

Carousel ride for mom during Depression

Written by Barb Franzen
Friday, 16 May 2014 14:24 -

Story takes place during Gothenburg's Harvest Festival

Editor's Note: Gothenburg resident and author Barb Franzen wrote this story for a magazine for Mother's Day. The story was told to her by local resident Ruth Wahlgren (in the story) who has since died.

Although the Great Depression was in full swing, inhabitants of the small prairie town flocked to the annual Harvest Festival.

The activities, though fewer in number, served as a distraction from everyday stagnation.

Lily Aunspaugh and her five children, two boys and three girls, were among those present. Starting that morning, from curb-side seats, they watched the parade on Main Street—marching bands, horses, a fire truck, floats, and a special treat, tossed candy. What a breath of fresh sunshine, considering the hard times.

When the parade ended, Lily and her neighbors picnicked in the park, managing more than a meager amount of fried chicken, rolls, pies, chatter, and laughter.

Next, Lily took her kids for a walk to admire the "drought affected" corn stalks and pumpkins along the streets. The downtown festivities would wait until later. Little Verna, at age 2, needed her nap, and Lily had work to get done. Husband George's job would keep him from joining them.

Later on, towards dusk, Lily's eyes turned to worry. Reaching up to a shelf, she clasped her fingers around a coin, a dime that George had handed her that morning.

"Lily," he'd said, "I saved something. I want the children to have a good time."

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Lily frowned. What good was a dime with five kids?

Gathering baby Verna in her arms, Lily and her children made their way downtown to the carnival and displays.

On arriving, Lily said, "Kids, with money as scarce as it is, our enjoyment must come from watching the crowds and viewing the various events. Try to understand."

Nine-year-old Ruth, the second oldest, nodded, while Tot, who was 5, whined, but not for long. Intrigued, he ran off to watch the men banging the hammer down. William, 11 and the oldest, had already taken off. He was over by the eerie diggers, watching as young fellows worked the drag lines in hopes of winning a bronze horse. Shirley, age 7, disappointed about the money, asked for a candy apple. Hoping to distract her little sister, Ruth pointed towards some chalk prizes.

"Look Shirley," Ruth said.

People were lined up, tossing darts in attempts to win the chalk animals.

Lily offered a wan smile. Her precious children did understand, after all. But for land sake, she thought. The way some of them were spending would arouse want and longing in any child. Sighing, Lily fingered the dime. It would be best to keep it hidden. But, if she did, George would be disappointed. Yet, how could he think that a dime would appease five children?

Hugging Verna close, Lily viewed the quilts and the painted china. By then, 8:30 p.m. had rolled around. It was time to head home. However, the coin was still in her pocket. She couldn't give one child a ride over another. Would life ever get easier? And why was she always the one in charge of decisions?

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“Five kids and a dime,” she muttered, wishing someone had the answer.

Just then, Ruth walked up.

“Mother, do you want me to hold Verna?” she asked.

“No. No I don’t. I want something else,” Lily said a bit brighter.

On seeing Ruth, an idea had emerged. Pulling her close, Lily explained.

“Ruth, the answer is beyond me. Get the kids and decide how this dime is to be spent. You’re going to need a miracle. They’re hard to find in these difficult times. ”

Undaunted, Ruth called her siblings together. With their arms linked, they stood in a circle talking. Less than a minute later, they looked up.

“Mother,” Ruth said, stepping forward. “We want Verna to ride the carousel. It will be her first time. We can hardly wait to see her face. And Mother, we chose you go with her. You deserve this.”

While Ruth spoke, the others nodded.

As the colorful horses pumped up and down to the music and tiny Verna laughed, Lily looked out.

There stood her children, their faces exalted. Wiping a tear, Lily realized that George was right.

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Indeed, a dime was plenty. One never knows, she thought.

Author's note: Before the end of the Depression, another child, Janet, would be born, and George would pass on.