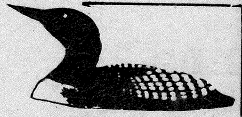


North Country Notebook



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Home To Ephraim

Martha Kinsey Gutensohn died in Santa Fe last week while visiting her daughter Sylvia and Sylvia's husband, Dale. Martha's other daughter, Helen, flew out from Madison; both daughters were with her when she died.

Because Helen and I have been married for a lot of years, I got to spend a lot of time with Martha. She was born in 1897, the daughter of a Moravian minister, and eventually became the wife of a Congregationalist minister. She was a retired school-teacher whose cataracts forced her to read the large-print edition of the New York Times; she read lesser publications with a magnifying glass. She and her sister were "pioneer ladies"—her phrase—who grew up in the Door County of 80 years ago. Katharine, who was older, lived and taught all her life in Door County, died, there, and is buried in Sturgeon Bay. Following Martha's wishes she was cremated, and her ashes will be returned to Ephraim, her childhood home.

Even today, Ephraim looks like a New England village: the white wooden houses, the church, the Pioneer School, the Anderson Dock, the Anderson Store. The place still has a quiet, pristine quality, particularly after the tourists are gone for the season and the winter is coming on.

Can you imagine what the village looked like, felt like in 1902? That was the year Martha's family moved there from Port Washington, Ohio, where her father had a church. Now he would have the church in Ephraim. Martha was five years old.

In the autumn of 1902, Martha told us, there was only one summer cottage in all of Ephraim. One cottage. No hotels. She doubted if there were a hundred people in the whole countryside.

That was the year that they started building the first structure of what would eventually become the Anderson Hotel.

"It was a wonderful place for a child," Martha said. "The beach was as free as the air. Life was primitive. The parsonage was next to the Anderson Hotel, and we shared a two-handled pump for water between us."

She and a handful of kids sat in the one-room schoolhouse with their teacher and a wood stove and learned of the great world beyond.

"If you looked out the windows one way," Martha remembered, "you saw the dark trees stretching back into the rolling bluffs and forest. If you looked the other way, you looked out over Green Bay and saw Eagle Rock."

Even as I write this, there is a picture of Martha in front of me, taken in 1982. She's coming out of the schoolhouse—which was restored by the Ephraim Foundation Inc. in 1949—wearing her leisure suit, leaning on her walking stick, carrying a chic handbag. She looks like your average Illinois tourist, except for the smile on her face. Tourists don't smile that way.

All the time she was in Ephraim, the family had a wood stove and an outdoor privy.

"I didn't have an inside toilet," she laughed, "until I got to Colorado. That was in 1923. I was 26 then."

She was married by then, too, to a young man named Sam (which is also the name of her great-grandson) who was a minister, a Congregationalist.

As a matter of fact, their only son, James Gerhard, also became a minister for a little while before he wound up in the Massachusetts state government.

Martha's life with Sam took them to parsonages in North Dakota, Colorado, Missouri, Iowa and Wisconsin. After Sam died in 1950, she went back to teaching school and seeing James Gerhard through high school in Sterling, Ill. Eventually, James would follow in his sisters' footsteps and graduate from Beloit College.

Martha always said she was influenced more by Ephraim than by any other place. She said the people there gave you a feeling of love and a real desire for education.

But Colorado left a profound impression, too.

"On the western slope in the 1920s," she recalled, "Sam and I met people who were fleeced in a land scheme, and they stayed right there and put their lives together. They had lost all their money, and yet they stayed and worked it out. The lesson of Colorado was: 'When hardship comes, meet it head on. It will make you stronger.'"

Martha came from the pioneer life to boarding jets in order to visit her scattered children, her 10 grandchildren and her "little Sam." She never presumed to advise any of them.

"I think it's tougher for young people to grow up today than it was so long ago in Ephraim," she said. "And having made so many mistakes in my own life, I say only this to young people: Make your own mistakes, but don't let those mistakes get you down."

I remember her sitting erect, her hands folded, reminding you of every good teacher you've ever known.

"I also tell them, the young people," she said primly, "that I've learned not to worry, because the things that you worry about don't happen. *Other* things happen."

A lot of people profess to love Door County, but many of them are summer people who never spend the winters there, who go south, to condominiums in Florida.

"Truth-to-tell," observes writer Norbert Blei, "you may know Door County in summer, but only in winter does an older Door County emerge, a Currier and Ives place, a primitive landscape acquainting our minds and imagination with a visual history of the past: How Anderson Dock, the bay, the bluff must have looked to settlers in Ephraim long ago; how beautifully distant the fields and woods must have been; how cold the harbors locked in ice, how vast the Lake Michigan horizon...."

It is fitting and meet that as all the summer people are going south, Martha Kinsey Gutensohn—the Last of the Pioneer Ladies—is going north.