

Erma Lorraine Groeger Atkinson (1921-2009)

Memorial Service – Our Savior’s Lutheran Church – Oct 3, 2008

Dhyan’s (Kathy’s) talk

I have had a number of personal historians as clients over the past few years and I am glad that they inspired me to have many conversations with my mother about her early life. I want to share a little of her story with you.

My mother’s story begins with two young people working at a grocery store in Baker, Montana. The boy was my grandfather, Lawrence Groeger, and the girl was my grandmother, Emma Bessert. They fell in love over the canned goods and decided to get married!

My grandfather came from a large (6 boys and 6 girls) very devote Catholic Family (eventually, four of the twelve entered religious life) most of whom still lived around their home town of Humphrey, Nebraska. He very much wanted to live in Humphrey to be near his family and he also persuaded my grandmother to convert to Catholicism.

They moved to Humphrey where, on January 16, 1921, my mother was born. They named their first daughter, Ermalorraine Groeger. In those days, her name was spelled as all one word. She was soooo cute as a little girl (as you can see from the pictures of her from this time in the video my brother-in-law created which is playing in the lobby). Her mother was an impeccable seamstress and made all of my mother’s clothes. We have some of the hand-embroidered, hand-crafted baby clothes to this day. Her mother was such a good seamstress that my mom told me that during WWII when she lived in Washington DC, all she had to do was clip a picture of an outfit out of the newspaper and her mother would make it for her.

Her father called her “Dolly” when she was little and Dolly Groeger she was until she started school where she was called by her full name “Ermalorraine.” Sometime before that happened, my strong-willed grandmother decided she didn’t want to be Catholic and she took herself and my mother into the Lutheran Church. This created tremendous strife in the family not only between my mother’s parents but this situation also separated my grandfather from his beloved family and even the church pressured my grandfather who was eventually excommunicated for not being able to control his wife and raise his children Catholic. This disturbed my mother all her life and just a few months

before her death she told both my sister and I, separately, that she wished she could write a book about how when religions fight it is so hard on the children.

My mother being Lutheran meant when she started school she attended the small Humphrey Public School instead of the very much larger Catholic school, St. Francis. She told me once that the Catholic kids used to throw stones at her as she walked home from school. The Catholic kids had been told that since Erma had been baptized Catholic and then joined the Lutheran Church she was on person "sure" to go to hell. The public school kids were also not welcome to attend the functions of the much bigger school, like the football games, plays, and other events unless they were the invited guest of a Catholic student.

Still, she loved her own school and there are lots of pictures of her in costumes her mother made for her to take part in plays etc. The public school was so small that my mother's class only had seven members from kindergarten to 12th grade.; six girls and one very small red-headed boy!

Despite the more difficult sides of family life, my mother loved and enjoyed growing up in Humphrey. She loved the 4th of July, all-town, celebration. She rode every year, in costume, on her father's float in the 4th of July parade. After the parade there was always a whole-town picnic, swimming and games for the kids, and the day was completed by a potluck supper, dancing and fireworks. My mother remembered these celebrations very fondly. Her father played on the Humphrey softball team, in the Humphrey marching band, and took part in plays – my mother told me she LOVED sitting in the bleachers with her mother watching her father play ball and she was so proud of him.

When my mother graduated from high school there were absolutely no prospects for her. Her father was sick and was in the hospital far from home for 2 years. My grandmother managed to scrape by for herself and her two daughters on my grandfather's small WWI Veterans pension, by boarding farm kids who came in to town to attend St. Francis, and by taking in sewing but one summer during the Depression, when everything in the garden failed except the tomato plants, my mother told me they ate nothing but home-made bread and tomatoes. To her dying day she would not eat stewed tomatoes. Eventually my grandmother couldn't even afford the 50 cents a week it cost to give my mother her beloved piano lessons so she practiced as best she could on her own at home.

After she graduated from high school my mother had no relatives who would give her a job and there were few jobs in Humphrey anyway. Because she was

Lutheran it was very unlikely she would find a husband in Humphrey. The public school created an option for her and several other girls in her situation. The year after she graduated she spent her mornings back at the public school taking secretarial skills classes and some teacher training. The year after that she was hired to teach in a little one-room school house in Tarnov, Nebraska with all of four students (all cousins, all Catholic, and all headed for St. Francis after 6th grade.)

Her mother saved her earnings for her and with that money she went to Wayne State College and learned more secretarial skills. When World War II came along, she and her best friend, Emily, got jobs in Washington DC. My mother worked for the Dept. of Agriculture.

This was a time when my mother absolutely blossomed. Freed of the tensions at home and in Humphrey, earning her own living; living with her best friend, she was very happy. She had always been an attractive girl but in Washington she just became a beauty! She LOVED being in Washington DC. She and Emily would get on their bicycles or a bus after work or on weekends and they visited every monument, museum and attended many concerts. I know this because I have seen her scrapbooks from this time full of programs, postcards, photographs, and literature she picked up at the monuments. She joined Christ Church Lutheran which very kindly had created a Walther League Program for all the young adults from out-of-state now living in and around Washington DC including the young men stationed on the military bases around the area. They provided a chaperoned place for the young people to get together and have fun. My mother had a great time dating and being courted; as well as living in an apartment with Emily and two other young women friends.

After the war, my mother wanted to stay in Washington DC but her father's health had taken a turn for the worse and, emotionally torn, she eventually decided she needed to be closer to home. She got a transfer to Lincoln, Nebraska and continued to work for the Dept. of Agriculture. She eventually ended up sharing a room with another young working woman at Proudfit's Boarding House – which was full of young people after the war, including Dave Barker, a best friend of my father's.

The closet in the room my mother shared at Proudfit's was tiny and her whole life my mother never had enough closet space to suit her! There was a young man down the hall who was attending the University of Nebraska on the GI bill but was away for the summer helping his parents paint their house. Since he was

gone my mother decided to slip her clothes into his closet where, much to his surprise, he found them when he got back to school in the fall.

But I will let my father pick up the story from there! ☺

My mother had some very hard times growing up but she managed to move up and out of those situations and create a good life for herself.

There is a blessing I have known for a long time which I have said many times since my mother's death. Would you please join me in blessing my mother one more time?

Mom, may you be well.

May you be happy.

May you be free of all pain, illness and suffering.

May your heart be filled with loving kindness.

May your experience be filled with joy.

May you be at peace and at ease.

Thank you all for coming!