

HUMANITIES

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the SENSE OF PLACE issue



AN EXCERPT FROM
WHILE THE WINDMILL WATCHED

by Jackie Pfeiffer McGregor and Janine Pfeiffer Knop



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MEET THE PFEIFFERS

THE WINDMILL I am The Windmill, a towering intermediary between wind and underground water—thirst-quenching water. My coordinated mechanism draws life-giving water from the aquifer and stores this liquid within a circular, wooden stock tank for the refreshment of the livestock on the Pfeiffer farm. Yet within this portrait of North Dakota history, I have an additional role. I am The Observer—The Observer of Time.

I stood as sentry over the land and people who awaken within these pages. Particularly, I observed the Pfeiffer sisters—Jackie and Janine, daughters of Jack and Eudora—as the years progressed. With a watchful eye, I caught sight of a recurrent theme in the metamorphosis of The Sisters' personalities. I found it to be true they were notably similar in integrity, honesty, morality, and work ethic, yet uniquely different in pursuits and experiences. It is hoped that you, reader, will also find this to be true as our tale unwinds.

Proof of the girls' unique, individual characters came to light on a summer day in 1954. The setting was my sturdy metal ladder.

THE MENOKEN COMMUNITY

THE WINDMILL Observing the invisible parameters of our Menoken community meant more than just having the same village name written on a stamped envelope. I saw the lifestyle of neighbor helping neighbor as the glue that held this rural society together.

Members of this cohesive group of local citizens held positions of public school and Sunday school teachers. I saw neighbors serving as 4-H leaders for community children. Families picnicked together, and after a sweaty day of work, they cleaned up and promenaded with each other at square dances. They raised funds for the local church when men hosted pancake suppers. Those jovial fellows could really flip pancakes!

As neighbor Zella Trauger once told the Pfeiffer sisters, “Nobody thought that they were better than the other one.” These activities and social gathering places were influential in shaping the characters of our authors during the 1950s.

MENOKEN SCHOOL

JACKIE I was fortunate to have been a student of Mrs. Violette Arntz during my first four primary grades. Mrs. Arntz was a very tall, well-groomed, gifted lady who radiated a commanding presence! She loved her job, evidenced by her many smiles, and the students loved/liked and respected her! She was kind, firm, and fair.

THE SISTERS Each Christmas, Mrs. Arntz directed an operetta. It gave all students, from grades one through eight, the opportunity to have a thespian experience whether they wanted it or not. Depending on the operetta, some students memorized speaking parts, all had group singing parts, and all were appropriately costumed. One of the most memorable operettas performed by our school was *The Little Blue Angel*. In fifth grade, Jackie played the part of a lonely princess who wondered if there was more to Christmas than receiving “just things.” At the end of the program, it was revealed by the little blue angel—a classmate dressed in blue who stood behind and to the top of the evergreen Christmas tree—that there was something more important than “things.” The best gift was the Christ Child.

THE CHURCHES

JACKIE Everyone who was involved in church activities and was not Roman Catholic, participated

at the Methodist Church. A traveling minister, the Reverend Edward Parker, presided on Sundays. Our neighbor to the north, “Grandma” Mabel Salter, faithfully took Janine and me, and her granddaughters Patty and Janny, to Sunday school. I left the house with a coin-filled hankie that contained my offering for “those poor children in Africa,” as relayed by my Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Salter. Mom made sure that the coins were secure in my little makeshift purse, so much so that sometimes Mrs. Salter needed to loosen the knot in order for me to place my offering into the felt-bottomed brass collection plate.

4-H

THE WINDMILL Jackie and Janine matured into learned young women in the nine-year season they were each a member of the two Menoken 4-H clubs. Why, you wouldn’t believe how the lessons of 4-H projects opened their minds to the learning of new skills. Aromas of freshly baked blueberry muffins and mouth-watering cherry pies drifted through open kitchen windows into the farmyard where I stood. I would catch a glimpse of a newly sewn, carefully pressed garment attentively placed on a hanger and poised for judging at the 4-H dress review in Bismarck. Jackie’s instinctive love of horses and Janine’s innate love of cattle were the catalysts in becoming accomplished 4-H livestock handlers. Mind you, though, the skills they learned through 4-H were all due to the patient teaching and encouragement of Eudora and Jack.

THE ANIMALS

THE WINDMILL Four legged. Two-legged. With wings or without. Farm animals represented income. They were the source of home-grown, high-protein sustenance.

Funds from the sale of animals were used to pay the bank, the feed store, and the grocery store. Bills and coins from their sales were traded for fuel purchased to stave off below-zero temperatures. The cream check or egg money paid for children’s piano lessons or 4-H project expenses.

Yet, as vital as animals were to the financial bottom line of a farm family, they also provided friendship and camaraderie between man and beast. They gave solace to those seeking a listening ear. Truly, I observed animals as nonprofessional mental health therapists. Stroking a horse’s mane or a dog’s forehead while sharing the day’s woes brought a peaceful regrouping of heart and mind.

Life was simply in balance when a farmer stood within his flock or herd and gazed upon its beauty.

THE SISTERS At Dad’s request, sometimes during various lambing seasons, we girls had the opportunity to become novice midwives if a ewe was having a difficult time giving birth. Dad would check the ewe to discern why she was having difficulty lambing. If he realized that the normal birthing position with the lamb’s nose resting on both front legs was not present, it was time to intervene. That being the case, the smaller hands of us young girls could fit into the birth canal more easily than his to assist with the birth as nature had intended. It was freezing cold within this outdoor animal science classroom known as the barn. Yet we sisters concluded that using our novice veterinary skills to bring new life into this world was totally rewarding.

THE CHORES

THE WINDMILL The Pfeiffer family operated as a team. Jack and Eudora worked cohesively, breathing a strong work ethic into the lives of their children. The bloodlines of their ancestors had introduced that virtue decades earlier.

Chores required of The Sisters were not difficult. But what the responsibility of those chores fostered was both personal and family accountability. Teamwork! Year in and year out, “Working Together” was the unspoken mantra on the Pfeiffer farm.

COUNTRY CLOTHING

THE WINDMILL The art of fashion design tickled the creative spirits of the Pfeiffer Sisters years before they each became accomplished seamstresses. But it was chicken feed—yes, chicken feed—that laid the foundation for fabric selection.

JACKIE During our young years, flour, chicken laying mash, and baby chick mash/chick starter were purchased in colorfully printed fifty-pound sacks. I did not appreciate having to wear a dress that had once been a chicken feed sack! Imagine shopping at the Peavey Elevator in Bismarck for your next dress or skirt fabric! Little did we know that the farm elevator would serve as our first “fabric store.” When Dad instructed us to pick out the mash sacks, we knew we’d end up wearing them!

Two seasons a year, he delivered a marketing masterpiece—a heavy, thickly bound volume known as the mail-order catalog.

JANINE It was our rural mailman who played a huge role in our learning about fashion. Two seasons a year, he delivered a marketing masterpiece—a heavy, thickly bound volume known as the mail-order catalog. Sears, Montgomery Ward, Aldens, Spiegel, and J. C. Penney held places of prominence in after-school viewing. A catalog was two inches thick and complete with a “New York runway” of fashions for every member of the family—all at our fingertips!

UNSEEN THREATS

THE WINDMILL People living on the prairie in the 1950s faced multiple seen and unseen threats. North Dakotans such as the Pfeiffers rose to overcome those challenges by facing them head-on, thereby welcoming advances in medicine, technology, and inventive sciences. Through their windows, I noticed small bottles of iodine and Mercurochrome holding residence inside mirror-fronted bathroom home medicine chests. With a drop of either of those red

liquids and topped with a flesh-colored Band-Aid, cuts and scrapes of the skin healed quickly.

However, it was those sneaky unseen threats of a higher order, in the forms of disabling and life-threatening viruses and bacteria along with government world greed, that were the nemeses of life. Scary? Indeed!

Observing over and beyond our Menoken community, I witnessed the fact that no one was naturally immune to these possibly life-threatening perils. I shudder to think of the potential path of destruction to human life we might've walked had not brilliantly gifted scientists and government leaders opened a progressive pathway for a better life on the prairie. In my opinion, though, the game changer for rural progress—electricity!

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

JACKIE One early summer afternoon in June 1954, our paper-doll fantasy world turned into tumultuous reality! Shortly after dinner, we sisters were sitting on Janine's double bed playing paper dolls. The blue

As our family worked and relaxed together on Fridays, I did not have a smidgen of realization that those occurrences would serve as the building blocks for my future.

sky featured fluffy, white cumulus clouds. I remember looking out the south-facing window having two observations: an unusually large cloud, large enough to block out the sun, had just passed, and the airplane I spotted in a split-second view was flying way too low! I quickly put two and two together, and realized that the darkening cloud had really been the shadow of the airplane! Within about fifteen seconds a terrifying, loud boom shook the house!

THE HOLIDAYS

JANINE Excitedly, Jackie and I were co-chairmen of the annual house decoration committee. Our fresh

Christmas tree was dressed with glass balls, papier-mâché bells, strings of large, colorful lights, miniature glass-ball garland, and thin tinsel icicles. Virtuous patience was practiced with the placement of each individual silver strand. It was a Christmas-decorating sin to throw those shimmering strands onto a bough!

WHAT WAS SO SPECIAL ABOUT FRIDAYS

JANINE As our family worked and relaxed together on Fridays, I did not have a smidgen of realization that those occurrences would serve as the building blocks for my future. In retrospect, they played a gigantic role in forging my personal growth and my destiny!

Jackie and I observed Dad's personal attention to genuine customer service on his egg route in Bismarck. He was an honest businessman! He delighted in having us accompany him as he sold eggs in the city's professional offices. Carefully nestled within our little-girl arms, Jackie and I proudly carried string-wrapped cartons of two or three dozen eggs as Dad happily carried a durable cardboard case of fifteen dozen eggs. Dad was in his realm; if

he could have cheerfully whistled while he carted that egg case around, he would have! His false teeth prevented that musical sound from his pursed lips.

A genuine smile and a polite "thank you" were always extended to those

who bought our product. He never grew tired of conversing. Our egg customers loved buying from Dad; he delivered a quality product along with outstanding camaraderie. One couldn't help but want to do business with Jack Pfeiffer!

OUR LAST WORDS

THE SISTERS Growing up on the vast prairie could have instilled a feeling of isolation within the souls of us sisters. There are stories of other rural North Dakotans whose childhoods reflected that feeling. However, we never experienced the reality of remoteness. Perhaps it was our proximity to the

capital city and the opportunities it presented to us. Perhaps it was the fact that our parents gave us a peek into a world beyond farm life while at the same time offering emotional and physical shelter and security within our environment.

Upon reflection on the journey of our lives in rural America during the 1950s, the words inscribed on these pages opened our eyes to the blessed gift of being the daughters of Jack and Eudora Pfeiffer. This writing experience further deepened the understanding of our incredible cherished legacy.

THE WINDMILL I no longer stand tall on the North Dakota prairie, but personal memories, just like the wind, continue forever. With advancing years, my functional service declined; my watchful eye observed with only fading clarity.

Jack and Eudora's "until death do us part" came to pass in the 1980s. Until that time, they lived in the house they had built on their farm in the Menoken community. The family's indelible rural legacy is encased within the cover of this book. Their productive slice of North Dakota prairie—those acres over which I stood observing their family life and the Menoken community—the land they lovingly stewarded with every inch of their being, remains in the Pfeiffer family today. □

THE PFEIFFER SISTERS, JACKIE PFEIFFER

MCGREGOR AND JANINE PFEIFFER KNOP grew up on a North Dakota farm in the 1950s, watched over by their parents and the windmill that tirelessly provided them with the water vital to their survival. Jackie and her husband, Bob, blessed with two daughters and four grandchildren, spend much of their time volunteering, traveling, and enjoying activities of hiking and kayaking in northeastern Washington.

Janine and her husband, Fred, blessed with two daughters and four grandchildren, are retired from farming in southwest Iowa and carry on with their mobile gourmet coffee cart business and dessert-baking business, Miss Nini's Fine Desserts.

The following is taken from the collection of recipes found at the end of the book. The recipes were popular in our community in the 1950s.

OLD-FASHIONED DATE BALLS

Gladys Goehring
Menoken, North Dakota

INGREDIENTS:

2 large eggs
1 ½ c. dates, finely chopped
1 c. sugar
5 tbsp. butter
2 ½ c. crispy rice cereal
1 tsp. vanilla
½ c. chopped English walnuts
½ c. shredded coconut
Additional 1–2 c. shredded coconut

DIRECTIONS:

In a bowl, beat eggs. Stir in dates and sugar. Melt butter in skillet. Add eggs, dates, and sugar. Cool until thick. Add crispy rice cereal, vanilla, English walnuts, and ½ c. coconut. Mix and cool. Form into teaspoon-size balls and roll in remaining coconut. Keep refrigerated due to cooked egg mixture. Yields about 5 dozen.