



Wealthy apples from the Gunderson homeplace farm, 2002.

From the yet to be published book *The Road I Grew Up On: Requiem for a Vanishing Era*  
All rights reserved. Helen D. Gunderson, 2004. [www.gunderfriend.com](http://www.gunderfriend.com)

# BLUE RIBBON MEMORIES

Kathy Dahl is the great-granddaughter of two pioneer couples: Anna and Diedrick Brinkman, who came to the area in 1873, and Louisa and Leon Ives, who settled in the neighborhood in 1886. Kathy was two years behind me in school, one of my peers on the school bus, and the fourth of eight children in the Norton and Velma Ives' family. Their farm was along the highway at the east end of the road. Norton was a farmer with a PhD who specialized in crop drying and traveled to many countries as a consultant. He continued to farm until he died in 1992 at the age of 74. Velma still lives on the same farm. Kathy and her husband Gary also have eight children. They live on the first farm north of Velma's place. Their house is an extension of the one that Leon and Louisa Ives moved to in 1890 when they bought the farm. The last major new wings of the house were built in 1953 and 2003.

Gary and Kathy met as students at Iowa State University. Gary came from a farm near Shelby in southwest Iowa and got a degree in farm operations. Kathy majored in child development. They were married in 1969 at the Presbyterian church in Rolfe. He wanted to enlist in the Air Force but was rejected because of a broken shoulder that had not fully healed. Gary and Kathy then attended Grace Bible College in Omaha and worked for Campus Crusade for Christ. Their ministry took them to Nashville, Tennessee, and then they lived in Denver, Colorado, where Gary worked as a finishing carpenter. Kathy was a stay-at-home mom. The couple returned to Iowa in 1975 to raise their children in a safer and more wholesome environment. Gary lined up a carpentry job, but there was a period of time before he was supposed to report to work. Norton suggested that in the meantime, the family could live on the north farm and Gary could help with the farming. One thing led to the next. Gary stayed on with farming, and the family made their home on the Ives' homeplace farm.

The Dahls certainly march to a different drummer than most other farm families do. They are often among the last farmers to complete planting or harvesting; yet, it doesn't seem to bother them. They are still able to get some of the better corn yields in the area, using the wealth of knowledge that has been passed down from Norton. Their farm equipment is neither the most modern nor the biggest. They use Norton's combine and corn planter, which was top of the line in the 1970s when Norton and his neighbor, LeRoy Rude, bought it together. The Dahl barn was in fragile condition for many, many years, and it finally had to be torn down in 2001. In its place, the family put up hoop houses, structures that are part of a sustainable system of raising hogs.

The Dahl children are home-schooled. Their instruction emphasizes compassion and cooperation as opposed to materialism, wealth, or other conventional forms of success. Often when I drive past their place, I see the family in the front yard playing volleyball, in the garden working, or in the open field along the highway walking the short quarter mile to Velma's home.

Gary taught his daughters Betsy, Dawn, Carolyn, Heidi, and Mercy about farming. A sixth daughter, Anna, suffers from allergies that limited her farming activities. Over the last decade, I have often seen the girls — now young women — in the fields baling hay or doing other work such as planting and combining, work that has been typically done by men. Perhaps the situation might have been different if Norton, who had traditional attitudes about gender roles, were still living or if the only two boys in the Dahl family, John and Luke, had

not been the youngest of the eight children. Regardless of the reasons, the Dahl sisters have been active in farming, and I am envious. Their father taught them more than the specifics of how to drive a tractor or do chores. He has taught them about agriculture in general and has given them the confidence to make decisions.

I have often thought that the Dahl family would be a great focus for a documentary project; however, Gary and Kathy maintain a deep respect for privacy. I have been welcome to photograph their children while they do fieldwork but, generally speaking, I am not allowed to photograph them at their home or farmstead. I gradually became familiar with the girls during the many visits throughout the past decade when I waited with my camera in the Dahl field along the road during planting, straw baling, and harvest season. Oftentimes, they would stop for a break and a bit of conversation.

On occasion when I stopped by to visit Kathy, we would stand on the front steps of the house for a quick chat. Other times, she invited me into her living room. Sometimes, one or two of the girls would join our conversations. However, even if they didn't join us, it was fun to simply observe their interactions. From where I sat on the couch in the living room, I could peer across the room through the swinging kitchen door of the Dahls' large, wooden oval table and see the many loaves of whole-grain bread left sitting to cool. Or I heard the girls talk about the daily story hour when Kathy reads to the whole family, including the older daughters, when they come home for visits.

I have run into Gary and Kathy in Ames, the home of Iowa State University, from time to time. The town is about 100 miles from Rolfe but only four miles from where I live in Gilbert. There was a time when various daughters had regular orthodontist appointments there. On those trips, the family became enamored with the Ames Public Library. Soon, they made a habit of trekking to Ames every time that library items were due, and that meant returning home with another couple of grocery bags full of books. Then they would run other errands, including visits to Big Table Books, a community-owned bookstore. One evening, we saw each other there and caught up on what was happening in our lives.

Gary and Kathy also come to Ames for some of the annual meetings of the Practical Farmers of Iowa held at the Gateway Center. The organization's mission is "to research, develop, and promote profitable, ecologically sound, and community-enhancing approaches to agriculture." When I first saw Gary and Kathy at one of the meetings, it was serendipitous to realize that they were long-time friends of some of the people I was just getting to know through PFI. It was also refreshing to know that there was at least one farm family from my hometown area who belongs to the organization.



Gary Dahl and his daughter, Heidi, stack bales of hay on a rack while one of Heidi's sister, Mercy, drives the tractor. South side Section 7, Garfield Township, 1994.

This is an era when huge, commercial hog confinement facilities dot the Iowa map. The stench they produce is much worse than the barnyard smells that are nostalgically associated with the family farm of previous decades. Instead, with manure from hundreds, if not thousands, of hogs concentrated at one site, the accumulation of hydrogen sulfide and ammonia can ruin the air of an entire rural neighborhood. Indeed, it can cause a burning sensation in a person's nostrils even if a he or she is merely driving along a highway through that part of the country. Even more problematic is the fact that these gases can precipitate respiratory problems for people living in the surrounding neighborhood. Additionally, the large quantities of manure stored in lagoons can spill directly into a river or creek or seep into the groundwater. Then there is the risk that an operator, in his or her haste to spread too much manure too fast, might create runoff. These scenarios are only a few of the ways in which the corporate hoglots menace the environment, the economy, and human health — not to mention the unethical and unhealthy living conditions for the hogs themselves. In contrast, the open-air hoop houses on the Dahl farm are an example of what many PFI members are doing to make a difference in the face of status-quo corporate agriculture.

I feel a deep sense of the sacred when I am with the Dahls, and that surprises me. Kathy and I knew each other in the Rolfe schools and Presbyterian church, where both of our families had been members since the 1880s. We lost touch after graduation, and I was not aware of her adult journey and developing interests. In our younger years, I had never thought of her or her family as being conservative; however, times have changed, and like many of her siblings, Kathy and Gary consider themselves conservative Christians. In an election year, there are usually signs on their property for Republican presidential and legislative candidates whose political views are an anathema to me. Also, Kathy and Gary have moved away from the Rolfe Presbyterian church, seeking more conservative religious communities. In contrast, I am a liberal and have become a Democrat even though I was raised in a Republican family. I, too, have moved away from the Presbyterian denomination, even after receiving a master of divinity at a Presbyterian seminary. Currently, I am a member of the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship in Ames. It has seemed that the Dahls and I are at opposite ends of the conservative-liberal spectrum, and before I became reacquainted with Kathy and met Gary, I anticipated we would have little in common. My preconceptions were wrong.

Gary and Kathy's second daughter Heidi is married to James Roland. He grew up in the southwest Iowa town of Atlantic, where his parents owned Roland's Funeral Service. When I first met James in the summer of 2001 at the Dahl farm, he was a theology student enrolled at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. However, he was taking time away from the Deerfield, Illinois, campus to work on his master's thesis. His topic was the purpose and meaning of life with a focus on what Jonathan Edwards, a mid-eighteenth century pastor and theologian, meant on the many occasions when he used the phrase "the glory of God." He and Heidi lived for a while with her parents; then in 2003, they moved into a farm home two miles from the Dahl home. Their four young children, Sophia, Maria, Peter, and William, are the sixth generation of Leon and Louisa Ives and Diedrick and Anna Brinkman to live in the Rolfe area. James has done a variety of interim and part-time work, including a tour of duty as a police officer in Rolfe. He plans to teach classes at a community college. There is the possibility that the couple and their children will travel to different parts of the world as part of their ministry, but there is also the possibility that the family will continue to live in the Rolfe area. Heidi loves to garden, bake bread, and prepare other culinary items such as jams and apple butter. She was one of the founders of the farmers' market in West Bend, where she enjoyed selling her produce.

One afternoon when Heidi and James were still living with the Dahls, I stopped at the farm to chat. Only Heidi, James, and their children were at home. They invited me to have tea, and we sat in the living room, watching the darkening sky through their picture window. We freely discussed rural issues, life in general, theology, and the importance of art. I felt comfortable with Heidi and James and shared some of my restlessness, if not cynicism, with the conservative wing of Christianity and my frustrations with my rural heritage. I was amazed at how well they understood and accepted my candor, almost as if what I was saying was refreshing for them to hear. When the rest of the family returned home that evening, I was invited to join them for a soup supper. It was the first of a few fine yet simple meals around their large kitchen table. I continue to enjoy the family's enthusiasm for life, the meaningful conversations, the opportunity to be in a real farm home with traditional rural cuisine, and their genuine hospitality. I am also impressed with the close bonds between the family members: the cooperation of the sisters doing their farm chores, the playfulness of the siblings, their coziness in the evening around the wood-burning stove while they knit and converse, or young Uncle Luke, a teenager, holding and nurturing Heidi and James' two-year-old son Peter.

I was not impressed with home-schooling in the 1970s when I first became aware of the movement. I thought that children should be enrolled in a public school system where they could meet other students and learn to socialize in the classroom as well as through extracurricular activities. Neither was I impressed with Gary and Kathy having eight children. It seemed foolish for a woman of my own generation to have such a huge family and follow in the footsteps of mothers such as Velma, my mom, and many other women of the 1940s and 1950s who had little choice in terms of contraceptives. Again, my preconceptions were proven wrong. The Dahls appear to have a great deal of curiosity, cooperation, and self-initiative as well as viewing life holistically with no rigid divide between learning and life in general. They also seem to have a way of discerning who they essentially are rather than getting caught up in popular fads and trends. I also realize that people have different vocations and that there are people such as Gary and Kathy who are extremely gifted at parenting. What counts is not the number of children but the children themselves. The qualities I see in Gary and Kathy's children and the relationships they have within and outside of their family are what really matter.

In the 1970s, Gary and Kathy learned about the L'abri Fellowship International. *L'abri* means shelter in French. It is an organization that was founded in Switzerland in 1955 by the Christian theologian Francis Schaeffer and his wife Edith Schaefer. One of the fellowship's guiding principles is giving honest answers to people who ask about honest questions about God and the significance of human life. Gary says that one of the most important lessons that L'abri teaches is that all of life is valuable.

The genuine hospitality that I feel when I talk with the girls on their breaks from fieldwork, telephone the Dahl home with a question, receive a thank-you note or Christmas letter from the family, visit with Gary and Kathy in Ames, talk with them over a ham salad sandwich at a funeral luncheon, or join the whole family around their kitchen table for an August meal of corn fritters and apple fritters is an extension of the powerful connecting spirit of L'abri embodied in this family. The more I learn about the L'abri attitude toward honesty as part of the quest to understand God, the more I understand why I was so comfortable with Heidi and James the afternoon when we sipped tea and talked candidly about so many issues that were beneath the surface of ordinary polite conversation.

Heidi, James, and the rest of the Dahl family also value creativity and art. Examples would be Dawn, who plays the piano and recorder; Anna, who plays the flute and decorates cakes;

Heidi, who plays the violin and weaves; James, who does oil paintings, writes essays and stories, and enjoys desktop publishing; Mercy, who sketches and paints pictures; Betsy, who is the family member most dedicated to journal writing; Carolyn, who plays classical piano music wonderfully; Luke, who does woodworking; and John, who plays with Legos and engages in other building projects.

The Dahls also have a deep regard for my documentary project and photography. The first words that caught my attention when I checked out the L'abri web site were ones by Francis Schaeffer, "Art is a reflection of God's creativity, and evidence that we are made in the image of God." Although I am hesitant to use God language, those words resonate in my soul.

Heidi, James, and the Dahl family sponsored a L'abri conference in West Bend, a town 15 miles northeast of Rolfe, on a winter weekend in 2003. I was surprised and hesitant when they first invited me to mount an exhibit of my work. However, I knew that my best friend Joy Leister, who is a conservative living in Gilbert, had known Gary and Kathy in the 1970s when they were part of the ISU Bible Study in Ames. I decided that if Joy could get away for the weekend, the conference would be a fine vacation for us.

I intended to exhibit photographs of rural scenes, especially some large panels that show changes in agriculture and others that show the demolition of the Rolfe Presbyterian church in 1996. However, while I was packing for the trip to West Bend, I began to think outside the box and decided to take along a still-life photograph of a teapot, cups, oranges, and apples. I did not yet know about the L'abri emphasis on hospitality, and I felt a surge of serendipity: the refreshment table the Dahls had arranged in the lobby of the motel where the conference was held amazingly akin to the photograph, with the exception that the table held more pots and baskets of oranges and apples. When the event was over, it seemed a perfectly fitting, if not a sacramental act, to give Heidi and James the photo. It is now in the farm home where they have temporary quarters.



The L'abri event was a marvelous web of connections. My friend Joy met other people she had known as part of religious communities in Ames during the past three decades. I visited with people I had known while growing up in the Presbyterian church, including my brother Charles and his wife Gloria. They and many of the other former Presbyterians who were at the conference have sought more conservative congregations and are no longer part of the shared ministry that formed when the Rolfe Methodists and Presbyterians merged into one organization.

Kathy and Gary's oldest daughter Dawn is one of the main staff members at the L'Abri center in the village of Greatham in England. She focuses her efforts on hospitality and tutoring. Before she married James, Heidi, the second daughter, worked at home on the farm, and in the winter she was a companion to Edith Schaeffer, a widow had made her home in Rochester, Minnesota, where there also is a L'abri center. Heidi prepared meals, did laundry, read to Edith, and helped the octogenarian entertain guests. Anna, the third daughter, commuted from the Dahl farm to Fort Dodge, where she earned a degree in nursing from the University of Iowa. She is currently a nurse in the vascular ward of St. Mary's Hospital, part of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. The rest of Gary and Kathy's children still live at home. Mercy, Betsy, Caroline, and Luke are the main ones who help with the fieldwork now that their older sisters have moved away. However, the three young women enrolled in the nursing program at the Iowa Lakes Community College campus in Emmetsburg in January 2004.

I have to admit that what really caught my eye about the Dahl family was that the girls had horses. According to Gary, the girls, especially Mercy and Betsy, always wanted horses, and instead of owning Barbie dolls, they had Pretty Ponies. In fact, they still have them. One year



Three of the Dahl sisters and their horses. Left to right: Betsy, Alister, Messena, Carolyn, Ameris, and Mercy, 2003.

when Gary purchased a milk cow, he also got baby calves for the girls. When the calves grew strong enough, the girls were unsuccessful in their attempts to ride them. The biggest problem was that the calves were so round that the girls couldn't get their legs around them. Finally, Gary acquiesced and got two colts, a Morgan-Percheron mare and a gelding. The girls gentled and tamed them for a year before attempting to do any riding, and in the process, they learned about the care and training of horses. Then the family bought a purebred Morgan stallion. They now have seven horses.

As a young child, I wanted a horse, but I never thought I would be able to have one. When I was nine, following our custom on Christmas day, we got out of bed and scrambled to the living room to open our stocking gifts. Next, our family had its holiday breakfast. The most memorable menu item was served in a split serving bowl and consisted of store-bought pear halves that Mother had dyed green and red, one color for each side of the bowl. Later in the day, we went to Grandpa and Grandma's farm three miles away. After dinner, we gathered in the parlor to open gifts from under the Christmas. As I sat in one of Grandpa and Grandma's overstuffed chairs, I felt forlorn with that vague blueness that can creep into the holiday season; but I also felt that I wasn't getting my share of gifts. Then my older sister Clara suggested I look past the Christmas tree and out the big picture window. Surprise of surprises! Grandpa was standing there with a bay and a black-and-white-spotted horse. One was for me; the other was for my brother and sisters. I went outside to help Grandpa lead the horses back to the barn. Then we rejoined the family as they finished opening gifts. Let me add a side note for the record: My grandfather from Utah gave me a brand new saddle for my birthday in April.

For a long time, I assumed that Grandpa, because of his love for horses, was the one who had bought the horses for us. I found out later that it was Dad who had made the arrangements. He had gone to a man by the name of LeRoy Nelson. LeRoy was associated with saddle clubs for many years and served as a judge at horse shows and as a ringmaster at events such as the county fair. He knew just where to get two horses that would be gentle enough for children to ride for \$50 apiece. The bay was named Pet. The spotted one was Beauty. They were probably 20 years old when we got them. Most of the time, it was Charles and I who rode Pet and Beauty. They were genteel, but then again, they had some spunk. Occasionally when I went to the horse pen to catch and saddle Beauty, she would come directly toward me, nodding her head as though she was going to butt me, and then she would spin around and kick her hind heels at me. However, once the horses were saddled and bridled, sometimes with Dad's help, Charles and I had some good rides in the fields and on the country roads.

I enjoyed riding Pet or Beauty east to the first farm along the road, up the long driveway lined with trees, through the grove, then across the field to a wooded area along Crooked Creek. Other times, I liked to go south to a wooded area at a sandpit along the road to the homeplace. Although it was a site where many people dumped trash and items such as old tires and washing machines, it was still a fun place to explore. On one outing, I brought along an aluminum foil meal. That meant putting a helping of hamburger, onion, potatoes, and carrots on a piece of aluminum foil, adding salt and pepper, then sealing the raw food in the foil so the juices would not leak. I had often made similar meals at camp, for 4-H, or Presbyterian youth fellowship meetings. I mounted Beauty and managed to take the food pack with me. When I got to the sandpit, I made a small fire and cooked the meal in the embers. It was a fun outing, and I was proud of my adventuresome spirit. However, even though I enjoyed the companionship of my horse, the site was not a full-fledged wooded area and in that respect, the adventure was somewhat disappointing. It was also a lonely outing. It would have been

fun to have some peers come with me. I recall that in the Rolfe High School yearbook, when I was a senior, the caption under my name said, "The more I know of men, the better I like my horse." It was a complete surprise when I thumbed through the book. I suspect some of my friends on the yearbook committee chose the phrase. I've chuckled about it, realizing they had a feel for who I was and conveyed my spirit as a tomboy who was not caught up in popular notions of how a girl should behave or what she should worship.

I always liked LeRoy Nelson and his wife Mary. They were some ten years older than my parents and long-time members of the Rolfe Presbyterian church. In the years following high school when I was home for vacation and attended worship there, they would always ask how I was doing in a way that told me that they truly cared about me. He was the kind of person I could go up to at a Greater Rolfe Days parade after not having seen him for years, give him a kiss on the cheek, and tell him that he was one of my favorite men. Whenever I reminded him of the horses he had helped Dad find for my siblings and me, LeRoy would remember. He could be funny and people who knew him can easily recall the way he chortled and slapped his thigh in delight at a bit of humor.

Gary Dahl talks about how supportive LeRoy had been in 1992 when Gary's father-in-law Norton Ives was ill with cancer. Norton had been at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and then came home for the last week of his life. LeRoy stopped by the Ives' farm for long visits with Norton. They talked about the old times, and the 74-year-old PhD farmer told LeRoy things that he had never confided, even to his own family.

I, too, could talk to LeRoy about serious matters. In 1994, there was to be a funeral in Rolfe that was projected to have a large turnout of people. I had always wanted to videotape a funeral processional with the hearse leading the line of cars, so I decided to place myself among the trees in the cemetery across the road, which overlooked the lot in the new cemetery where the committal service was to be. After the brief service ended and the cars drove back to town, I noticed that LeRoy stayed at the gravesite and was talking with the cemetery custodian. I ambled down the hill and across the road and spoke with them. LeRoy was there in his role as a member of the cemetery board. The previous year, 1993, was one of considerable rain and flooding in Iowa. People had told LeRoy about water seeping between the cemetery plots, and he was inspecting the grave. I ventured to ask him some questions. I wanted to know what my grandfather would be like in his burial lot only 40 yards away. If exhumed, would he have been completely decomposed or would I recognize him? It wasn't what LeRoy said as much as the fact that he listened to me, understood my questions, and was able to converse about things such as death, dead bodies, and perspectives in an in-depth but fun way. He told me that if my grandfather's body were exhumed, there might be a resemblance between it and my grandfather who had meant so much to me.

In 1995, LeRoy and Mary came to a supper and folk dance that I held for my 50th birthday at the Rolfe High School home economics room and the adjacent gymnasium. Several people, including Kathy Dahl, agreed to bring a crock-pot of maid-rite filling for sandwiches. We plugged the crock-pots into the several outlets along the wall. Kenny Allen, who had been one of the youngsters on my school bus route and later as an adult owned the Ideal Café in Pocahontas, catered the buns and coleslaw. I also arranged for Lavonne Howland, a cakemaker from Rolfe who was several years older than me but who had grown up along the road, to make a chocolate and a white sheet cake for the occasion. Each square was decorated with the number 50 and a small flower. The invitations had asked the guests to bring their favorite version of Jell-O salad. Several of the women took charge of organizing the serving table.

Their good planning allowed people to fill their plates with food and find a table alongside the gym floor where they chatted with other guests while enjoying the meal.

A friend at the Unitarian Fellowship told me about a folk group from Ames called the Pretty Good Band that plays for barn dances. I arranged for the band to play at my party. I didn't know the musicians prior to the dance. However, it turns out that one of the guitar players, Rick Exner, is the research director for the Practical Farmers of Iowa, and the mandolin player, Mike Bell, would eventually write a book about PFI and use several of my photographs for the publication. The squeezebox player, Joe Lynch, and his partner Lonna Nachtigal, who plays the hammered dulcimer and was the caller, own Onion Creek Farms. I often buy basil, garlic, onions, collards, tomatoes, and other produce from them at the farmers' market. I've also built a good friendship with the fiddle player, Mary Sand, who has joined my friend Joy and me for trips to my mother's cottage at Lake Okoboji or for sewing and cooking retreats at my home.

During the dance, many people, including Mary Nelson and my parents, sat and talked with others on the sidelines. LeRoy joined in the dancing. I particularly remember being across from him when we did the patty-cake polka, a mixer. First, it was heel, toe and a slide, slide, slide. Then the participants each clapped their hands, patted their thighs, and gave a high five to their partner's right and then left hand. Next, a right elbow turn and onto a new partner. There was LeRoy in his subdued western attire with brown cowboy boots, well into his 80s: a fun dance partner.

He was on the program for at least two of Rolfe's all-class reunions and told great stories of small-town and rural life in the 1920s. In 2000, I asked him if he would write a piece for a book of Rolfe High School memories that I was editing. He put me off for a long time, not because he didn't want to contribute to the project, but because his ability to do so was diminishing. Fortunately, his daughter Mary Le Clark came to his aid and he finished an essay that is part of the book. He begins with the statement, "The Roaring Twenties. These were good years — prosperous years — the period between two wars." Later he tells how the tables turned.

Unfortunately economic conditions were not what they seemed. It was a lucky Rolfe High School graduate of the late twenties who would finish four years of college. Herbert Hoover became President in 1929. The Rolfe State Savings Bank closed in 1931. Our carefree life vanished before our very eyes. Farmers were burning corn rather than selling it for ten cents a bushel or on occasion nine cents. We watched as grain was scooped into the furnace to heat the courthouse in Pocahontas. People had their telephones taken out because they couldn't afford to pay the monthly bills. Land was lost. People went broke. Unlike many in the cities, we in the rural areas had food. The younger generation would recover. Many of the older generation would not. (*Excerpt used courtesy of LeRoy's family.*)

LeRoy is gone. He died in March of 2003 at the age of 94. Mary has been in failing health for several years and is now in the Rolfe Care Center. LeRoy had been the healthier of the two and cared for Mary at home for some five years. Then in 2000, he had a stroke and in October 2002, he broke a hip. According to his son Mac's wife, Mary Nelson, he went through some very difficult times before his death. However, LeRoy and his wife Mary continued to live in their home with the family arranging for nurses and other help to be with them. Betsy, Mercy, and Carolyn Dahl each went to the Nelson home one day a week during January and February to

care for the beloved couple. In March, the time came when Mary and LeRoy needed to move to the care center. Mac's wife Mary said that there was a warm week sandwiched between two terribly cold weeks when her son John and his wife Amy made a spur-of-the-moment decision to travel to Rolfe from the suburbs of Austin, Texas, with their only child, a month-old daughter. When they visited LeRoy, he managed to sit up and hold Madeline Grace Nelson, the youngest of his great-grandchildren, and gave her a kiss. An hour later, he passed away.

I went to LeRoy's funeral at the Methodist church building that is now the meeting place of the Shared Ministry of Rolfe. I got there ten minutes after the service began. I slid onto a folding chair next to the ushers who were sitting in an open social area at the back of the sanctuary. There was only a small turnout of people. LeRoy had outlived most of his contemporaries, and many younger friends and associates were too old or ill to attend. Mary was seated in a wheelchair in the aisle between the front row pews. Her daughter, Jeanie Stowell, who was a year ahead of me in school, was also in a wheelchair. She had been ill with polio as a child and walked with a leg brace when I knew her. At the time of the funeral, she was suffering from multiple sclerosis. When the funeral service ended and the family moved to the back of the sanctuary, they wheeled Mary and Jeanie in front of them.

I felt as though I was in a time warp when I watched Mary. I had not seen her in many years. Her hair was white, there were dark circles under her eyes, and her face and body were that of a very old woman as she sat strapped into her wheelchair. Perhaps what impressed me most was her faraway gaze, as if she didn't fully understand what was happening. In my mind, I tried to reconcile the image of Mary in the wheelchair with the Mary I remembered and with what she would have looked like when she was a beauty queen at Iowa State University where both she and LeRoy had been students. The lesson that was percolating in my soul was not that of dust to dust in regard to LeRoy but a reflection on the long journey that a popular young woman, who was healthy and robust with a full life ahead of her, had made in some 75 years to a stage of life where she had lost so much and yet still exuded a kindness and dignity.

Her daughter, Mary Le, said that Mary had osteoporosis and dementia but was aware that LeRoy had died. However, Mary Le also said that several times during the funeral activities her mother had asked, "Is this somebody we know?" Another time, Mary confided in Mary Le, "I really did like him," as though LeRoy had only been a good friend. And at other times, Mary asked various people, "Well, didn't I take good enough care of him?"

Jeanie wheeled herself directly over to me. She told me how thankful she was that I was there. She expressed how much her dad liked me and how proud he was of my efforts to document my rural heritage.

After the committal service in the old cemetery, there was a luncheon in the basement of the church. The menu included ham salad sandwiches, Jell-O salad, potato chips, and an assortment of cakes. I sat at a table with Kathy and Gary Dahl. When LeRoy's daughter, Mary Le, joined us, she told Kathy and Gary how wonderful it was that their daughters had been able to care for her parents. Gary humbly responded that it had been a meaningful experience for his daughters and that they were glad they could assist Mary and LeRoy. He also said that caring for people was something he and Kathy had tried to foster in their children. He then mentioned his mother-in-law Velma, who was currently healthy and active and lived just a short quarter mile away from their farm. He said that when the day would come when Velma needed care, his daughters — Betsy, Mercy, and Carolyn — would be there to serve their grandmother as graciously as they had served Mary and LeRoy.



LeRoy Nelson, circa 1988.

### **Equestrienne**

By Jessie Edgerton Yeazel

I cannot think that there would be no horse  
For you in heaven. Surely there must be  
The best celestial steed reserved and waiting  
For you to ride through all eternity.

I see you racing gladly down the years,  
Wind in your hair and laughter in your eyes  
As once you were, vital and young and free,  
Pounding the endless trails of paradise.

For when I picture you as charging gaily  
Down some far roadway, singing as you go,  
Pain left behind you, then I can deny  
The futile grief the human heart must know.

You are released, and time can have no fences  
For such as you who in ethereal pride  
Down the enchanting bridle paths of heaven,  
Lost to the world, will now forever ride.

In the summer of 2003, Heidi and James Roland and their children moved to the farm where Mary and LeRoy had lived for many decades. LeRoy raised purebred Aberdeen Angus cattle as well as Arabian saddle horses. The place is called Meadow Run and is just east of the cemetery. A hitching post still stands in front of the house, even though there are no longer any horses on the farm. Point of interest: LeRoy's obituary says that he enjoyed riding horses until he was 90 years old.

I am reminded that there is a lone Wealthy apple tree on the abandoned Gunderson homeplace farm. The house is gone, the barn is being torn down, and the only buildings that are left are steel grain bins and a machine shed. The tree was planted in 1925 when Dad was seven; it is worn from age and the elements of hard weather. The apples don't look so good, but they taste great and in my opinion are the best apples for pies. When I moved back to Iowa in 1993 and visited the farm, I was surprised to see the tree there and still producing apples. In August 2002, I was at that farm the day after a windstorm of near tornado intensity. I wanted to see if the barn was still standing. Luckily, it was in fine shape. As I was about to drive out the lane and on my way, I noticed the tree. As I got out of my car and walked over to it, I could see plenty of healthy apples lying on the ground. A windfall! Most years, I am not at the homeplace when the fruit is ripe. Other times, the apples are nearly ready for harvest but the branches are too high to reach the fruit, even when I stand on the top of my car. And sometimes, the fruit has been on the ground for a number of days or weeks and has rotted. That year, I knew that the apples were for me. I gathered them into a plastic tub from the trunk of my car and brought them back to my apartment at Gilbert.

I have heard that lone apple trees will produce fruit only every other year. When I visited the homeplace again in August of 2003, I wasn't expecting to see apples. To my surprise, the tree was full of good fruit. However, the tree is some 25 feet tall. I was staying that week with my friends Ben and Sylvia Olson at their farm home south of Pocahontas. So I went back to their place; borrowed their dusty red, 1982 Chevy, three-quarter-ton pickup truck and a step-ladder and then stopped to see Heidi and got a broom handle with a homemade apple-picking basket mounted on the end of it. I returned to the homeplace, parked the pickup under the tree, placed the stepladder on the bed of the box, stood on the ladder, and reached through the scratchy branches to pick the fruit. Many of the apples that looked red and wholesome from the ground had already been pecked over by the birds. Fortunately, I got enough good ones to fill two grocery bags, although I longed to get the ones that were so high in the tree that only the birds could enjoy them. Later, I sat at Ben and Sylvia's kitchen table and peeled, quartered, cored, and sliced two-thirds of the apples. Because I was not very experienced at peeling and cutting up apples, the job took several hours. Finally, I had what I thought would be enough for ten pies. That seemed sufficient, and besides my hands were getting cramped and weary from the work. I packed the processed apples into Ziploc bags and put them in their freezer. Then I brought them back to Gilbert to make apple pies during the course of the year.

I knew that James Roland had used his computer to develop a sharp-looking list of food products and other homemade items that Heidi wanted to sell at the farmers' market and to other clients. Apple butter was on the list, and I realized that she probably was pretty adept at making it. I called to see if I could bring her the apples I had not cut up and hire her to make apple butter. She was eager to do so. I also visited with Marjorie Harrold at her farm just a mile from my parents and got some more apples that had freshly fallen to the ground. After that, I stopped at the farm across the road from her place where Velma and Verle Howard used to live. Brian Slama, who lives there now, gave me permission to pick apples from their tree.

Later I found a farm near Laurens in the northern part of the county where I could buy some honey. Surprisingly, the woman there is a cousin of Norine Reigelsberger, who lived a quarter mile to the east of my parents before she and her husband Joe retired to town. I took the extra apples and honey to Heidi.

In the next few weeks, between her responsibilities of parenting young children and having produce ready for the West Bend farmers' market, Heidi made several small jars of apple butter and a few large jars of applesauce. I've eaten some of the apple butter, and it is awesome. Each jar is a real treasure in light of the fact that the apples are from my grandparents' farm and the farms of neighbors along my road. It is traditional Iowa cuisine, made by a fine young woman whose heritage is linked to mine in many ways. Heidi even had a surprise to report. She said that when she finished making the apple butter, she scraped the last dregs from the bottom of the pan, put them in a jar, and entered it in the Clay County Fair, one of the most prestigious county fairs in the state, if not in the nation. The end result is that her (or should I say our) apple butter got a blue ribbon. Well, here is to blue ribbon relationships and memories!