

News from Nan

NAN'S WRITINGS

NAN'S REMINISCENCES: FOUR "HAPPENINGS"

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This post is part of a series of reminiscences that Nan (born 1906) wrote about her childhood in Minden City, Michigan. Most of the pieces were written sometime between 1990 and 1995.

This post describes four "happenings": (1) "Mothers try to grant wishes," (2) "A joke that backfired," (3) "A wedding," and (4) "A fire!"

Mothers try to grant wishes

In the northeast corner of the Red House [the house where Nan was born], Mother had a bed of violets. It was cool there, and we had a hammock there in the shade. One hot summer day Maxine Lytle and I were sitting in the hammock moaning about how hot we were. We were making a big fuss, telling each other how unbearable the heat was and how we wished that a shower would somehow break over our steaming heads and cold, wet water would fall on us and cool us off!



Yellow violet

And all at once, like waving a fairy wand, a shower of cool water was drenching us! We squealed and jumped out of the hammock.

In the shed window above us my mother was laughing! "Well, I was trying to make your wish come true," she said, "but look what a mess I have to clean up!" She had to throw the water through a screen, and

some went inside, not out.

Mothers try to grant wishes!

A joke that backfired

One afternoon I got home before the supper call, and I thought I would play a joke on my mother. Our little express wagon was in its place at the west side of the house, and I sat in it to wait for the call.



Four oldest Riedel kids with the "little express wagon" (the picture was taken before Nan was born)

I intended to jump up and say, "I'm here!" and I thought it would be a good joke. Mother would call so loudly, and there I was, on the steps! I sat and waited, but no call came. I began looking up at the kitchen window above me. Had someone seen me? Why didn't they call? After all, I didn't want to miss my supper! I looked up, and then down at the wagon, and stretched along the wagon edge, almost in my lap, was a green grass snake! It was harmless, and I should have been pleased that it trusted me enough to come so close, but I was afraid of snakes of any kind, so I screamed bloody murder! I must have scared little thing to death! Perhaps he had hoped I'd share supper with him.

So the surprise was on me: that joke backfired.

A wedding

On the fifth of April, 1918, a very important thing happened at the Red House. There was a wedding! A wedding is a happy event, but this one was a little sad, too, because it was a wartime wedding, and the groom was soon to leave to do into the service.



Selma ("Sal") Riedel and Arthur ("Art") Bostwick at the Red House, shortly before their wedding

I was eleven years old, and it was exciting, but not until afterward, because they didn't tell me beforehand. There wasn't time nor opportunity to have a big wedding, and so they were keeping it quiet until it was all over. They were afraid I might "let the cat out of the bag," as they say.

You can imagine that I was very insulted to think that they thought I couldn't keep a secret! I did have a pink silk dress to wear: it had been made out of a dress that Sal had worn, as many of our clothes were hand-me-downs, especially in wartime, when everything was scarce.



Sal and Art Bostwick at their home in Port Huron, Michigan, on their 60th wedding anniversary

I must tell you about the dress! It had been dry cleaned, which must have "killed" the fabric. One day a little later, we were out in the car, and that dress, which I was wearing, suddenly just separated into threads on my body!

My sister wanted her bridal bouquet to be lilies of the valley, but it was too early for them to be in bloom, so she had sweet peas. The lilies of the valley grew along the west wall of the Red House, where the snake came to visit me, and every year after that, when they were in bloom, Mother would have me take them to Sal, because she had not been able to have them for her bridal bouquet. (Another thing she got every year was the first strawberries that ripened in the garden, which usually happened about on her birthday, June 15.

I'm not sure Sal and Art even had a honeymoon. Art had to leave for Camp Custer, and he was soon sent to fight in Europe. In June Ray and Gladys were married, another wartime wedding, and he also went to Custer and to Europe.

That was a very sad time in the Red House. The brides were heartbroken, and Mother had a nervous breakdown. I don't think the Red House ever saw a sadder time. But you can believe what a time of joy it was when the war ended and our boys came safely home!

A fire!

My parents were very modern in keeping up with new inventions. In the old days there were no wash-and-wear fabrics, and nearly everything was made of cotton or linen cloth that wrinkled badly when washed, and so had to be ironed. And as there were no electric irons, the irons were heated on a stove and used to press out the wrinkles.



Stove-heated iron once owned by Nan's mother

It was a hot and trying job, and when someone invented an iron that was heated by gasoline, people were glad to try it. Gasoline was dangerous, of course, but Mother and Dad bought one to try, hoping it could be used without trouble.

Mother put up a clothes line in the kitchen and hung the ironed clothes up to dry out so they wouldn't wrinkle again. And I, who was about five or six years old, was busy cutting out pictures, dipping them in water, and sticking them on the window, my favorite art work.

With paper scraps and a line of clothes, the kitchen was a very badly unsafe place for what happened next! The iron exploded!

Mother was always grateful that Paul was such a good baby. He was asleep in the bedroom above the kitchen and gave her no extra worry as she pulled me out and away from the flames and gathered up the hanging clothes to keep the flames from spreading.



Paul Riedel

We had a cistern pump in the kitchen, so water was available when she could use it. And I think the "Old Tiger" town fire engine came before everything was settled. I think it was in the village paper!

The Red House really saw some exciting times! Mother worked fast, and nobody was hurt. Electricity is much safer than gasoline!