

III. THE HOUSE

My first memory of our original home was its purchase. What made this occasion memorable for me was the fact that Mrs. Della Bradstrum, the dealer, promoted the sale by offering me, at the age of four, an enticing piece of candy. (Mother and Mrs. Bradstrum were acquaintances throughout many long years, but they certainly were never friends.)

The house was rectangular and contained, in sequence, a living room, a dining room, and an obtrusive back room, awkwardly extending out towards the outhouse. This extension was the butt of many neighborhood jokes. Much use, however, was made of the extension. Here it was that Mother used her manual Singer sewing machine. It was in this room that Dorothy and I had our instrumental music lessons and practice sessions.

To the right of these three rooms and facing the front door was the varnished stairway. These steps were a very precious play area for us two children.

Upstairs was the hall extending from right to left. The store room to the right was designed for guests. The small room at the left of the hall was intended for a future bathroom. There were two bedrooms on either side of the hall.

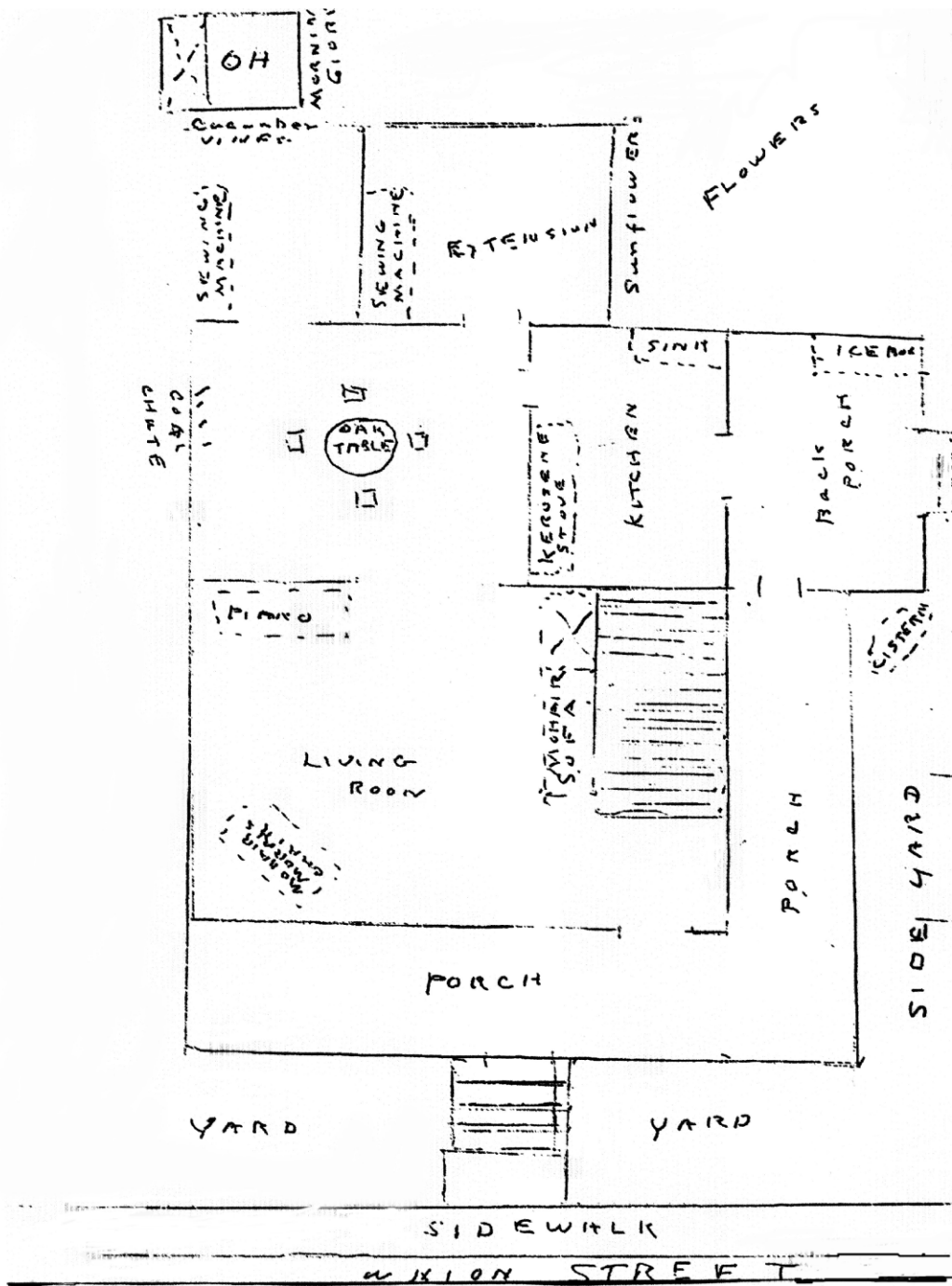


Recent photograph of the Smith home

Early on, the living room held two Mohair pieces--a Morris chair and a sofa with a left-hand head piece. Although these two items were hideously styled, there is a possibility that today they might be collector's items. The living room also included an upright piano which was placed against the back wall. Thanks to Mother it was used many hours each week.

The dining room was the center of the family's activities. The usual round oak table was placed in the center of the floor. When electricity came in, a really lovely chandelier of glowing colors hung over it. In addition, the dining room contained Mother's pretty little desk which was placed near the window. Mother allowed me to use this precious piece of furniture many, many times. There must have also been some kind of a china cabinet, for Mother owned several nice pieces of decorative chinaware. The kitchen contained a kerosene stove and a sink with a soft water pump. And near the sink there was also a drinking water pail which contained the communal water dipper. To complete the picture, a roller towel was attached to the wall.

The house boasted of a narrow front porch which made a right angle to become the side porch. Until Mother decided to use this porch for sleeping, it made a very satisfactory play area for all the neighborhood children.



Here it was that we had our annual ice cream ritual. From some unknown place Mother hauled out the hand ice cream freezer and then proceeded to make a rich custard ice cream mix. In addition, Mother had to chop up a block of ice from the icebox. The mix was placed inside a container which fitted inside the freezer and the salter ice was placed around this container.

All of the children of the neighborhood willingly helped with the hand freezing for they knew from experience what to expect. Although there were many willing hands, the process of turning the hand crank seemed interminable. We could hardly wait until we approached the final turn when we could turn no more. At this present time, I can still recollect the sight and taste of this non-commercial delicacy.

For a few years we were forced to endure the backyard sanitary facility; but our parents did conceive the idea of utilizing cucumber and morning glory vines as partial camouflage. Mother must have had a way with garden flowers, for I can remember the brilliant colors of the tall sunflowers and hollyhocks and other smaller plants such as cosmos and phlox.

Dad's principal contribution towards landscaping was a row of catalpa trees along the front sidewalk and another row of shorter mulberry trees along the side. Both groups of trees really annoyed the neighbors. The catalpas had flowers and pods for pedestrians to contend with, and the mulberries not only caught unwary heads, but presented a squashy carpet at fruit time.



Marion on the steps of her front porch in 1924, just after her first permanent

IV. THE AMENITIES

My family, in all probability, had whatever amenities were available at the time. Grand Rapids enjoyed electricity, plumbing, and the telephone several years before they were introduced to Sparta.

In my early years the family used kerosene for lighting and kerosene oil for cooking, and Mother's flatirons had to be constantly heated on the stove.

The obtaining of water presented problems. There was fortunately an outdoor cistern adjacent to the kitchen, and by means of the kitchen pump soft rain water came up from this cistern. For drinking water, Dad had made an arrangement with Mrs. Starch, a side-street neighbor, to have the use of her yard well. Accordingly, each noon hour, Dad, perhaps accompanied by one or two children, made his daily trek to the well.

Doing the weekly family wash was anything but a pleasurable occupation. Sunday night was delegated to setting out the wringer apparatus, the two tubs, and the boiler. The boiler was placed on the stove and the tubs on either side of the wringer. It was Dad's job to fill the tubs and boiler from the kitchen pump; in the meantime, Mother must have sorted the clothes and other items to be washed, reserving for the boiler any special pieces which needed extra attention.

Monday's routine must have followed fairly much this pattern:

Step 1: The first tub was used for hand scrubbing. Of help was some kind of soap, a scrub brush, and a scrub board.

Step 2: The hand wringer was used both for wringing and to provide a means for getting the clothes into the second tub.

Step 3: The wringer was again put to use for the dropping of the clothes into the waiting laundry basket.

Step 4: Finally there was the hanging up of the clothes. Presumably the lines had already been strung out. Of course, there was always a problem if the weather was inclement!

But, knowing Mother, I am sure she coped.

My family did have one "modern" feature, however. There was a coal-burning furnace in the basement, and a coal chute was located on the right-hand side of the house. Each fall the local dealer poured the requisite number of tons of coal down this chute.

The back porch contained an ice box. Both ice and milk were provided by house-to-house delivery service. The ice man used a horse and wagon, and, of course, delivered only in the summer. The milk man used a horse driven wagon or sleigh according to the season.

At one time, Uncle Fred delivered milk locally. I vividly remember him coming down our front sidewalk by horse and sleigh with various containers of milk bottles. We children did not have to receive a second invitation to jump aboard!

The ice came from a nearby lake, probably either Camp Lake or Sand Lake. Each winter, after the water was frozen the required number of inches, ice from the lake was broken up into blocks. These blocks, in turn, were carried away, naturally by sleigh, and stored in sawdust, awaiting the summer season. Mother placed an ice card in the window of the back



Lillian trimming the hair
of her cousin Alice Potts

porch which indicated the amount of ice needed on a particular day. Eventually, the eagerly awaited modern conveniences arrived, one by one. The new telephone was placed on the wall. Mother, however, was hesitant to put it to much use. Apparently there was a gossip-hungry exchange operator. In due time, running city water became available. I have no recollection of the kitchen sink being modernized. But, it was a great day when the bathroom fixtures, including a claw-footed tub, arrived. Previously we must have used the laundry tubs for the bathing ritual!

An electric stove was, at last, installed. The Bissell carpet sweeper was replaced by some kind of electric sweeper.

As I recall, electric laundry facilities came in a little late. When the modern washer eventually made its appearance, no housewife in the entire country should have resented the probably huge fortune made by the Bendix Company. I have no recollection of Mother's first primitive electric washer or electric iron. The

acquisition of those two items must have made her domestic life much less arduous. Perhaps, for the first time, Mother began to have a little hope that she might augment the family's income by joining Dad at the store.

V. THE STORE

The family store was located at the corner of Union and Centennial Streets, facing the latter street. The Sparta State Bank was located diagonally from the store, and there was a vacant lot directly opposite.

The store was heated by a coal-burning furnace in the basement and boasted of three large rooms. Three departments were located in the first room. On the left were the shoe and meat departments, and on the right were the shelves of groceries.

The second large room held, at the front, the men's clothing department. At the back was a raised platform where Dad reigned supreme. Here he was able to supervise the activities of the store. Here too the book keeping was conducted. The store had a trolley system which carried containers back and forth from the salespersons to the office. These containers held the sales slips.

As time went on, the third large room became Mother's domain. She sold dry goods, lingerie, and the like in the front of the room. Ladies' and children's millinery and ready-to-wear were located at the back. Mother was much beloved by her customers from the country who relied upon her choice of patterns, yard goods, and ready-to-wear.

Mother had her work cut out for her. She not only had to compete with the mail order catalog business, but also with the fascinating large department stores in Grand Rapids.

A large part of Dad's success was his doing much of the business on a charge account basis. He allowed many of his customers to run up relatively large bills. He seemed to know when to draw the line. I remember hearing the word "garnishee" many times in my childhood.

So far as his employees were concerned, Dad tried to be fair. Each Saturday night he had the book keeper draw out of the till a certain amount for himself – I remember it was in the amount of thirty-five dollars – and proportionate amounts for the help. (Dad allowed himself two weeks' vacation time and his employees one!)



Dorothy, Lillian, Marion, and "Mike" in the summer of 1925 in front of a house located behind Erastus' store

In a spirit of good will and self esteem, Dad, on several occasions, took his employees and their families on various excursions and trips. The first two trips were educational. The first was to the Gerber Baby Food plant at Fremont north of Sparta. The second trip was to a silk mill at Belding thirty or forty miles east. Concluding the latter event, Dad had the entire entourage stop somewhere along the way and then provided ice cream concoctions for everyone.

At one time Dad carefully planned and executed a dinner engagement for all his employees and their spouses at Reed's Lake near Grand Rapids. The plans for the evening included an elegant menu, featuring filet mignon, followed by a vaudeville show. Whether or not the latter appeared amusing to the guests, Dad, in any event, got his money's worth.

Dad's most ambitious project was an overnight Labor Day trip to what is now Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore near Traverse City over a hundred miles north. I remember very little about this elaborately planned trip except that it rained all the way up. Beautiful baskets of fruit were waiting at a fruit stand ready to be picked up by each car. Everyone seemed to have had a marvelous time trying to climb Sleeping Bear Sand Dune.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, his exhibitionistic largesse, Dad was thoroughly resented by the store employees. He did, however, try to be fair according to his own sense of justice. Provided the employees were honest and did what they were asked to do, both Dad and Mother did care about them and their families.