



Mother and Dad

My mother and dad grew up on farms about six miles apart; my mother about a mile south of Evan and my dad about three miles south of Cobden. How they met is a mystery.

Cobden is about seven miles west of Sleepy Eye on U.S. highway 14 with a population of about 100 when my parents married and now about one quarter that. In its prime it had a bank (failed during the Great Depression), a post office, a general store (burned down, I am guessing in the early 1950s), a meeting hall, a gas station, a jail, and two or three watering holes. The town was named after Richard Cobden of Sussex England.

Evan was platted as Hanson Station in 1887 and incorporated March 1904. A post office was established in 1886, named Evan by the postmaster for his wife Eva and eventually also the name of the village.

Evan is about six miles northwest of Sleepy Eye on Minnesota highway 68. Its population was about 120 when my parents married and now about 80. In its prime it had a post office, community meeting hall, general store, blacksmith shop, school, grain elevator, and, of course, watering holes.

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My dad was last born of 13 and my mother was 6th born of 9. Neither of my parents went beyond the 8th grade, but whatever they lacked in book learning they made up in common sense.

They married 19 Sep 1923 and parted 53 years later when dad died. Like Midwesterners they did not show emotions. Crying was not something you did. Especially if you were a man.

The hugging and kissing that goes on when people greet was foreign to me. I had to learn the behavior. There was none of that in Sleepy Eye when I grew up. (Now there is none of that because of the COVID-19 pandemic.)

The most you could expect of a man being introduced to another man was a hand shake. No hugs. If a man was introduced to a woman there was nothing. No hand shake. A simple hello. Maybe a slight bow of the head or tip of the hat.

I was probably in my mid 30s in this eastern culture before I could bring myself to hug a woman on greeting and in my mid 40s before I could kiss her on the cheek, and in my 50s before I thought it was OK to hug a man on greeting. I wonder what the “standard” is these days in Sleepy Eye for greeting.

Not surprising, there were not many displays of affection by my parents. I have no recall of ever seeing them kiss, hug, or hold hands. Neither do I recall much bickering or fighting except on Wednesdays, later.

To be sure there were the usual irritations of married couples, but they dealt with them differently. My mother would voice irritation. My dad would ignore them.

That said there was a day I came to dread – Wednesdays – shipping day. If there were to be arguments and fights, it would be Wednesday nights when my father came home from “shipping”.

My father was in charge of a shipping cooperative. It was created by area farmers who needed a way to get their livestock to market. The predominate market then was in South Saint Paul. The only practical means of transport was by rail,

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eventually trucks. The South Saint Paul stockyard went away when slaughtering plants started dotted the countryside.

The routine was for farmers to bring their livestock to a railroad siding in Sleepy Eye to be purchased and then loaded onto stock cars for transport to South Saint Paul. There would not have been any problem with “shipping day” were it not for what happened after the rail cars were loaded.

After loading, dad went to the local watering hole to have a “couple” beers -- the standard number for anybody who has had more than they should have.

It would take hours for him to have his “couple” beers.

I came to dread Wednesdays because of the arguing that would happen when he came home. Early on I was angry with my mother for picking on my dad, but eventually I came to see her side. By the time I was ten or eleven I had been with my dad enough when he had two beers to know that a “couple” was a lot more than two. I came to see that his personality changed after his “couple” beers.

My Dad was a needler. He would say things simply to see if he could get a rise out of you. He liked to argue and so did I. Eventually, in the normal course of things, it got so it was just the argument, not the side one was on. Indeed it is this behavior in my adult years that caused colleagues to accuse me of being “lawyer-like” because of my willingness to take either side in an argument. (This propensity to “argue” was evident in high school with membership on the debating team.)

I enjoyed the to and fro of exchanges with my dad, but I learned to ignore them after his “couple” beers on shipping days. His needling then had an edge. Normally the exchanges would be fun, on Wednesdays they were not.

Still, now, I have vivid memories of sitting at the kitchen window facing the highway on Wednesday evenings watching cars coming west in the hope that one would slow and turn onto our driveway.

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As Wednesdays went, I came to know that if it was after seven before my dad got home, there would be arguing.

My mother was a T totaler. She never drank. The only alcohol she ever had was a hot toddy for a cold, and those, few and far between. Why she was so disposed is a mystery but it may have had to do with her brother, Elmer. He was a drinker. They found him hanging from a rafter in their barn when my mother was in her thirties.

The normal Wednesday nights were “back and forths” for my parents but the Wednesday that stands out, these many years later, is one when things got nasty. Who slapped who is clouded now, but I do remember being so alarmed and upset that we kids left to sit on the stairs to the upstairs in the shanty waiting for things to quiet down.

Eventually shipping days went away when farmers started trucking their livestock to South Saint Paul. Indeed, our neighbor, a half mile to the west, was in that business by the time I was in college. I hooked rides back to school on Sunday evenings with truckers taking cattle to South Saint Paul.

The greatest gift a child can have is a stay home mom. Fathers are great, but mothers are special. This reality is why ninety year old men in nursing homes call for mother, not for dad.

We grew up with a mother who was always there when we came home from school. It was a lonely house when she was not there. Rare except when she ended up in Rochester. I was probably around twelve.

Minnesota has two outstanding medical facilities: the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis and the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, but you would not know that where I grew up. The only place to go when something was wrong was Rochester. Nobody ever thought of going to the University of Minnesota.

The trip came because of a lump in my mother’s left breast. She and my dad were there about two weeks for work up, surgery, and recovery.

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She ended up having a radical mastectomy; removal of the breast and lymph nodes. Today she might have had a lumpectomy.

The main problem with radical mastectomies was what removal of the lymph nodes did to the arm. It got twice the size of normal because of the drainage problems from removal of the lymph glands.

Side story

Years later, the world of clinical trials would be exposed to a case célèbre involving a lumpectomy breast cancer study done by the National Surgical Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project (NSABP) under the leadership of Bernard Fisher.

The triggering event was receipt of a form marked “false” (in French) from the Saint Luc Hospital (Montreal) study clinic, June 1990. “False” on the front page of any form received in a study coordinating center is akin to a person talking about bombs at an airline check.

Site visits to the Montreal clinic by study leadership and interrogations of clinic director revealed that the principal investigator there was in the practice of changing dates for biopsies, surgeries, and pathology reports that made women ineligible for enrollment so as to be able to enroll them.

The public outcry over the case and concern that lumpectomy was not as effective as reported with tainted data led, eventually to Fisher losing his chair in the NSABP and a shutdown of all NSABP activities. The concern that the results may be wrong was not assuaged by reanalysis of results excluding patients enrolled at the Montreal clinic.

When the smoke settled, the Montreal clinic director was prohibited from receiving government funding and serving on advisory committees, boards, or review groups for an eight year period. Eventually activities in the NSABP resumed.

End of side story

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My mother's surgeon was Charles W Mayo, son of Charles Horace Mayo, one of the two Mayo brothers responsible for founding the Mayo Clinic. She went to her grave believing her surgeon could walk on water.

I have no idea what a stay in the Mayo Clinic would have cost back then, but whatever the going rate, sizeable for us. The surprise, when my dad went to settle up, was that charges were waived.

It was before health insurance and medicare. What you were charged was based on what you could pay. A poor farmer from Sleepy Eye paid nothing but the Prince of Jordan paid a lot.

My mother was about 5'7". My dad about 6'1". In regard to their offspring, Carol got the short end of the stick standing about 5'4". Bonnie was taller. Maybe about 5'7". Dean was about as tall as dad and I was 6'6".

Funny thing about how you see yourself. I consider myself "average" height until I have to fly sardine or until I see somebody my height. When I see such a person approaching on the street I think "My God that guy is tall". When I come along side I realize I am that tall.

My dad was a smoker. Cigarettes most of his life and then a pipe in later years. Today he would have to do his smoking outside but not when I was growing up. I know it bothered mother but usually she kept quiet about it.

Mother was high strung. Dad was laid back. He had a loud booming voice that for those who did not know him made them wary of him. But as they would say in Texas, he was all hat and no cattle. He was a paper tiger.

Son like father.

My parents had kids to raise before helicopters had been invented. So helicoptering parenting was still in the distance. They pretty much left us on our own. I do not recall them coming to any school events after we left District 36. No parents day or parent-teacher conferences.

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So if you take 24 chromosomes, 12 from each parent. What do you get? Too close for me to know but I think I can say with assurance that I got my industry, my bouts of depression, my worrywartness, and my pessimism from my mother. From my father I got my demeanor, my sense of humor, my interest in intellectual pursuit by argumentation, and my ability to do math in my head. My dad was a master at that.

Thank you Lord for loving caring parents!
