

# *Emma Moerbe Nielsen: A Memoir*

*Dr. George Nielsen, Special Features Editor*

*I began writing this sketch of my mother many years ago and came back to it recently—in time for my sister's eighty-fifth birthday. Her immediate family had planned a celebration and she wanted something for the children and grandchildren to read about the environment in which she was raised. While I try to restrict references to my personal life in the little pieces for the Newsletter, I thought by including it that somehow it would encourage people to write for their children and grandchildren. Often the recorded family information is limited to the dates and places of births and deaths, and extraordinary events or significant accomplishments. Children in this new century think of mothers as persons who drop them off at daycare and then continue on to an office job. Do they realize that our parents and grandparents did not go to KFC but raised and dressed the chickens they ate? So, please accept my apologies for talking about my personal life but read this sketch and consider writing for your own loved ones.*

Mother did not always wear braids. A photo taken on her wedding day shows her with short wavy hair, in keeping with the style of 1926, the date of her marriage. She was only nineteen at the time and her youthful beauty shows through no matter what the hairstyle might have been. The photo shows her looking down on an armful of roses, not the usual pose for a wedding shot. But she was suffering from a summer cold, and the photographer suggested the downward gaze to mask the watery eyes.

As far back as I can remember I can only envision her in braids. Sometimes she wore a single braid down her back; at other times there were two, and when she dressed up, she wrapped the two braids around her head like an olive wreath on a Greek athlete and pinned

them with large plastic pins and small metal bobby pins. She never went to a hairdresser. Every morning she brushed her hair and every week she washed them and let them dry in the Texas air. We did not have a shower or fancy bath facilities, so she washed them in a white enamel utensil scarred by a few chips. The wash and rinse water she used was never from the city water tap treated with chemicals, but it was always soft rainwater from the cistern. (In Aleman we had a windmill instead of city water or cistern, so Mother collected water in containers when it rained.)

The only time someone did her hair was in the winter of 1944 when she was in the hospital for a hysterectomy. She was gone for about a week and when we came for a visit, she said a nurse had done her hair, but that the nurse did not know that long hair needed brushing at the ends first and then advance in small stages toward the scalp. The nurse had started at the scalp and before she reached the ends, the knots had been jammed together. Evidently there was some concern about the operation and Mother's recovery, but I was too young to understand. My biggest fear was that during her weeklong absence the household could not function without her.

Mother was born on October 10, 1906, in Giddings, Texas, the county seat of Lee County. Her father was a Lutheran pastor and had taken the parish there in 1895. He belonged to the large Slavic ethnic group in Lee County called the Wends, but he spoke and preached primarily in German and English. One of Mother's maternal grandparents was also Wendish, and the other one was German. There were quite a few congregations in rural Lee County so when the pastors brought their families into town for Saturday shopping, they stopped to visit Grandfather while the pastors' wives shopped.

Grandfather enjoyed the collegiality, and the pastors discussed the sermons for the next day and other problems related to their parishes. He was a good host and prevailed on Grandmother to provide some food. He also handed one of the girls some money and an empty bucket so she could go to the tavern and get some beer. Mother's older sisters were not attuned to the value of collegiality but were more aware of the skimpy leftovers that they faced on Saturday night dinner table as well as the drain on the family budget. Mother was an infant during this time and blamed some of her scrawniness on her mother's neglect in order to serve the guests. When Emma was two, in 1909, her father accepted the call to a rural parish in Hamilton County; the nearest little village, about three miles away, was called Aleman. Aleman, the Spanish word for German, was the name given to the settlement by the Mexican workers as they were building the Cotton Belt Railroad.

In 1938, when Mother was thirty-one the family moved to Nebraska for a year and lived with Grandmother Nielsen on the family farm. It was a difficult year for Mother because the five of us were crowded in with Grandmother, two maiden aunts, and an adopted son. And it was not Texas. The next year we moved to Thorndale, a small town in central Texas, population 898, which provided shipping access to the Missouri Pacific Railroad for agricultural goods. In 1952 Mother and Father, empty nesters since Flo's marriage, moved to Vernon, the county seat of Wilbarger County in northwestern Texas. In 1971 they retired in Stephenville, also a county seat and the home of Tarleton College. So with the exception of one year, Mother spent her entire life in Texas. She occasionally traveled out of the state, but when her time would come, she fully expected to die in Texas.

The home in rural Aleman,

where Emma grew up, stood on a gentle slope of a hill along a gravel road. Across the road was the brick church with a steeple, and on the side with the parsonage were the cemetery, a barn, and garage. Further down the road, about one hundred yards away, was a two-room school and a house for the teacher. Like the parsonage, the teacher's house had a barn and some small sheds for chickens and also for the auto. The only trees in the area were around the homes or along Mustang Creek. The remainder of the land was either in pasture or under plow. Mother attended that school for her elementary education, and in 1920, when she was thirteen a new teacher arrived from Concordia College in Seward, Nebraska to help staff the school. William Nielsen, only eighteen years himself, later, in 1926, became her husband.

When they were married six years later, they knew each other well because William lived in a room at the parsonage and ate the meals with the family. He paid for the lodging, and after the two agreed to marry, Emma's mother gave her the money she had saved. One twenty-dollar gold piece was to pay for the wedding expenses, and the other was for her to keep. Later when Franklin Roosevelt took the country off of the gold standard, Emma secretly kept the gold piece and did not tell me about it until I was in college. She thought it was a crime to have retained the coin, but I relieved her conscience by informing her that keeping it in a collection was not illegal.

William was Emma's teacher during her last year of elementary school and after graduation she continued her schooling at high school in Aleman. After high school Mother attended a Norwegian school, Lutheran College of Clifton, thirty miles away. She graduated high school on May 24, 1923, at the age of 16. Some of her sisters such as Annie and Esther had also attended Clifton and then taught in Lutheran schools. The cost of schooling

was covered by rental income from a farm that Grandfather owned in Thornedale. Emma remembers that college year fondly and used the opportunity to improve her skills on the piano. She told me of an incident that took place in the little school illustrating the ingenuity of the students. After some athletic exercises several young men, wrapped only in towels, left their rooms for the shower room. While they were showering, guests of both genders gathered in a reception room that separated the shower from the dormitory rooms. Their showers completed, the young men realized their quandary. They were too embarrassed to wrap themselves in the towels to parade in front of the guests, yet if they waited any longer they would miss the evening meal. Their solution was to wrap their heads in the towels to preserve their anonymity and streaked through the reception room.

She attended Clifton for a year and then taught school for one year at a Lutheran school in Bishop, Texas. It was during these teenage years that Mother "bobbed" her hair. Wearing hair short was considered rebellious and met with objections from her father. The act was postponed for a time—but not for long.

Grandfather insisted that Emma would not get married before she was twenty, so during some of the summers of waiting for Emma, William supplemented his income by working at a feed mill in a neighboring town called Hico. During other summers he attended the University of Texas. They were married on July 4, 1926, and then moved into the newly built teacher's house next to the school. The fiftieth anniversary of their wedding coincided with the Bicentennial of the United States in 1976. Eleven months after the wedding Flo was born, and Emma became fully occupied with the traditional role in a woman's life.

The hair was symbolic of her life style—simple, efficient, and thrifty. She had grown up in a home of eight

children. Money was scarce, and thrift was a prized virtue. The older daughters were expected to help with the young ones and they learned the household skills. Mother was the fourth daughter and contributed the most by getting out of the way. She learned to cook, but she never really enjoyed it and her meals showed it. Her cooking also was simple, thrifty, and efficient. You could almost tell the day of the week by the menu. In those days we all ate the evening meal (supper) and often lunch (dinner) as a family. Monday was washday, so that was the simplest meal, usually hamburger meat in gravy served in a volcano-shaped helping of mash potatoes. (She peeled a lot of potatoes and when she peeled, she sort of pursed her lips and made the peelings very thin). Tuesday was for ironing, and dinner was a bit more elaborate. She also liked cottage cheese and canned peaches. Sometimes she would make clabber from sour milk and hang it in a cheese-cloth bag from the clothesline. She had to eat that herself.

Sunday was the big meal and much of Saturday was spent getting the meal ready. In Thorndale we lived on the edge of town so we had a large garden, two cows and a flock of chickens. Saturday afternoon Mother would nab two fryers from the fenced chicken yard and butcher them. We had raised the fryers ourselves. Every spring father ordered a few dozen of baby chicks that usually arrived on the highway bus, which stopped at the Mobil station. The chickens had been "sexed" which means that their gender had been identified. We wanted males, but in each batch of males there were some females—wrongly identified. We kept the chicks in the house in an area heated by an electric light bulb and fed them rolled oats. As the outside temperatures warmed, they were taken outside and when old enough, added to the flock of hens. As the chicks grew, the larger comb on the heads identified the true males, and marked them for the table.

When they were of suitable size, Mother took two of them to the woodpile and hacked off the heads. Although Dad had grown up on a farm, he rarely participated in such chores, Saturday afternoons usually being his time to practice the organ for Sunday services. And he was chicken-hearted. So Mother, with her skinny arms, would grab the hatchet and hack away. She quickly released the headless birds and watched as they flopped around in their death dance, and then scalded the feathers so they could be plucked. The most fascinating step was dressing the remains. It was a weekly anatomy lesson. Mother saved the liver, heart, and gizzard. Because chickens have no teeth, the breaking down of the food takes place in the crop, a bag of muscles in the chicken's chest. Chickens peck up small stones that remain in the crop and the muscles grind the stones and food for digestion. The crop is eatable, but to make it a gizzard, it must be cut open, skinned and cleaned. We often checked through the contents of the crop, hoping that one of the stones would be a diamond. (Dad ate the gizzards and gnawed the cartilage off the bones.) The final step was cutting the fryer into pieces and then refrigerated until Sunday.

She baked the bread, and a pleasant memory is returning home to the smell and getting the freshly cut end of the loaf for a peanut butter and honey snack. Later when they retired, Dad helped her with the kneading. A sound I remember is her sharpening the butcher knife on a ceramic crock, and a smell I often woke up to was burned toast. We had an electric toaster that was by no means automatic. It had two wings on either side that held the bread close to the elements. When one side had browned you opened the sides, flipped the slices, and then toasted the white sides. Mother would invariably leave the bread in too long and burn it. She would then take the toast to the back door and scrape off the burned part before serving it.

Mom liked gardening more than she liked cooking. She seemed to enjoy getting up early to work with her flowers. I remember waking up to the sound of her hoeing outside my window. She usually took care of the garden plants with little seeds while the rest of us took care of the potatoes, beans, peppers and black-eyed peas. When we planted the potatoes, we bought seed potatoes and she would cut out the eyes for planting and then make potato pancakes with the rest.

Mother was "green" before the green environmentalists were even born. She did it not to save the planet but because it saved a few pennies. It was called thrift, or *Sparsamkeit*. And in those days pennies made a difference. She made her own laundry soap by boiling lard and lye together and after it hardened, I had to shave it into flakes. She canned garden products, churned butter, and when she washed dishes, she saved the water in the dishpan and carried it outside to water her roses. She was handy with the sewing needle, and she sat—lips pursed like she was peeling potatoes and the "coolie" braid down her back—at a sunlit window with a green accountant's visor over her eyes. The slogan on the visor read, "I'm a jazzin' kid," hardly the motto of an accountant or for her. She sewed dresses (three printed cotton cloth feed bags for a dress), patched pants, darned socks, and mended just about anything. And she loved making quilts with other women as they rehearsed relationships and who-married-who.

Florence, the oldest child, was born when Mother was twenty-one. There already were several grandsons in the relationship, so Florence's birth was cause for celebration. Flo was the poster child of the Aryan ideal, glowing cheeks and straight, flaxen hair cut in a Dutch style with bangs across her forehead. When she was old enough to walk, she became the frequent choice as the flower girl in weddings. She was also Grandmother's only granddaugh-

ter in the Aleman area so she became grandmother's favorite grandchild. Bill was born twenty-six months later. He was given my father's name, and became father's favorite. I was born twenty-one months later and being the last child, enjoyed Mother's attention and hence "Mother's baby." Except on school days, Flo and Bill were the only children around, so until they went to school, we were playmates.

Giving birth and caring for three children within four years taxed Mother physically. Even though Dad's school was a short distance away and he helped to an extent, Mother's working conditions were primitive by our standards. To wash clothes, Mother built a fire under a black kettle in the yard and added water, homemade soap, and the soiled clothes. After stirring the clothes in the boiling water, she twisted them dry and rinsed them and pinned them to the clothesline. She breast-fed all of us, although I was weaned early after I thanklessly bit her. But then she had to make her own baby food by cooking and straining the food. She also made dresses for Flo and shirts for us on the foot-powered Singer sewing machine. We did have electricity and when Bill was born they bought a Maytag washing machine (with a wringer) that was sheltered in the washhouse. But she still needed to heat the water in the black kettle and carry the buckets of boiling water to fill the machine. Electricity also powered a new refrigerator that simplified the preservation of milk and food.

The demands on her were too great and Mother experienced what she called a "nervous breakdown." I don't remember it, but friends came to help, and eventually we kids grew up and became easier to handle. Mother's poor health, nevertheless, was something I always sensed. She talked about her high blood pressure and tired easily, so whenever she had a moment she stretched out on the couch or bed. Cold temperatures bothered her and she wore

long heavy stockings and a jacket all the time. When she went out, she tied a bandana over her head. We teased her about her Texas thermostat, but she was the first one out of bed and was the one who started the fire in the kitchen wood stove. Later in life, when air conditioners became common, she was the last one to suggest turning it on, and often, instead of looking for the off switch on window units, she just pulled the plug. Her frail condition we accepted as part of her—just as we accepted her braids. After we moved to Thorndale, Mother thought drinking a malted milk might give her energy, so I pedaled the bike to the drug store with a fruit jar in a bag. I brought the malt back and never asked for a taste. Mother, not I, had the energy problem.

Mother was the early riser. She was a light sleeper and things needed to be done. In winter it was the stove, and in summer it was the garden, both flowers and vegetables. In Aleman the neighboring farmer permitted Mother to garden on a terrace closest to our house. The topsoil had been scraped together in the creation of a terrace, so plants grew best on the terrace. Getting up early for outside work was also a good way of avoiding the sun and heat of a Texas day. Gardening also meant more work because the vegetables needed to be canned and the heat from the cooking and the pressure cooker made the kitchen unbearable.

Other than a little powder, rouge and lipstick, Mother did not spend a lot of time or money with make-up, and when I studied history and saw photographs of the Oklahoma women during the Dust Bowl days, I thought of Mother. She was not exactly like these gaunt flat-chested women with the bony fingers touching the sunken cheeks and gazing into the distance with their vacant stare, but she was close. Her everyday clothes were sewn from feed sacks just as the Oklahoma women, and the physical demands along with the Texas sun had robbed her of her

youthful beauty all too early. I wonder how she would have looked if she had stopped with one child or lived in the city.

Mother never commented, much less complained about her lot in life. Her role in life was what she was doing. It was largely nurturing with a daily task of looking after the family. It was more than just having babies and feeding them. It was enriching the family life when the means of enrichment were limited by rural isolation and limited resources. Music was her first love, but the music was either classical or religious. Jazz was anathema because it was not uplifting, contemporary music was frivolous, and country was, well... country. Once when Florence brought home some Frank Sinatra sheet music, she was firmly reminded that it was not worth the money. The radio seldom carried religious music, and if it did, it would be the revival kind—anything but Bach. In 1945, when Roosevelt died, Mother finally heard her kind of music as the nation honored the president. We always had a piano, and Mother had become proficient with it at Clifton, but I never remember her practicing and performing. She did, however, give lessons to us and other kids. But that illustrates her mentality. Playing the piano for her enjoyment was not time well spent.

As thrifty as we were, the outside world was not ignored. In Aleman we subscribed to the *Dallas Morning News* and the comics brought entertainment. At one point we agreed to give up the newspaper and replace it with a radio. The decision was not hard because we could go up the hill to Grandmother's house and she read the comics for us. The same is true of reading. Mother helped us read school books and occasionally we received books for Christmas, but I never saw her read a novel or anything for her own enjoyment. Music and literature was weighted toward religion. Religion was not only at the center of the family, it was the center of the community.

Mother not only played the traditional woman's role, she did what she could to show that she did not wear the pants in the family. She and Dad divided responsibility. Mother took responsibility for the home and Dad looked after national concerns such as the New Deal, the foreign policy toward China, and the Republican Party. She was the epitome of a back-seat driver, but tried everything to keep from being obvious. Dad bought a Ford Model A when I was born and sold it when I was in college for the same amount of money. As a youngster I was embarrassed by the car because it showed our lack of money, but by the time I realized that it had become a classic, it had been sold. The car was in sound condition because from time to time Mother gave it a new coat of black paint. The Model A was the one car Mother learned to drive, even though she never held a driver's license, so when Dad bought a Rambler, we all rejoiced that her driving days were over. No matter who drove or where Mother sat in the car, she helped the angels protect the family. She called attention to potential threats, and to bring variety to her warnings, spelled out STOP instead of saying it and making it sound like a command.

She did what had to be done, and never made an issue of it. Dad suffered from eczema and during allergy times or periods of stress the ailment flared up and he withdrew from public activity as much as possible. Bill and I were at boarding school in Austin and just at the time when our school year ended, and we needed transportation home, Dad's eczema worsened. Mother showed up at the school with the Model A, and brought us home at the speed of thirty-five miles an hour. She had an expression for something going very fast, "Going like sixty." She never went sixty.

Like other mothers, she remembered birthdays and other occasions. These observations were never elaborate, but they were not overlooked. At

Christmas her brother, a druggist in a neighboring town, brought rum flavor and Emma provided the eggs and milk for eggnog. She bought the Easter candy and filled our decorated Easter nests. (Our nests were not baskets, but small boxes lined with grass and flowers and placed on the screened back porch.) And for birthdays she came up with the weird custom of tying one ankle to the bedstead with a rope. You always knew when it was your birthday from the moment you woke up and tried to get out of bed. It never had the same status as a wrapped present, but you went along with it because you knew it would happen again next year.

She also kept the calendar for the cows. Because she was the first one up, she was the first to know when one of our two cows was thinking about a family. On those occasions Mother woke me up early and I placed the chain around the horns of the restless cow and took her across town to the man with the Herford bull. It was a highly embarrassing chore because I knew that everyone who saw me knew what was happening. When I returned Mother went to the calendar and counted nine months and wrote down "Rosie" or "Bossie" and almost to that date the Jersey cow produced a white-faced calf.

While Florence remained at home and attended the local high school, Bill and I left home after grade school to attend Concordia in Austin. We were deprived of parental care during those four years, but each week we sent dirty clothes home by parcel post and each time they came back clean along with some cookies. Even during the summers we were not home the entire time because Bill and I went to help uncles on their farms. We usually made it back in time for picking cotton, the dreaded August activity. Mother actually liked picking cotton. She did not pick as frequently as we did, but when she found time, it gave her an opportunity to visit with friends as they picked. She always wore her bonnet, sewn out

of feed sacks, and stiffened with little slats of cardboard.

Even though Dad was my teacher for the last three grades of grade school, Mother was my tutor. When we moved from Nebraska to Texas, it was time for second grade. The teacher in Thorndale was a huge man who used the chord from windows to keep order, while the teacher in Nebraska, Miss Kaiser, had been sweet and lovely. I was also timid as usual, so I did not go to school voluntarily. It was Mother's task to escort me in the morning and at noon until I realized the futility of resistance. When I got to third grade the next teacher discovered that the class had not learned the multiplication tables, so Mother worked with me through that agony. And she also helped me with German and with memory work.

The worst punishment I ever received from her was the deprivation of the Lone Ranger radio program for several weeks. It was on for thirty minutes every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I cannot remember any physical punishment from her. On one occasion I was outside and she was on the back porch and I did or said something that irritated her. She grabbed the nearest thing, which happened to be a baseball bat, and came after me. By that time I was bigger than she, and the sight of this frail woman coming after me with a bat was so funny that I collapsed in laughter.

For Mother, her reason for being on this earth was completed in 1950 when I left for college. My sister had a husband to look after her, my brother had joined the Air Force, so she let Jesus know that she was ready. But her time was not God's time, and she remained earth-bound for another twenty-three years. Finally the doctor reported that he had found cancer. Without hesitation, Mother decided against any therapy. In her mind she was too frail for the treatments and why should she go through the pain and expense for a few more months on earth. When I

suggested that modern medicine could now cure the cancer she suggested that I should time my visit to coincide with her doctor's appointment. The doctor examined her and then as Mother lay on the table, the doctor displayed the X-ray negatives showing the spread of cancer. When he finished, there was silence as my throat tightened and tears began to well up. Instead of the comforting voice I had always heard, I now heard Mother say in a clinical voice, "Well, George, do you have any questions?" She died a few months later—at home, on her bed, in Texas, after she and Dad had read their German daily devotions.

I always felt that distance between Texas and Illinois and my occupation had deprived me of being with Mother during her last days. A number of years later, Aggie, the woman across the street, lost her husband. Aggie was a front porch sitter and often on my way home after class I joined her and Bob. She was almost the opposite of Mother: profane, attended church only for funerals and weddings, and kept her hairdresser appointment each week. During the years of Aggie's widowhood I helped her by doing things around the house so she could remain in familiar surroundings. It was therapeutic for me and her Italian food more than compensated me for my efforts.

Emma was buried in a commercial cemetery on the outskirts of Stephenville. We had never discussed the place for burial because I assumed that she would be buried in the church cemetery in Aleman where her parents and so many of her relatives were buried. But I think that she and Dad did not want to inconvenience anyone and therefore bought a pre-planned funeral package. And, I suspect, she thought that issue was not important—what mattered was the way she lived her life.