncles praise me for its cleanliness! In no way would I disappoint them with a dirty floor!

One of my uncles liked peanuts. I liked to go out to his new Dodge touring car and eat the peanuts in the shells scattered on the seat. I liked peanuts, too! He would give us some, but I always ate the extra ones in the car.

We slept in one of the four bedrooms upstairs. Sometimes it was scary. An owl sat in a tree nearby, hooting during the dark night hours. Then I would remember an old saying, "When you hear an owl hoot in the middle of the night, it means death in the family." I would lay awake and imagine many things.
The day we arrived at Grandma's, I took the table scraps out to feed the dog -- a bulldog they had recently received from a friend in town who had some problems with him. I was about to set the dish down beside him when he sank his teeth in my arm. Now, my uncle would not tolerate such behavior, so he took the dog out behind the barn and shot him. I thought perhaps we could have been friends if we could have had some time together.

When the neighbor children came over to play in the evening, we had to be careful not to make noise, specially on the side of the house where Grandma's bedroom was located. She wasn't feeling well and needed her rest. Living in a home dominated by men, my coaches, my exercise consisted of wrestling with the neighbor boys. Oh, how the cheers rang out when I was able to take one down and pin his shoulders to the ground. I learned to shoot a rifle and to clean one, too. They would put a tin can on a fence post or toss one in the air for me to shoot. I tried, but a shot gun was too heavy for my shoulders.

My uncles had a violin that they played by ear. I liked to listen to them as they played such songs as "Turkey in the Straw" and "My Old Irish Rose." We were not allowed to touch the violin. It was their prized possession.

It was there, sitting at Grandma's kitchen table, while the clock ticked away on the wall shelf, alongside the table, that I learned to draw cartoon characters from the newspaper. Maggie and Jigs, Maggie with her rolling pin in her hand,
Toots and Casper pushing the buggy down the street, and, of course, little Buttercup, too. There, too, in Grandma's kitchen, I sat on a chair with the coffee grinder between my knees and ground coffee beans that dropped into the little drawer below, ground coffee for us to brew our coffee.

(Drawn by Myrtle Rendahl around the age of 11)
Sometimes we would play in the old house in the orchard. They had lived in it until they built their new five-bedroom home on the hill for the amazing sum of $1100. It was fun to climb the straight stairway and look into the closets, but scary, too, for some animals and birds were now occupying some of the rooms.

Perhaps the greatest fun of all was going to the barn to play in the hay mow. We would climb up the ladder on the side of the barn that was almost filled to the top with hay. We would stack up the hay until we could reach the hay fork rod that ran from one side of the barn to the other. We would take hold of the rod and by placing one hand in front of the other, we would work our way across the driveway of the barn to the other side. We would then let go, turn a somersault or two and land in the hay below. We never feared falling, perhaps to our death, if we fell on the solid wood floor, or on top of the hay wagon that stood in the driveway of the barn below us. That was our most fun time! But a dangerous stunt.

My youngest uncle Edgar was hard of hearing after his was experience, so he could not always hear Grandma when she would call. Grandma would take an empty wooden spool and rap on the wall to Edgar, when Uncle Arthur was not at home. That he could hear! It was their communication system, used especially at night as Grandma slept downstairs and my uncles upstairs.
Grandma had a great worry because of one of her sons, a very kind man, but the black sheep of the family, because he drank too much. She always feared for him. When I was little, this uncle would give me a silver dollar if I sat on his lap. He came to live with us in 1947 and lived for 14 years until he died, eventually not touching a drop of liquor. But Grandma never lived to know this! Her greatest worry was no problem any more.

In those days someone always closed the eyelids and put a penny on each eye to keep them closed. I don't know why, but I had that penny under a book under her chin and went to Grandma's room. I took her glasses out of her bureau, took them from her white pocketbook, and laid them on Grandma's eyes. But they were fixed too late to do any good.

The last couple of weeks, someone sat with Grandma almost all the time, for she needed her chloroform more and more. When she had spells and couldn't get her breath, we put a few drops of chloroform on a corner of a hankie and put it under her nose. Then she would be better for a while. Different people each day would take turns sitting with her during meal time. It was noon on the day it was my turn, but somehow my aunt wanted to do it instead. Perhaps she
realized that Grandma was very low. We had just started to eat when she called for us all to come into the bedroom. Grandma was dying! I stood at the foot of her bed and watched Grandma take her last three long gasps of breath. She was gone with no suffering! I remember my aunt almost fainting! My uncle threw open the window and fanned her with a fan.

In those days someone always closed the eyelids and put a penny on each eye to hold the eye closed. I don't know why, but I had that privilege. I put a book under her chin and went to Grandma's second drawer in her bureau, took from her white pitcher two pennies, and laid them on Grandma's eyes as they were closed in death.