

## News from Nan

### NAN'S WRITINGS

# NAN'S REMINISCENCES: HOUSEHOLD ROUTINES

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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 various household routines.*



*Nan's parents, Louis H and Anna Schreiter Riedel*

### Tending babies

MY mother said that HER mother used to lift the next-youngest into the cradle with the baby. The toddler's job was to rock the cradle if the baby fussed. (They didn't have any play equipment, so maybe the toddler thought rocking the cradle was fun!) We didn't have to do any chores quite so young as that, but there was a lot of fetching and carrying to do, and running errands was kids' business as soon as they were old enough to do safely alone around town and to carry a coin without losing it.



*Nan's maternal grandmother, Louise Dorsch Schreiter*

## Running errands

As a schoolgirl, I went every evening uptown to Mrs. Moony's house for a quart of milk. I had a little two-quart pail with a cover and five cents to pay for the milk. If I got there early, and the cows were not yet milked, Mrs. Moony would milk the milk right into my little pail, which I thought was fun to watch. Sometimes she gave me a cookie. She was a nice lady, but very deaf, so she had a high-pitched voice and a laugh that sounded like a cackle.

I suppose the round trip was perhaps three-quarters of a mile, but I didn't mind the walk, because I could see what wild plants were blooming along the way, and in winter it was rather fun to go by the blacksmith shop and see the nice warm fire and hear the "cling, clang" as the blacksmith hammered the hot iron.

That chore was every day. Then I used to set the table, perhaps fetch vegetables from the cellar or from the garden, or get a stick of wood. I liked the vegetable preparations: I used to love to peel potatoes or prepare string beans or peas, or hull strawberries, because I could sit on the steps under the maple tree and watch the ducklings in their little pond, or the birds, or listen to the chickens singing.

We often had to go to the store for an item, such as a bar of Fels Naphtha soap, or a half-pound of tea nibs, or a pound of Arbuckle coffee, or a half-pound of cheese. Not many things were packaged then, so you had to wait until it was weighed and wrapped. The worst of it was that if the price had risen, Mrs. Moore would say, "Tell your mother the tea is two cents more, but there's no hurry." But Mother would give you the two cents and you had to make another trip right away!

If we were sent to Wahla's for a spool of thread or needles, we usually asked "C'n I have a penny for candy?" Wahla's had a big glass candy case with all kinds of penny-candies. If you had no penny, you were not supposed to stand and look – at least, WE were not supposed to, because Phene, the clerk, was the

aunt of our friends, the McCoys, and if she saw you looking, she would come and give you a piece. That would have been great, but Mother would scold, for she considered looking the same as begging, which was strictly forbidden!

## Getting up in the morning

If it was winter, the house was not cozily warm when we got up in the morning, although we were sheltered from the worst of the cold. We had no furnace in the house until I was about ten or twelve, and after we got the "wondrous creature," it had to be hand fed (that is, the coal was shoveled into its maw in the basement, and hand controlled to keep the heat coming along reasonable evenly).

My dad was a good fireman, and Mother had to be a good fireman's assistant through the day.

For a big house, as ours was, the one register was not much. But we had a kitchen range, which burned wood or coal, and there were registers in several upstairs rooms to let some heat up from the first floor. We often went to bed with a warm brick wrapped in cloth.

Before the furnace days, there was a so-called "base burner" (another name might have been "space heater"). It didn't heat much space, and it didn't put out a very fierce heat, but it was mellow and cozy. You could pull a chair up close, take off your shoes, and press your cold, wool-stockinged feet against the metal trim for comfort.

As a supplementary assistant, we had a smaller "space heater" in the upper hallway.

The base burner had to be shaken down, and the first sound of morning was Dad shaking down the base burner – or tending to the furnace – and Mother getting the big range going for breakfast preparations. Dad would be carrying out ashes and carrying in wood and scuttles of coal. Kindling and wood for the kitchen had to be at the ready in the wood box, probably filled the night before. And water had to be pumped at the outside pump and brought in by the pailful. In very cold weather the pump might have to be thawed and primed.

During these early-morning preliminaries, our pet rabbit "Bunny" would be following Dad in and out of the house, and perhaps up and down the cellar steps. She might make her own breakfast preparations by getting an apple or carrot or even a potato from the storage room, if she could get in.

All this and we aren't even up yet!

Now the edge is off the cold, and we kids are called.

Paul [Nan's younger brother] and I dressed beside the upstairs heater, when it was in service, and beside the big square register there, which was harvesting heat from the furnace. This was a fun time for the rabbit and the cat, who came to lick our feet and to play games with us or each other.



*Nettie (Nan) and her brother Paul, out and about*

We pulled on long-legged underwear and hand-knit woolen stockings, folding the underwear legs neatly so that the stockings fitted smoothly. The stockings were fastened to a garter waist. And there was lots more to come: shoes to be laced or buttoned, heavy coats and caps and mittens and scarves – maybe snow pants and galoshes.

At our house, the big dining room table was usually set for eight. The older ones would be gone for school or work by the time the younger ones made it. The oatmeal was keeping warm on the back of the range and developing a “skin” over the top, which I HATED! Toast could be had only if the fire was down to red coals in the range and Mother had time to hold a toasting fork over them. Sometimes she buttered bread and toasted it in the hot oven – a special treat!

I forgot to say that Dad was an avid weather person, and each day began with his interested observation as to what the thermometer reading was. Later, barometer, too – when we had one.

I carry on the weather watch for my dad. Well, for myself – but from him I learned to be interested. From him, too, I learned the grains, the common weeds that shouldn't be in the grains, and the effects of weather on the crops. From Mother, the flowers and the garden vegetables. And where did they learn them?

So, the day has begun. No electricity. No water except what was carried in. The indoor toilet facilities we had required the carrying OUT of the end products. Not even a washing machine in the early days. Nor a telephone, at first. Lots of “go and get.” Kids' legs were in demand! No radio. No television. No movies. Almost no books!

## Suppertime

Since everyone did not have a telephone, if your mother wanted you to come home for a meal or any other reason, she would send a brother or sister for you, or at mealtimes, she would step out the door and call: Net-TIE! Celes-TINE! Max-INE!

It was a two-tone call, the second tone higher than the first. It carried pretty well, and we usually were not far away. Any other child in hearing would pass the word: "Nettie Riedel, your mother's calling you." If they saw you still out a while later, they'd say, "Boy, are you going to catch it! Your mother called a long while ago!"

None of us had watches, but we knew pretty well when suppertime was. Everybody had the main meal at noon, and school was out from noon to one-o'clock for that. Fathers and brothers came home from work.

The evening meal was supper, usually at six o'clock. School was out at four, and four to six was playtime, except for any errands to be run. At suppertime you could smell potatoes frying anywhere in town, as most people had the leftover dinner potatoes warmed up for supper, with perhaps fried eggs or cold sliced meat from the dinner roast. Homemade bread and butter, and perhaps homemade cookies with canned fruit or applesauce completed the menu. There were always homemade pickles and relishes.

Milk was not pasturized, and our mother didn't trust raw milk. We didn't like the boiled milk to drink, nor evaporated milk, so we drank water or green tea. Our daily quart of milk was boiled and made into cream sauces or puddings, and that was how we got our daily milk ration, not as a beverage, as you probably do.

We rarely had oranges, except in our Christmas stocking. We had bananas sometimes, the whole stem hanging up at the grocer's – "upside down," as they seemed.

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