

“Life With Erma”

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I have written about my war experiences and my career experiences. Now I will present other experiences primarily related to Erma and our married life. Some are good memories, some not so good. I will start with a background subject which is religion. Religion has been very important in my life. Not because I am religious . . . but because I am not.

I will start with my parents and Erma’s parents. Amy and Max Atkinson and Lawrence and Emma Groeger. These are Megan and Chris’s great grandparents.

The Atkinsons: My parents, **Max and Amy Atkinson**, were Methodist and firmly believed in God. I went to Sunday School and church with my parents through childhood until I graduated from High School and went into the Army. The custom of our church was to join during your junior year. I conformed to the custom and joined. I remember that we were called up to the front of the church to repeat our vows. Then as I walked back to my seat I remember thinking, “What have I done?” So I had serious doubts about religion even in high school.

My mother’s belief in heaven was strong. After my father died, my mother wanted to die so she could be with him.

And now for Erma’s parent’s; that is **Lawrence Groeger and Emma Bessert Groeger**.

The Groegers: Lawrence had five brothers and six sisters. Their parents emigrated from Austria and the whole family was very catholic and lived in the predominantly Catholic small town of Humphrey, Nebraska. Two of Lawrence’s sister became nuns, one brother joined a catholic order as a “nursing brother,” and another sister was a housekeeper for priests her whole adult life. The large Catholic church, St. Francis, was the center for most Humphrey activities.

The Besserts: The Bessert family were Missouri Synod Lutherans. Emma, Erma’s mother, had 3 sisters and 4 brothers. There was an important story about the death of Emma’s father, Ferdinand Bessert. All Erma knew was that what happened was a major family disgrace. Her mother would not tell her the details, but it was so disgraceful that the

remaining family moved from Nebraska to Baker Montana to get away from it. Erma's mother, Emma, took the secret to her grave. For Erma, not knowing what happened was worse than knowing whatever the truth was. So Erma went through most of her life distressed that her mother never told her.

Then in July 1999, Joe Bessert, a second cousin of Erma's, who she did not know, called to get Bessert family information. He told us what had happened. Then Dhyan found the newspaper article about the event online. Here it is:

Ferdinand Bessert: Born 1854, Died July 7, 1908

ATTEMPTED MURDER, SUCCESSFUL SUICIDE

Ferdinand August Bessert Attempts to Kill Wife and Then Kills Self, Tragedy Ends Domestic Trouble

A terrible tragedy was enacted at the Ferdinand A. Bessert home four miles north of Winnetoon, Tuesday morning about seven o'clock. A husband with an uncontrollable temper and a family quarrel, attempted murder of the wife and successful suicide of the husband tells the weird story.

Tuesday morning Mr. and Mrs. Bessert got in a dispute over what one of the boys should do during that day. Bessert became so enraged, he went upstairs, got his revolver and coming down threatened to annihilate the whole family.

The wife ran from the house to the gate, the husband following, as she passed through the gate, she stumbled and fell and at the same instant Bessert fired, but the bullet went wild. She was so frightened, she could not get up immediately and it was fortunate she did not.

Bessert supposing he had done his work well, passed out the gate over her prostrate body into the road, placed the muzzle of the revolver in his mouth and pulled the trigger. The bullet passed upwards through his head; death was instantaneous.

The neighbors were notified of the tragedy immediately and Coroner Kalar of Bloomfield telephoned for. He came immediately by auto and viewed the remains as he lay in the road.

Inquiry brought out the facts as above stated and it also developed that these family troubles were frequent and he had threatened to put an end to all of them many times.

He had an uncontrollable temper and was easily excited and when in this condition

was to be feared by anyone who might cross his path.

Bessert was a prosperous farmer about 55 years old. A number of grown sons and daughters, besides his wife, survive him.

The funeral was held Wednesday from the home and burial made at Bazile Mills.

...The Creighton News 19 July 19

When Lawrence and Emma were married, Emma agreed to join the Catholic Church. Erma was born and then baptized in the Catholic Church. But Emma was not happy attending the Catholic Church. Eventually she backed out of her agreement and did not join the church. Instead she returned, with Erma, to the Lutheran church. As a result, after many threats by the priest toward Lawrence for not being able to "control his wife," Lawrence was excommunicated from the church. The conflict between Emma and Lawrence got so bad that Emma left Humphrey and returned to her family in Baker. She apparently intended to get a divorce, but found out, while she was in Baker, that she was pregnant. She returned to Humphrey and she and Lawrence lived together for the rest of their lives.

Lutherans were tolerated in Humphrey, but Erma was different. She had been baptized as a Catholic and then left the church. This was near the ultimate sin. Apparently in the catholic school Erma was given as an example of someone certain to go to hell. She received verbal abuse and even thrown rocks from the Catholic kids.

Humphrey had a Catholic school with 40 to 50 students per class and Erma went to the public school with the same 8 in her class from kindergarten to high school graduation. During all that time, no Catholic child would have anything to do with her. When we think of the problems Erma had later in life, we can at least wonder to what extent they were precipitated by her troubles in childhood.

After she graduated from high school she taught for two years in a country school with a total of 4 students in grades 1 to 8, all cousins. Erma's father expected her to fold her income as a teacher into the family pot but Emma insisted that that was Erma's money and she should be able to save up for further education. During the summers she went to a business school. She then took a civil service exam, passed, and went to Washington DC to work at the Department Agriculture during WWII.

While In DC she was very active at Christ Lutheran Church, in fact she became their organist and participated in a very large group for young adults at the church who were in Washington DC because of WWII. There were many service men there and the church held

many social events. At these events Erma met and dated a Marine by the name of Wally Stienpreis. They became engaged.

After the war, Wally took Erma to Sheboygan, Wisconsin to be introduced to his family. They did not approve of Erma! Then Erma took Wally to Humphrey to meet her parents and they did not approve of Wally!

I do not know why Wally's family rejected Erma, but the reason for Wally's rejection is interesting. Even though Wally was a member of a Missouri Synod Lutheran church, his name sounded Jewish to Erma's mother who apparently was so prejudiced against Jews that even though Wally was a Lutheran a Jewish sounding name made him completely unacceptable.

Erma told me many years later that her mother said "Erma, you can marry Wally if you want to, but if you do, don't ever come back to Humphrey." Erma's bond was stronger to her family than to Wally and she dropped him cold.

There are many "what ifs" in my army write up and here is a **super major "What If!"**

What if Erma's mother had not been so strongly anti-Jewish and she had accepted the Lutheran, Wally. Erma would have married a Lutheran and probably would have been happier than she was with me. But if you are Kathleen, or Janet, or Megan or Christopher, you would not be reading this because you would not exist. So perhaps you can be thankful for Emma's prejudice.

So much for religion, at least for now.

I got out of army at Leavenworth on the last Saturday of January 1946, hitch-hiked home and arrived late that day. My sister, Wilma was a student at Nebraska University (NU) and I knew that registration for the second semester started on Monday. Sunday, I went to Church with my parents and met a high school classmate, Dave Barker. He was also at NU, was living at a boarding house in Lincoln, and said there was an opening. I rode to Lincoln with Dave and moved into the boarding house run by Mrs. Proudfit, (otherwise known as Mrs. "P.") There were four rooms for boarders, two for men and two for women. Five of the eight boarders were from Pawnee City.

About that time, Erma moved back from Washington D.C. to Lincoln to be closer to her Father who had had two heart attacks and might die at any time. She transferred from the Department of Agriculture in DC to the Department in Lincoln.

She rented a room from a family, but was not happy with the arrangement. She then moved in with Alphadeen Campbell, a fellow employee. Alphadeen was from Pawnee City and knew about Proudfits. In June of 1946 there was an opening at Proudfits and Erma moved in and shared a room with Margret Turner also from Pawnee City. Their closet was small, so she put some of her cloths in my closet because I was away for the summer helping my parents repaint their house.

So in September when I returned to Proudfits I found women's clothes in my closet and that is how I met Erma. We all ate breakfast and the evening meal together and got to know each other.

During high school I became interested in classical music. In Lincoln I started purchasing record albums. Soon Erma joined me Saturday mornings at a record store. I would buy an album and then we would take it to my room to listen to it. So that was how we started going together. Occasionally we went to a movie or to dinner but I was living on the GI Bill allotment of \$95/month, and I had very little money for such things.

After about a year Erma's sister graduated from HS and got a job in Lincoln. Erma moved from Proudfits and joined her in an apartment in the house next to Proudfits. By this time I was serious about Erma and asked her to marry me. She turned me down. Actually she turned me down three times.

The Proudfits did not own the house that we were in. They rented the second and third floor. In late 1947 the house was sold for a commercial development and Proudfits moved about a mile away. I went with them. I gave up on Erma, she had turned me down and she lived a mile away. I became interested in Ruth Nelson who was in a physics class with me followed by a German class across campus. We walked together between the classes. Ruth was smart and we were equal in physics. She was much better than me in German. I had very little contact with Erma at that time.

Then April 14th, 1948 Erma called and wanted to come out to see me. We went for a walk on a beautiful spring day. I remember walking beside a row of lilacs in full bloom. And then Erma suggested that we get married between the end of Summer School and the Fall Semester.

But it was not quite that simple. Erma and her mother were going to California for much of the summer. Now she told me, "If you can find us an apartment while I am gone we will get married."

Lincoln was filled with many married veterans who were students. Few apartments were available. I looked at many that were completely unacceptable, several were nearly unfinished basements.

After weeks of looking finally I found a nice looking apartment. Then I went in the kitchen and opened a drawer and it was black with dozens of cockroaches. Cockroaches are my least loved things in all the world. That apartment was also unacceptable.

Erma had gotten me a part time job in the photo processing center of the Department of Agriculture where we printed out stereo aerial photographs of farms to be used during the construction of anti-erosion contours. The pictures were taken so the pictures overlapped by about 2/3 to produce 3-D images.

I worked with another part time worker, Newton Smith, who was also a NU student. Incidentally, Newton's wife had been the instructor for one of the math courses that I had taken. Her parents owned a house in Lincoln with three apartments on the second floor and one was available. So through Newton I got the apartment and Erma and I were married on September 5, 1948.

Incidentally I have some "small world" stories. Newton Smith and his wife moved to the Kansas City area about a year after we did and lived about a mile from us in Roeland Park, KS. We played bridge with them for a while but then lost track of them.

For the first year in Kansas City, we lived in a new apartment development on Brushcreek Blvd, near where I worked at Midwest Research Institute (MRI) and one day in the parking lot I ran into Kurt Sienknecht who we knew in Lincoln. He was Erma's sister's husband's brother. He and his wife lived in the next apartment building.

And at work at MRI, Virgil Johnson (Johnny) was in the physics department. Both Vergil and his wife Virginia were from Pawnee City. I had dated Virgil's sister in High School. We became very close friends with Ginny and Johnny, and spent many evenings playing bridge with them. I remember one evening they served a cherry pie that was almost solid. The story goes that previously Ginny had made a cherry pie that was too runny. So she added

more corn starch. Johnny did not want this pie runny so he had also added cornstarch. You could hardly get a fork through it!

After a year in the apartment we bought a house in Kansas which had a much better school system than Kansas City, Missouri. By that time Erma was pregnant. On the morning of Dec 23, 1952 Ginny Johnson invited Erma to come make Christmas cookies with her and her mother. Erma went but got very tired. She lay down on a bed, fell asleep and slept all afternoon. I came to get her around dinner time. It was snowing as we drove home. It looked so beautiful that we dressed up warmly and walked around the block in the snow. We went to bed but at 2:00 AM Erma had her first contractions and we knew the baby (either Stephen Robert or Kathleen Marie) was on the way. We got up and opened our Christmas presents before going to the hospital. Kathy was born at 7:52 am on the 24th.

At that time Midwest Research Institute was fairly small. Opel Best was the receptionist and ran the telephone switch board. I passed her desk every morning and I knew her fairly well. She knew that Erma and I would soon have a baby. I called MRI shortly after 8 AM and told Opel that I would be late for work because we had just received a 7 pound 6 oz Christmas present. After a short pause she said, "What was it, a turkey" Then she realized her mistake. I was later told that the switch board was shut down for about 5 minutes because of hysterical laughter.

In 1953 our little Janet arrived on April Fool's Day. Back then fathers were not allowed in the delivery room. The delivery room was at the north end of a long hall and I was in a waiting area to the south. I knew that Erma was the only patient in the delivery room. When I saw a nurse come out of the delivery room I knew the baby she carried was ours. She started walking towards me and I was eagerly waiting her arrival. But damn it, she came to a nurse's station and stopped to show off this cute baby. She finally started coming towards me but again she came to a second nurse's station and stopped. She eventually got to me and I got to see that beautiful baby. "Can I hold her?" No. In those primitive times fathers were not even allowed to hold their new born babies.

Before I was in the army I read that many soldiers were killed in their sleep. So I trained myself to waken up if I heard an unexpected noise. As a result I heard the first whimper when either of our babies woke up. So I got up in the middle of the night to change and feed Kathy and Janet. Erma never woke up.

When I was at home, Erma and I fairly well shared taking care of the babies. At that time cloth diapers were used that needed to be washed. We did not have a dryer then and the

diapers were hung out on a clothes line to dry. One day I was hanging up diapers and the three young neighbor girls came out in their yard and started chanting "Woman's work, Woman's work!" Their father was not about to do any woman's work.

When Kathy and Janet were young, Erma was a very good wife and mother. She was devoted to her children. I was in a carpool and she had the car several days a week to take them wherever they need to go.

When Erma was in DC if she saw a picture of a dress she liked she would cut it out and send the picture to her mother. Her mother Emma, was such a good seamstress that, with no more than a picture, she would make the dress and send it back. Erma, in turn, made many of her children's dresses and they were very good.

In my old age I do not remember many details of Kathy and Janet's young life but I remember that there many sleep-overs. I generally made pancakes of various flavors (plain, apple cinnamon raisin, chocolate, peach) and shapes (trees, Mickey Mouse, cat faces, etc.) Apparently such breakfasts were not served at other sleep-overs and the kids looked forward to spending the night at our house.

In the summer we often went to the park for breakfast. I would fix pancake batter and we took our camp stove. Kathy and Janet would play while I set up and made the pancakes. We would then eat followed by various activities in the park. Those Saturdays were enjoyable.

Now let me go back and readdress religion and church. When I was first in Lincoln, I often went to a Methodist church with a pastor by the name of Kennedy. He gave very thought-provoking sermons on the various social issues of the day. The sermons were only indirectly related to religion.

Then I went to the Lutheran Church with Erma. The sermons were entirely different. Each sermon, almost 52 Sundays a year, was a variation of a single theme. The only thing important was Salvation, getting to Heaven. No matter what you do, you cannot earn your way to Heaven because you are a descendant of Adam and Eve. They sinned and you carry that sin. And what did they do? They ate the fruit of knowledge. They acquired knowledge and that is a sin. However there was a way out. Jesus died on the cross to wipe away that sin. Now, all you needed to do was believe that, and you would be saved. Summed up: "Believe and you will be saved", no more and no less. So I have been condemned to

everlasting hell by this Loving God for what Adam and Eve did 6000 years ago. I remain a sinner.

Before our marriage we agreed to find a church that we both liked. After we were married, so far as Erma was concerned, it was only a Missouri Synod Lutheran church would we select. She would not consider any other. So I did not join her church. She never forgave me for not keeping my agreement. But neither did she.

In 1952 we bought the house at 2804 W 47th Terrace and Erma joined the nearby Missouri Synod Lutheran church, Our Saviour's. I did not join. While I was not a member, I always went to church with her and most of our friends were church members. There were a group of church members that had get-togethers to play pinnacle. They wanted to switch to bridge. They learned that we played bridge and asked me to teach them. I wrote out instructions and the group started playing in 1952 or 1953 and the bridge group continued until the mid-1990s

I guess I should include that a couple of times when a new pastor came to the church I took instructions for joining but failed the final exam with the question "Do you believe?" Then in the late 1980s another pastor was "called." His name was Jeske and our church friends told him that one of his assignments was to get me to join the church. He was a nice guy and he came to our house several times and finally convinced me the Missouri Synod was changing and becoming more liberal. He brought writings from some from the St Louis seminary to indicate it. So, for Erma, I reluctantly joined. Things were fine for a few months. Then all hell broke loose at the seminary. One of the instructors told his class that they did not have to believe that Jonah was actually in the belly of a whale for three days. That event became general knowledge. The view of the leaders of the Synod was, if the Bible said that Jonah was in the belly of a whale for three days, Jonah was in the belly of a whale for three days, period. The enlightened instructor was fired followed by a general firing or resignations of all the liberals that Jeske had told me about. Many churches left the Synod including one not far from us but not Our Saviour's. Jeske left. So now I was a church member but Erma never forgave me for not joining as soon as we were married.

I helped in lawn and church building maintenance after I retired from work. I ran the Food Pantry one day a week. I was on the finance committee and handled the collection one week a month.

About 1964 we started looking for a larger house. Our little house consisted of a kitchen, a living room, two bedrooms and a bathroom all in a house 24 x 36 feet. It did have a basement the same size, which I finished, and a garage.

At that time we did not know the young people in the house to the west of ours. After living there for several months they had a big party, trashed the house and moved out. They apparently had stopped making mortgage payments. Unknown to us, the house returned to the FHA and was listed for sale to the highest bidder.

One evening I came home from work and a VW followed me and turned into the drive next to ours. A black man got out and went in the house. I thought nothing about it. I went in the house and soon the phone rang. It was a neighbor. He said, "Did you see that nigger go in the house west of you?"

The black couple that bought the house were both high school teachers. A few days after they moved in, Erma and I were sitting in the back yard. Our new neighbor came out. I started to get up to meet him, but Erma said "Don't you dare go over there." I have always regretted that I never spoke to him. Erma's prejudice nearly equaled her mother's.

We were in a hell of a situation. We wanted to move and sell our house. Now things were very complicated. If our neighborhood became bi-racial our house value would go down. The neighborhood soon organized to get the Black couple out. Eventually they were bought out for nearly twice what they had paid for the house. I'm ashamed to say that we contributed to the buyout.

For several years four of us were in a carpool, including Bernard Jones who lived at 4411 W 54th Terrace. Barney was an engineer at MRI. In 1964 the size of the engineering department was reduced and Barney was let go. Their house was for sale. We looked at it, and liked it, but thought it was overpriced. I told Barney that I hoped he would get his price, but if he didn't, I made him an offer for a lesser amount. Months later after we essentially forgot about the house, Barney called and we tentatively agreed on a price.

In May 1965 Emma, Erma's mother, came for a 2 week visit. During the visit Erma and Emma looked at the house and Emma liked it very much. After two weeks with us she went to Joliet IL to visit her other daughter for two weeks. When she got home she felt very tired and the next day she went to see her doctor. He told her "You are 73 years old and have been on a month-long trip. It is not surprising that you are tired. Go home and rest." She went home and set up card tables for a bridge game the next day. That was June 9,

1965. On that date we bought the house at 4411 W 54th Terrace and called to tell Emma. She was incoherent. We called one of her neighbors. They took her to a hospital. After arranging to leave the girls with some neighbors, we left Kansas City early the next day for the 350 miles trip to Humphrey. Emma died of acute leukemia before we got to Humphrey.

I remember three things the weekend of the funeral. The Sunday before the funeral we went to church and Helmut, Erma's brother-in-law, was sitting next to me. The Pastor made a mistake, he said "Go forth sinning and rejoicing." Helmut and I cracked up.

During visitation, a young catholic women walked up to Erma's sister, Merle and said in a very subdued voice, "Congratulations." Apparently it was meant as a subdued "my sympathy" or "condolences." She had the right tone but the wrong word. For me it made the evening more enjoyable.

Many who attended the funeral were Catholic and much to my disgust and embarrassment much of what the pastor said was bashing Catholics. It was unbelievable. Such was Humphrey.

With her mother's death Erma became a different person. She was completely consumed by the loss of her mother. At that time Kathy, who was 12 years old, desperately needed love and attention and she received none from Erma and, sadly, I was at work very often and couldn't help her. She and Erma had verbal fights. Erma was on the edge of a nervous breakdown.

It was the worst time of my life. I feared that Erma would need psychological treatment and our insurance paid very little for mental illness. I asked Kathy to back off to try to save Erma but Kathy interpreted this as me siding with Erma and against her. Things got worse all around. Kathy urged me to get a divorce but that was unacceptable. Erma needed me and I needed her. We moved on and things gradually got better. But that period left a life-long scar for Kathy.

I guess it was a year or two before Emma's death we bought a tent camper trailer. It opened up to have two near normal-sized double beds. In 1964 the Oldberg family, from church, joined us for their first camping experience. We were going to Yellowstone National Park. We left Kansas City with a large borrowed tent on the top of our VW bug and our trailer being pulled by their car. The first day we drove to Humphrey, spent the night there and then proceeded for our first camping night at the camp grounds of Bad Lands National Park

in South Dakota. About 100 miles before we reached the Bad Lands we were driving into a very strong wind. Our VW, with the large tent on top had a top speed of about 30 mph. We finally moved the tent to the top of the trailer.

We got to the campground and a ranger came around and warned us that a strong storm was expected and a tent would probably not withstand the storm. We set up the camper but not the tent. There were four adults and five kids. We made a bed on the camper floor between the beds. The three youngest kids slept there including Janet. The four adults slept in the camper beds and two kids (Kathy and Diane) slept in the car. What a night for the Oldberg's first camping experience! With every gust of wind it felt that the camper would be turned over, but there was a lot of weight in it and we had parked the cars strategically as wind breaks. There were probably thirty or forty tents around us and during flashes of lightning, Kathy and Diane, in the car, saw all of the tents blown down one by one. No tent was up the next morning.

We introduced several other church families to camping. We made several camping trips to Round Springs State Park in Missouri. Round Springs is a large natural spring emptying into the Current River. We took canoe trips on the Current. We camped at Round Springs, were put in about twenty miles upstream where the river was less than a foot deep and fairly narrow. We canoed down to our camp site, spent the night and continued another twenty miles the next day. There were stretches with fairly challenging white water. By the take-out point the river about 50 feet or more wide and probably ten or more feet deep.

One memorable trip, by myself, I took five young 11 or 12 year old girls canoeing. The girls included Janet's best friend cousins, Joyce and Ellen Atkinson from LA, Kathy, and some others from church. Some of the girls were good with the canoe, some were not good. We came to a place in the river where the current was strong. A large tree with a trunk about three feet in diameter had fallen across the river. Someone had cut about a four foot section out of the trunk. One of the canoes went in sidewise and they leaned away from the trunk, filling the canoe with water. I worked for most of half an hour to get it free. I feared that with the force of the fast stream, the \$200 canoe would be broken. But it was not. Joyce had given me her watch which I had in a plastic bag in my pocket. I was working in about four feet of water and the watch and bag floated out. Surprisingly we found it about a mile downstream attached to a tree limb that had fallen in the river. That was a memorable trip!

Sometime in the mid 1960s an MRI employee had a Sunfish sail boat. She and her husband had it on the top of their car and traveled on the highway at about 60 mph. The boat came

off and went bouncing down the road. It was "totaled." It was valued at about \$600 and the insurance company, with a \$100 deductible, paid them about \$500. I bought it for \$100. The mast, sail and dagger board were undamaged. The boat damage primarily consisted of a break nearly completely from one side to the other on the bottom of the boat and one of the back corners crushed in for about a foot. To repair it was a challenge. I had never done any fiberglass work but I learned. It took me about a year of weekend work. I did a good job and we had a good Sunfish from then on. Janet and I sailed it a lot. Janet would take it out to the Shawnee Mission Park lake with friends. At that time the rule was that there was no swimming in the lake. So Janet would take the boat out to the middle of the lake where she became skilled at capsizing it. If it capsized you had to swim. She was also good at getting the boat back in an upright position but she and her friends would take a long time doing so. They often waited until they saw the park patrol boat coming to help them.

In 1968 we took a very enjoyable camping trip to California. That included a stop in San Francisco, down the coast highway to Los Angeles where we visited with our LA Atkinson relatives. We went to Disney Land and generally had a good time.

One year, I think in the early 1970s, we went to LA to visit my brother Dan and family. He rented a house on Malibu beach. We were in LA for a few days before we went to the beach and I became fascinated with their small electric pottery "kick wheel." While at the grocery store with Elsie I saw a block of potter's clay. I bought the clay and we took the kick wheel to Malibu. For a week while the others were playing on the beach I was up on the balcony learning to make pots. So that is how I got started in pottery. By luck, shortly after we got home, I chanced on a garage sale with a kiln. It was a reasonable price and I bought it. I needed a wheel, so I designed one and built it myself. The kick wheel was made of concrete, 29 inches in diameter, 4 inches thick, 200 pounds and perfectly balanced. How did I balance it? I put a pole through the center hole and hung the kick wheel between two saw horses. As long as it was unbalanced, the wheel would turn so that the heaviest part was at the bottom. I rasped and rasped the extra off until the wheel went around perfectly with no settling.

I thought it would be a near perfect hobby for Erma and me. I, the non-artist, could make things and Erma, much more artistic, could glaze them in artistic forms and colors. She would have nothing to do with pottery, much to my disappointment.

So life was good in the 1950s through most of the 1960s and on into the 1970s. By the mid 1970s Kathy and Janet were gone. Erma and I were in three bridge groups, each meeting

once a month. One was the church group where we played noncumulative party. The second was a group from MRI. And the last group was started by three lawyers and their wives joined by a stock broker, a dress shop owner, an owner of an air conditioning company and two chemists with their spouses.

Our health was good. Sometime in the mid to late 1980s, I was told that our family was the only family of several hundred MRI employees that had never filed a claim. That was about to change. On July 30, 1988 I was walking with my dog. The temperature was about 100. I had walked nearly a mile and had just come up about 100 yards of a steep slope. All at once I had an intense pain in my chest. I was about three blocks from home. Erma was in Houston visiting Janet and family. This was before cell phones. I very slowly started walking towards home. About half way home I came to a neighbor out watering her plants. Stupid, stubborn Gaylord used her as an excuse to stop and talk and wait for the pain to get better, but I did not tell her I had intense chest pain. I got home sat down and the pain went away. I called Erma and she arranged to come home the next day. I went to work that next day. I called my doctor and got a prescription for nitroglycerin and an appointment for the following day. I drove to the airport to get Erma. The next day I went to my doctor's appointment. His office was directly across the street from the hospital. He took an EKG, took one look at it, and called the hospital to have me admitted.

An angiogram was scheduled for the next day. During the procedure I could see the screen and I thought it was fascinating. At the end I said "I didn't see anything." The doctor pulled the screen close to me and he pointed out five blockages which he said varied from 95% to 99% blocked. The main left artery was the most blocked. I was taken to the recovery room. My chest pain became intense. It turned out that the angiogram probe had knocked off some of the material of the left artery blockage which completely blocked an adjacent small artery. It was a minor but painful heart attack. I was immediately taken back for an emergency angioplasty. The four blockages were opened. For the procedures they inserted the probe in my right groin for the first angiogram and the left groin for the angioplasty. Now they have a procedure to close the groin injury within a few minutes. In 1988 I had to lie on my back without moving with heavy weights on each of the areas for an entire 50 hours. My back nearly killed me. They told me if I felt any moisture in my groin area let them know because I could bleed to death in minutes. So I did not move.

The same year, a few days before Thanksgiving we were scheduled to visit Derek and Janet in Houston. I had called my cardiologist's office and told them I was having some chest discomfort. That evening the dog sitter was at our house getting instructions. The phone

rang and it was my doctor. He said, "You are not going anywhere but the hospital." So I had another angioplasty to open a blockage in my right artery.

In September 2007 I had another event that demonstrated that I am not capable of learning from past mistakes. We went bowling and in the final game I was having an unusually good game. In the eighth frame it seemed likely that I would get over 200. Then a chest pain started. I wanted that 200. I told no one about the pain. I finished the game with a good score, but not my desired 200. We went to our cars. Derek and Janet pulled out just ahead of us. I considered calling them back to drive me home, but did not. I thought to myself, "I will go home, take a nitroglycerin, and things will be fine." They were not. The pain intensified. I called Janet or Derek and asked them to come take me to the emergency room. A short time later I called them again and said, "I think I need an ambulance." Their reply, "We have already called."

Soon I heard the siren of the fire/rescue trucks on the way. That was quite an experience. They arrived. I was sitting on the porch bench with a fireman beside me. He gave me an aspirin and called for an ambulance. When the ambulance was about a block away I realized that I was going to pass out. Just as the ambulance arrived I said "I'm going to pass out, I'm going, I'm going, I'm going, I'm gone." Everything went dark. The fireman almost didn't catch me. I came to as they were putting me in the ambulance. The blockage was 100% in the right artery. Fortunately it was low enough down the heart that the upper part still had some function. My cardiologist later told me it was the flip of a coin whether I lived or died.

I wonder if I have now learned my lesson about asking for help? What do you think? In spite of my stubbornness I am still alive and nearing the age of 92 and have gone nearly ten years without a heart event.

Back to 1991. I retired from full time work in February. We planned to go to Washington DC to visit some of the places that Erma remembered from the time that she lived and worked there during WWII. I had made tentative plane arrangements in the morning at MRI. I went home for lunch. As I reached the house Erma was coming out to go to the grocery store. She got in my car and we went to the store. When we came out of the store Erma walked along the sidewalk that had a row of shopping carts. The space between the shopping carts and curb at the edge of the sidewalk became narrower and narrower. Finally Erma stepped on the edge of the curb and her foot slipped off of the curb and dropped about five inches. I went to help her get up and saw the ragged edges of a broken bone under the skin. Altogether, Erma broke her fibula about 2/3 of the way to her knee and four bones in her

foot and ankle. It was a very bad break and after surgery she had metal bars sticking out either side of her ankle. Erma never walked very far again and she never fully recovered psychologically from that fall.

1991 was not finished with us. In September Erma had a doctor's appointment and when she came home she had a flyer stating that the following Saturday there would be a city wide free prostate cancer screening. Her doctor said I should go. Who, me? Why would I have cancer? I was to get the results by calling after 4:00 PM on Wednesday. Four PM arrived. I was talking to a fellow MRI employee. I casually said, it's four PM I need to call and find out if I have cancer. (Cancer, of course I don't have cancer.) So I called. I was shocked. You have a high PSA value, you need to come in for a biopsy. I had surgery in November. It was diagnosed as a very aggressive cancer but caught very early. What if Erma's doctor had not suggested that I be screened? I probably would not be alive now. I carpooled with Walt Hodge for 25 years. He was then diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer and soon died. I was lucky.

In the late 1990s Erma was diagnosed with congestive heart failure (when the heart is no longer capable of functioning normally) and also a brain scan showed that she had had multiple mini-strokes. She became unpredictable. On several occasions we were scheduled to spend an evening with friends to play bridge or go out to dinner and she would back out at the last minute and refuse to go. I was embarrassed to repeatedly cancel invitations at the last minute. Janet was urging us to move to Dallas. Erma was against the move and wanted to stay in Kansas City with her friends. But she repeatedly would not see her friends and also, she was spending much of her days and nights in the darkened bedroom asleep. So I decided that we should move.

Erma's brain damage was in some parts of the brain with other parts normal. Her speech was normal. So you could talk to her and she would seem to be normal. Her long term memory was good. But her short term memory was very poor and her ability to reason was also poor.

So we moved to Dallas and she never forgave me. She repeatedly asked to go back home.

As the years went by she needed more care. I could readily handle the physical part of it. "Gaylord get me some ice water." She had to have ice water - without ice was not acceptable. But I became stressed by the fact that nearly every day she would have some complaint and demand that I call Dr. Wang. When I would not she became very angry with me.

When Erma stood up her blood pressure would drastically decrease (orthostatic blood pressure) and she would faint and fall. This resulted in many visits to the emergency room with torn skin and a broken hip. Her falls became more frequent, and more trips to the emergency room. Village Oaks had a policy that an emergency room visit was required after a fall to check for a concussion. I remember one emergency room visit, I approached the receptionist and she said "Are you here again?" It was the second time in a week.

At Christmas 2007, Janet and Dhyan talked to me about moving Erma into an assisted living facility. I wasn't ready but by spring I realized I just couldn't take care of Erma by myself anymore. So in June 2008 she was moved to Village Oaks, a very nice facility Janet found. She decorated a beautiful room for Erma. At Village Oaks, they had a nurses and a doctor, and the demand to call Dr. Wang was no longer my responsibility.

September 5, 2008 was our 60th wedding anniversary Erma was feeling very good that day and Janet and Derek gave us a very nice party. I had brought Erma to the house and she picked out what she wanted to wear. It was a very good day - her last good day. Because of her congestive heart failure she developed kidney failure and soon lapsed into periods of no response. On September 14th death was near and an arrangement for a hospice nurse made. Arrangements were also made for Dhyan to come home. On the afternoon of September 16th Erma rallied and was nearly normal.

The woman that handled medication at Village Oaks was a black woman named Anna. The hospice nurse on duty for the night of September 16 was a black woman named Emma. In the evening Anna came in to give Erma her medicine. They talked and Emma said "Miss Erma, I knew you would come around." She said she was leaving for a vacation and she would see Erma when she returned. She came beside Erma and gave her a high five with Erma responding in kind. She was leaving and got to the door when Erma called her back and they held hands for several seconds. By the time Dhyan arrived Erma was fairly well out of it. She smiled and nodded in response to Dhyan's voice but she did not speak. We told her to get a good night's sleep and we would see her in the morning.

At about 2:30 I received a call from Janet. The nurse had called her and said we should come right away. Dhyan and I got there about 15 minutes later, a few minutes after Erma's death. The hospice nurse said that she sensed Erma breathing differently and sat down next to her. Erma reached out her hand and they held hands. Erma took a couple of deep breaths and died.

During the last day of her life Erma repeatedly called for her mother.

I think it is very ironic that with Erma's prejudice against blacks, during her last hours of life she high fived and held the hand of Anna and then died holding the hand of the black hospice nurse, Emma.

What if, but then

EPILOGUE

Gaylord Robert Atkinson

December 2016

After Erma's death my (Gaylord's) life is much more relaxed. I have spent more time with pottery, gardening, and reading. I had two dogs as companions when Erma died, Georgie and Betsy. Georgie had had bone cancer and lost a hind leg but could still walk fairly well. We adopted Betsy in July 2004 to be a companion for Erma. Both dogs wanted to go on walks and we walked daily, generally twice a day. I lost Georgie in October, 2012 and Betsy in May, 2014. I obtained a new walking companion in March 2013 after Janet saw a dog for adoption on TV. Ellie was rescued from Iran after a cleric declared that dogs were "dirty" and were not to be kept as pets. She was part of an air lift that rescued a number of pet dogs.

I walked the 5K Dallas Turkey Trot in 2011 and 2012. In mid-2013 I developed hip and leg pain which limited how far I could walk. In 2014 it was diagnosed as an abdominal Aortic Dissection. That is when the inner layer of the artery separates. In my case it formed about a 50% blockage and limits the amount of blood that gets to my hips and legs. Now I can walk only about 0.75 of a mile before hip and leg pain sets in. But Ellie lets me know that is time for a walk mornings and evenings. We walk around the block which is 0.85 miles. Pain generally sets in near the end.

I like classical music and have a good collection of records and CDs to listen to. I always regretted that I never learned to play the piano and made an attempt to learn after Erma died but soon gave up. Years ago I was fairly good with a recorder and now play it some.

Erma and I played bridge for many years. After she died I went to the Senior Center and took bridge lessons to learn new rules for bidding. Four of us from that class then played once a month at our various houses. We played for about five years. I still play occasionally as a sub for another group. Of course I will always be ready for a game of Oh Hell!

After I retired from full time work I did most of the cooking and meal preparations. After we moved to Dallas in 2000 I believe that Erma only cooked one time. That was when I had an early morning doctor's appointment and she fixed herself breakfast. (The reason I know she cooked is that she put the hot pan on the counter and left a burn ring that stayed until Janet helped me redo the kitchen.) I like to cook, Erma did not. I suppose I am best known for my

oatmeal chocolate chip walnut cookies. I have made them for Christmas for several years. Last Christmas I made 20 dozen for Christmas presents. This year I have come up with a new favorite to make for friends: Runzas. This is an eastern European food that I first had back in the late 1940s in Nebraska. It consists of a mixture of hamburger, onion and cabbage wrapped in rolled out bread dough and baked.

Jay Chatham, a former neighbor has become a very good friend and we have enjoyed many beers together. About once a month we fix a lunch of sausage and sauerkraut with mashed potatoes made with sauerkraut juice. Sounds gross? Try it, along with a cold beer it is hard to beat!

Life is more relaxed but I always have a “to do” list that never gets shorter. The house is full of things that should be gotten rid of. I have mastered the art of procrastination so the list will probably never get shorter.

But, what the hell ! 😊