

THIS OLD HOUSE SPEAKS

As houses go, I'm really not that old, but old enough to have undergone a lot of changes. For more than 60 years I have stood on one corner of the intersection of 6th Avenue and 10th Street in the small village of Northwood in north central Iowa about four miles from the Minnesota state line.

When Bill and Selma first acquired the land on which I am standing, they were living a block away in an older home with their four children. A couple of years earlier they had moved to Northwood from a small farm in Minnesota. Farming during the depression was not easy, and Bill did not particularly like farming anyway. He had experience working with his father and brother in the building business, and when Selma's parents moved to Northwood in their retirement, they encouraged Bill and Selma to join them in Northwood. I think Selma hated to leave the farm, but she had not lived near her parents for many years, and they were getting older. Bill, on the other hand, was anxious to start a new life in the building trade again.

My birthing was slow and exhausting. Bill was busy starting a new business in a town where he was unknown, and he started building me in his spare time. At first, I was only a foundation, and digging the basement with a team of horses was a challenging task. His reputation as a good craftsman and reliable worker grew steadily, and time became scarce. Money was scarce, too, and he didn't buy any construction supplies or materials until he was financially able.

I was going to become the first home that he and Selma owned. In the more than a dozen years since they married, all their homes had been rented. This home would belong to them. Time elapsed before the framing began. Sometimes Elaine and Sonny would play at the construction site, and Selma would bring the younger boys, Roger and Ardean, to see how things were progressing. Bill worked long hours on his other jobs and finding time to work on his home wasn't easy.



I was not going to be a grand house. Bill built much grander houses in his lifetime. I was going to be a modest frame home built in the Cape Cod style with both a front dormer and a back dormer for extra room. In the 1930s, the trend was for small, economical, and

mass-produced houses. Now recognized as one of the historic styles in American architecture, Cape Cod style homes became popular throughout the United States during that era. Symmetrical in appearance, with a center door and windows on each side, the shutters were strictly decorative. My exterior featured wide wooden clapboard siding painted white.

I had three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs and one-bedroom downstairs. On the first floor, in addition to the bedroom, there was a kitchen large enough for a kitchen table, a dining room, and a living room. The basement was for the furnace, the washing machine and storage.

I was anxious for the family to move in, and the family was anxious, too. Bill was 40 years old and Selma was 37, when the family moved in just before Christmas in December of 1939. I wasn't completely finished, but I had a furnace, a bathroom, an old-fashioned cooking range in the kitchen that was prized by Selma, and there were beds for everyone. The family that became mine had all the necessities and were happy about being in their new home. Ardean was two and a half years old and Roger was four and they were home all day. Sonny and Elaine were in school, but there was a lot of activity within my walls.

In the beginning,
my walls were unpainted

and the wall papering was not finished. There was only sub flooring on the first floor, but it made me feel good to have the little boys practice roller skating indoors. Elaine had a Halloween party and her friends bobbed for apples in a tubful of water right in the living room without concern for damage. I remember Selma trying to keep my floors clean before carpeting and linoleum were installed because there wasn't a good lawn in the beginning either.

The back entry was one of my busiest and most used places. A small lavatory was installed in the corner just inside the back door with a mirror placed above it. A handy towel on a roller was within reach. Bill stopped here to wash up whenever he came home, and it was part of his morning ritual to shave with a straight edged razor in front of this little mirror before he went to work. The kids used this entrance, too. They would stop to take off their boots and hang up their coats and jackets on the hooks conveniently placed by the door.

Selma was a busy homemaker and during those first years she didn't leave home much except on Sunday when she taught Sunday School at the Norwegian Lutheran Church. A wonderful aroma permeated my rooms on Sunday because Selma always put a pot roast on the stove before she left that was ready for the family's Sunday dinner when they returned home after church. One exciting change happened in the kitchen when Selma was the lucky winner of a new gas range at a cooking school sponsored by the local utility company. She baked bread regularly and excelled at pie making. Bill's favorite pie was lemon meringue, and her lemon meringue pies were unforgettable. Ham dinners were Selma's specialty on holidays because Bill received so many gifts of ham from the lumber yards, hardware stores,



*Selma & Bill in the beginning,
I stood alone—no lawn, no trees,
No neighbors*

and other business associates.



I was the home of the same family for more than 40 years, and witnessed many happy times, but there were also some lonely times. During World War II Bill spent weeks at a time away from home doing defense work in Wisconsin and Illinois. It was lonely for Selma who was home with the boys. Elaine was away attending

*Photo taken in 1942 Bill, Selma and Elaine
Gerald, Roger and Ardean*

the University of Minnesota School of Nursing beginning in 1943. Her front dormer room with the window seat and a built-in desk made by Bill was claimed by one of her brothers

There was a lot of excitement here when Elaine and Walt got married at Christmastime in 1946. Then Gerald (or "Sonny" as he was called by the family) enlisted in the service in 1947. I was overwhelmed with sadness on Christmas Eve in 1948 when word was received that Gerald had died in a one-car automobile accident in California. Earlier that evening I watched as the family enjoyed their Christmas gift exchange without Gerald. They were expecting him to be home for a visit the next week so had accepted his absence with good grace. I remember most, Selma's response to the news. She started cleaning her already clean house and washed clothes all night long as if the activity would assuage her grief. It was a heartbreaking time for all the family, but especially for Selma and Bill.

Bill and Selma were faced with another loss because Walter and Elaine had to leave right after the funeral. Walter graduated from Iowa State College just before Christmas, and he was scheduled to begin work in Frederick, Maryland. It was such a sad time, and I was glad that Roger and Ardean were still home for a few years before Roger left for Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. Ardean followed soon after by leaving to attend Waldorf College in Forest City, Iowa. A short time later, however, he enlisted in the service.

Selma and Bill were living alone for the first time in nearly 30 years, but I continued to be filled with activity. For a long time, I didn't have brick steps at the front door, but they had been in place many years by now, and the door was always open. There were many baby showers and bridal showers and quilting parties and circle meetings. Neighbors and friends, were regular visitors, and the neighborhood children were always welcome.

None of their grandchildren lived nearby, but summer vacation was the time when the families arrived. There was a built-in drawer in Selma and Bill's bedroom that held special treasures. It contained items that fired the imagination, and was always the first place the children checked out when they visited. There were broken clocks, empty spools, small containers; any discarded item that was safe for children to play with was waiting in that drawer for the children to use creatively. The button jar was another source of curiosity and amusement.

I was never exposed to animal life because Selma was a farm girl who believed animals

should live outdoors. That changed and an exception was made for the grandchildren. Ellen was heartbroken and cried unceasingly when her Dalmatian, Duchess, was not allowed to sleep in the same room with her. Grandma finally relented, and at least during that and future visits I was allowed to have a temporary animal resident.

I was the only house on the intersection when I was built. One summer before there were any other residences in the neighborhood, a roller-skating rink under a large tent was right across the street from me. There was a lot of activity and strains of *I Left my Heart on Blueberry Hill* and other popular music wafted through the air during the summer evenings. Over the years, I watched Bill construct homes on two of the other corners, and their owners became good friends of Bill and Selma. Lyle Bestul, a high school teacher who worked for Bill during the summers built a house on the other corner where he lived with his wife and children. Eventually more houses were built, and I was on a street full of homes in a friendly neighborhood

My view from the back changed a lot, too, as time went by. At first there was only a large open field and the garden. An apple tree was planted in the back yard and a catalpa tree with its large heart shaped leaves and long seed pods grew there. Bill built a small windmill as a decorative yard fixture, and Selma planted annuals each year in a square painted washtub on legs.

One of the sights that pleased me was watching Flash, the horse that Ardean got when he was 10 years old. Flash was two years old when he became part of the family and was 27 when he died. Bill built a small shed for Flash in the backyard that was used for several years, and I loved to watch the grandchildren ride Flash when they came to visit. I missed Flash after the neighborhood became more populated, and he was moved to a nearby farm to be boarded after his barn burned. A worker started a fire to clear a neighboring vacant lot of grass and weeds that quickly spread to Flash's shed and hay caught fire before the fire department got the flames under control.

Bill built a bicycle shed at that location which became a playhouse for the neighborhood children after Roger and Ardean grew up. There was always a sand box in my backyard available for children, too. The apple tree grew, and it was a familiar sight to see children climbing in the tree and people sitting outdoors on Adirondack chairs visiting in its shade.

The Lutheran Retirement Home was built a few houses down the street behind me, I often watched Selma walk the short distance to the Retirement Home where she spent many hours volunteering her services and became the first Auxiliary President, a position she held for 16 years.



One of the big events in my life was the 50th wedding anniversary of Bill and Selma. Their children planned an event at the First Lutheran Church. Of course, I was unable to witness this, but I heard all about it. I heard how Roger was the Master of Ceremonies and how all the children and grandchildren participated in one way or another either by speaking or by

performing. Many friends and relatives from out of town came to my place either before or after the event so I was able to share a bit in this special occasion

A rather strange phenomenon occurred in Northwood that day. An infestation of houseflies attacked the village. Flies covered the screens of my front and back doors, and it took constant vigilance to keep them outdoors. I learned this was also a problem at the church and all-around town. In a day or two they left as suddenly as they came, but Selma and Bill were almost too busy to notice. Son Ardean, stationed in Germany, convinced them to return to Germany with him just a week later. There was much excitement because everything had to be done in such a hurry. Getting passports and transportation arranged in that short time left the journey in some doubt until the very last minute, but it all came together and they left me alone while they made a wonderful trip to Europe.

One of the big changes in my life came when Bill and Selma decided to enlarge their bedroom and add a bathroom on the first floor. At that time Bill was 82 years old, but he did most all the work himself. Selma was 79, and they both enjoyed my new addition. It wasn't long afterward that Selma had a heart attack, and I was especially happy to be able to add to her comfort and ease at that time.

When she returned from the hospital after a second heart attack in 1980, I heard some very unsettling news—Bill and Selma were going to leave me. A house in Cincinnati right next door to Walt and Elaine's home had come on the market, and they were going to buy it. They seemed excited with their decision, but this was going to be quite an adjustment for me.

Almost immediately they started to go through their belongings and pack, but it seemed like they just couldn't empty me. They got tired, and it was hard to decide what to do with things that had been here for 40 years and what was added since. Some things were given away, and they had a garage sale. They didn't want to move more than necessary, and I gave up a little more each day until the moving truck came. It was loaded, and Bill locked my door. I was the home he had built and where he and Selma had raised their family.

I didn't know what was going to happen to me. As yet, I had not been sold, and I was cold and empty on this November day in 1980. Before long I was purchased by an elderly couple who lived here comfortably for a short time. Next a young family moved in, and I was overjoyed about this new life and all its activity within my walls again.

I have changed and been redecorated since Bill and Selma lived here. A deck was added where the children can play, an extension was made to my kitchen, and some doors were added. The old garage was torn down and a new double-car garage facing 10th Street was built. The children that live in my house ride their wheels in the driveway, and I enjoy watching them through my back windows.

Bill and Selma's children have visited me when they returned to Northwood on occasion. When the Elliott's grandson Ross and his wife Patti came to see me in 2003, my present owners invited them inside to look me over. Ross saw some changes in this old house, but it still looked familiar, and he remembered the times he visited. I was happy to hear him say Bill and Selma had loved their home in Cincinnati. They saw Walt and Elaine every day,

and took part in many family gatherings and celebrations with their grandchildren and their new friends.

I learned that Bill and Selma died in 1990 just three months apart and had funeral services both in Cincinnati and in Northwood. Now their burial sites are not far from me at Sunset Rest Cemetery near their son, Gerald, and Selma's parents. Deep inside my soul I remember the past, and I was pleased about this *homecoming* for them. But I look forward to the future, too, hopeful that I can provide comfort and shelter to my new family in Northwood, Iowa, for many more years.

. —. Elaine Elliott Varland