

My Life Story Daniel C. Boyle

The Sheldon Years

In the summer of 1946 my parents and I moved from Alice, North Dakota, where I attended elementary school, to Sheldon, North Dakota. The two villages are about 15 miles apart. Alice had a population of 161, Sheldon 262. Sheldon was the older of the two having been established in 1881 when a branch line of the Northern Pacific Railroad was built. The farm where I was born was nine miles north of Sheldon, where my parents had traded, attended the Catholic Church, and sent my older siblings to the Catholic parochial school when it was open. My older siblings all graduated from the Sheldon public high school. For my parents Sheldon may have been a little like coming home. They were certainly well known in the community.

The house my parents bought was one of the oldest in Sheldon, dating back probably to the early 1890s. It had been neglected and needed some attention. A bathroom was needed as was a hot air furnace to replace the coal burning parlor heater with isinglass windows in the dining room.

The house was a two parlor, one bedroom, dining room and kitchen design with an added unfinished space for a bathroom. There was a rear deck and a partially excavated basement. One parlor (now used as a bedroom) opened to another parlor which opened to the dining room. The kitchen was unusual in that there were five kitchen doors; one each to the exterior, the pantry with a trap door to the unfinished basement, the attic where clothes were dried in the winter, the dining room and the bathroom space. There were no built in cabinets in the kitchen.

Also on the property was a barn with outhouse accommodations as well as a lean-to added to serve as a garage for a car.

My Dad was 68 and my mother was 58. I'm not entirely sure about the circumstances of the move. A prime one was that Sheldon had a high school; Alice no longer had a high school. But there were likely other considerations as well.

I believe my mother's favorite brother, James G. Brown, Jr., supplied a \$500 down payment for the purchase of the house. The sales price was \$2500. The house payments were \$25 monthly. A consideration may have been that during the summer of 1946 the second wife of their father, James G. Brown, had died. James was nearing his 90th birthday and his health was failing noticeably.

For 17 years James and Mame (formally Mary Ellen McGrath, pronounced McGraw) had lived with his bachelor son James in the 15 room house James senior had built in 1906. It is the only two story brick farm house in all of Cass County, North Dakota, but alas in 1946 it still had no indoor plumbing. So how was the bachelor James to farm, keep house, and care for his seriously ailing father. Actually James did have a long term housekeeper, Louise McNutt. However she was past retirement age herself and in need of nitroglycerin from time to time to control her angina. (Some people speculated on the nature of the relationship between James and Louise!!)

What happened is this. The house in Sheldon was improved with a forced hot air furnace and a bathroom big enough to also be a laundry room, with a wringer washer and room for wash tubs. in the Fall of 1946, my grandfather James G Brown moved in with us.

He was accompanied by his daughter Charlotte Gill, who acted as a companion and practical nurse. My mother Mary was employed cooking school

lunches. James and my mother's other brothers, Leonard, Preston, Francis, and Clair contributed monthly to support the care and housing their father was receiving.

Grandfather Brown and Charlotte each had a double bed in the formal bedroom. My parents were in the front parlor curtained off from the other parlor, now the living room. I had a day bed in the dining room.

When grandfather had his 90th birthday on January 6, 1947 he pronounced he had another day coming, his dying day. That day occurred in late March and the household soon reverted to being just three of us. My parents moved into the bedroom and I into the front parlor. A window there had a scratch in the glass where someone years before had used a diamond ring to enter the date of their honeymoon.

My parents had not recovered financially from the loss of their 640 acre farm in 1937. My Dad had only parts of three years of formal education, received in Dakota Territory where educational facilities were rudimentary. He could read and write, but was handicapped in doing so by what is known now as dyslexia. Mother had seven grades in a country school before she was needed at home to help her mother.

The first six children of my mother's parents were daughters. Three of the them went to normal school and trained to be teachers. Three, my mother among them, stayed home to help their mother manage a family of twelve children and feed all the men needed to operate an 800 acre farm in those days without electricity, running water, and already prepared foods.

When my Dad turned 65 in 1943 he became eligible for Old Age Assistance, a welfare program. Since he had a child, me, under 18 years old, I became eligible for a companion program, Aid to Dependent Children

(ADC). There was even some medical care associated with ADC. I needed surgery for a growth on my throat. This surgery was paid from ADC funds. These programs in North Dakota, while certainly not bountiful, were more developed and generous than these programs in most other states.

After we moved to Sheldon there was an issue about our continued eligibility. My older brother James had gifted my parents with a new electric range to replace one which dated from the 1920s. The caseworker questioned whether the purchase price of the stove should be considered income, which would have jeopardized eligibility. (Thirteen years later I was a caseworker working with these same programs making decisions about eligibility. Would you believe I tended to give recipients the benefit of any doubts encountered?)

This era of being recipients of public assistance came to an end for us. My brother Robert was in the Army Air Force when he died in the crash of a B24 bomber in May 1945. Soldiers were required to buy War Bonds from their earnings. Robert (Bob) was cashing some of his and sending the proceeds home to our parents. This enabled them to claim benefits from a program for dependent parents of soldiers killed in service. This program did not involve caseworkers overlooking every financial detail or strict limits on earnings. It was a veterans' benefit of sorts, not considered welfare. The benefit was \$75 monthly and then raised to \$80. My mother continued drawing this benefit until she died in 1979.

Still finances were tight. When the Sheldon basketball team was competing in a tournament in Jamestown, 90 miles away from Sheldon, I didn't have money to go. After the tournament had started, the parish priest Father Veit, who had business in Jamestown, took me with him and gave me \$5. That covered whatever food I ate. I found a ride home on my own when the tournament was over.

St. Mary's Church in Sheldon (officially Our lady of the Scapular) put out detailed financial statements. One year my father's contribution was \$13; 25 cents for each Sunday of the year. He had of course contributed labor when the church was being lifted up and a basement installed under it. Still I was very glad when later the church financial statements were less detailed.

This church has one stained glass window dedicated to my grandparents Cornelius Joseph and Ellen Boyle and another one dedicated to their eldest son Owen Joseph Boyle.

One time my father's 1936 standard Chevrolet two door sedan needed repair. The repair shop was really a blacksmith shop where plow lays and mower and binder blades were sharpened and broken farm machinery was welded together. Horse shoes could be made when needed. But car repair work was also done. Since my father could not afford the repair, I was drafted to work in the shop until my earnings, meager as they were, were enough to cover the cost of the repair.

This 1936 Chevrolet became pretty disreputable as it aged. The tan paint faded to blue in spots, the mohair upholstery became no hair, fenders were dented and a bumper was missing. Finally when I was a junior in high school in 1948 it was replaced.

The replacement was a 1941 Chevrolet, again a two door sedan, with 90,000 miles on it. Fortunately it had a new engine. It was, however, a far cry from the 1946 DeSoto owned by the parents of my classmate Arlen Bunn or the 1949 wide body Hudson owned by the parents of another classmate, Gertrude Kaspari.

All was not doom and gloom. My parents were generous with me as their means permitted. I was still sitting in my dad's lap when I was in high school. According to my sister-law-law Isabelle, my mother could make a good tasting, nutritious meal from what others might regard as scraps.

Sheldon High School had about 45 students. Ten were in my class, but it dwindled to 7 by graduation time. Classes were so small that every other year the beginners started with sophomore subjects. The classes were not demanding, the only homework I ever took home was bookkeeping and that didn't last long. There was no "shop," so the boys took "home ec" and most of them took typing too.

I was small. Even when I was discharged from the Army five years after high school graduation I weighed only 130 pounds. I was not athletic. But someone felt sorry for me and pressed me into being a cheer leader. We did "rah rahs" and "sis-boom ba's" at football and basketball games. There was no school bus so I spent some time begging parents to drive to out of town games to provide transportation for the cheer leaders and other students not on the team. Incidentally the football team had six players instead of 11; all the teams in the league had six men (boys).

St. Mary's church had no youth activities. There were several Catholic kids attending Sheldon school, but I was the only one living in town. Most were living on farms with lots of chores to do. The Sheldon Methodist and Evangelical United Brethern churches did have youth fellowship programs. So to make up for my lack of required chores I attended them. They "kept me off the streets." I learned to sing "John Jacob Gingelheimer Smith" from one group and the concept of "righteous indignation" from the other and that lights were not to be dimmed when a dance was held even at school.

I graduated from Sheldon High School in 1950 tied for second in the class of seven. The valedictorian actually spend time studying. There were no family funds to finance college and I was not assertive or motivated enough then to try to “work my way through college”

The key for me to attend college was service in the US Army for 23 months and 10 days during The Korean Conflict. This made me eligible for the GI Bill of Rights, which included money for college. I served exclusively in Camp (now Fort) Gordon, GA, well out of harm’s way. The Korean Conflict was over before my term of service was over. They discharged soldiers early who had firm plans to attend college. So then with finances and new found motivation, I started at St. John’s University in Minnesota in January 1955.