

One of Dorothy Okerstrom's most endearing features was her modesty. Yet in the last eighteen months of her life, spent in Minot, she became something of a celebrity. Embarking on her hundredth year, she became willing to talk about herself, her life, and the people in it. It was time to open up a little and share some details with new and old friends in Minot. Some of what they learned was provided in a loving memoir written by her daughter Mary Ellen—Cookie to all who know her—for the one hundredth birthday celebration.

Most of us can't imagine what it would be like to be nine years old, suddenly without a mother, and then, out of necessity, to have the family split up with some children being farmed out to others. Dorothy's immigrant parents were of modest means. Her father was a house painter. Her mother did handwork every afternoon and sold it to help with the family income.

Thus did Dorothy Lindahl wind up living on a farm in Port Wing, Wisconsin, going there with only the clothes on her back. She adjusted well, Cookie wrote, and in school, one of the "town boys" wasted no time in singling her out. Thurston Nathaniel "Okie" Okerstrom told his mother he was going to marry that girl. Dorothy took his intentions in stride. She'd heard he was important. His father had founded Port Wing. Other girls in school made it clear that Thurston Nathaniel was off limits to the new girl in town.

At age sixteen, Dorothy, who grew up a realist with a practical side, decided it was time for her to be self-supporting. This would have been about 1924. The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution granting nationwide suffrage to women had been around only since 1920. Dorothy was a woman of her time.

But there weren't many jobs in Port Wing. So she returned to the Chicago area and went to work as a housekeeper. She went back to Port Wing to spend the summer. She was there at age 19 when Thurston Nathaniel, still carrying his torch, asked to take her home from a Luther League meeting. But she had come to the meeting with a girl friend, she said, and felt obliged to return home with her. She hadn't counted on the crafty Thurston, who found another guy for her girl friend. The four of them piled into his car. She was thrilled about the ride home. He was the only young man in Port Wing with a car. Their dating and their corresponding—when she was back working in Chicago—continued for another three years before they were married.

They were eager to have children, but nature wasn't cooperating. They began adoption proceedings, and then Dorothy became pregnant. Adoption papers were withdrawn, Cookie was born, and of course she was the center of their lives. After that, Okie contracted the mumps. "We couldn't have anymore children," Dorothy told her Minot friends.

But what a mother she was to this only child of theirs. Focus on family became her mission in life.

"My dad did much traveling during the war, so my mom and I became very close," Cookie wrote. "We spent much time on the bus, since she didn't drive, going from one lesson for me to another. She wanted everything for me that she never had. She was always my Sunday school teacher, my Brownie leader ... and most importantly, my friend. Every summer my mom and I would go to Port Wing so she could take care of her invalid stepmother. I would make the rounds with different cousins or sit and listen to my two Swedish grandmas trying to figure out what they were saying." Okie's mother still lived in Port Wing then, but later lived with them when they moved to St. Joseph.

Dorothy and Okie's life took on a whole new dimension when Wallace Dale Berning married their beloved daughter. In time, they had two children, Todd Nathaniel and Shaun Ellen. The birth of these grandchildren probably was bigger in her mother's eyes than her own birth, Cookie reported. She was the perfect grandma.

"Always willing to baby sit when they were young. Doing laundry when they were in college. Setting a true Christian example for them. Now she is setting the same example for her great-grandchildren, those two wonderful boys, Nathaniel Landen and Keenen Halvorson Berning," Cookie wrote in the birthday memoir.

They all were on hand to toast Dorothy on her hundredth birthday.

What Cookie couldn't say in her memoir is that she was the perfect daughter and that Wally was the perfect son-in-law. They were all of that, as they carried Dorothy to eternity.

*gf*