

The Story of My life

Helen Zacek Gundlach

I, Helen Rose Zacek, was born on February 21, 1920, in Chicago, Illinois. My parents were Rudolph and Bessie Zacek. My dad came from Czechoslovakia to Chicago in July, 1903, when he was 17 years old. My mother, Bessie Strejc, was born in Chicago in 1889. My mother's parents had a grocery store in Chicago; my mom worked in the store. My dad became a tailor by trade. We lived at 2637 Lawndale Ave. in the upper flat of a two-story house. At that time I had one brother, Rudy, and two sisters, Bessie and Val. I never went to school in Chicago.

My mother's parents, Joseph and Katharine Strejc, had moved about 1921 to a farm at English Lake. My dad drove us out to English Lake on the weekends. My dad wanted to be a farmer, so our family moved to a farm north of San Pierre in 1924.

My first and second grade teacher at San Pierre was Mrs. Gilmore. I liked school. My big brother, Rudy, was in high school and was a basketball player. So I had my picture taken on the steps of the schoolhouse with his coach, Mr. Ingwell, who later became Dr. Ingwell. I was very proud of that.

We all worked hard on the farm. We had a big garden, a pickle patch, and lots of chickens to take care of. Dad also had pigs, cows, and horses. When I got older, I milked lots of cows and worked in the fields driving horses in front of the plow and harrow. I helped Dad shuck corn by hand when I wasn't in school.

Our neighbors, the Dusts, used to take my sister, Val, and me to Sunday School at San Pierre. There were six of us in their Model T Ford. When the Dusts stayed for German services, they let us kids walk around town and get ice cream. I was in the church programs at Christmas time. I always sang a solo with a doll.

On July 19, 1927, my sister, Val, and I, and our neighbors, Wanita and Lester, went out in the woods to pick wild huckleberries. It was a hot day. When we got back to the house, we had a little baby brother! That was my younger brother, George. We sure were surprised. The stork had paid a visit to our farm.

In 1929, the "Great Depression" hit our country. I was just nine years old, so I didn't understand things too well. The banks went under. Lots of people lost their money. Things got rough on the farm. All the farm produce prices went way down. My dad got 35 cents for a bushel of corn. Hog prices were about 5 to 6 cents a pound. Many people were on welfare. I don't think we were as we owned our farm. We had food from the farm to put on the table. My parents had a hard time paying for groceries at Dolezal's store in San Pierre. Our neighbor, August Dust, was the trustee of Railroad Township. Whenever there was coal car to be unloaded for the school, he gave the job to my dad and my brother, Rudy. We girls didn't have new clothes for school, but my mother was a good seamstress. My aunts and friends from Chicago brought us clothes which Mom made over for us.

When I was about ten years old, my parents let me take piano lessons, for which I am very grateful. I started at school, and my teacher was Mildred Lotton. After she left, I went to a lady in town, Mrs. Ralph Kingman.

My third and fourth grade teacher was Dora Batzka. My fifth and sixth grade teacher was Herretta Daly. I used to work for her during the summer months cleaning house.

One winter we had a blizzard, and there was no school. The roads were drifted and blocked. Our animals needed feed, so Dad and I went to town, 2-1/2 miles, with the sled and two horses. I thought that was fun as we had put the jingle bells on the horses' harness. I was froze when we got home.

My first male teacher was Orlyn Clauson in the seventh and eighth grade. In June of 1933, I graduated from the eighth grade. The graduation ceremony was at the county seat, Knox. I got my first permanent for this occasion and a new white dress. Aunt Millie, from Chicago, paid for my permanent. My Aunt Rose was good to me, too. I used to spend summer vacations with them in Chicago. They took me to see my first big circus.

I went to high school at San Pierre where I had gone for my first eight years of school. When I was a freshman, my sister, Val, was a senior. I had a lot of fun in school. I belonged to the Girls' Glee Club. We sang for programs and also had parties at the school gym. In my junior and senior year, I was a cheerleader with my girlfriend, Lois Brown, at the basketball games. I was treasurer of the Athletic Association. My brother, Rudy, drove the school bus, so I got to go to the games.

During the summer, to earn some money, I picked strawberries for two cents a quart at Cervenka's. My sister-in-law, Dorothy Vanecek, and her sister, Micky, rode with me in Dad's GMC pickup after I got my license. Before that, we rode our bikes five miles up and five miles back. We also cleaned ducks and turkeys before the holidays working for Jim Chesak.

My mom, Bessie Zacek, picked a whole truckload of lilacs and sold them to some people who had driven out from Chicago. They took them back and sold them as fresh flowers. She was paid \$7.00 for the flowers. Mom gave me the money to pay for my class ring.

In April of 1937 I graduated with eleven other classmates. We had seven girls and five boys. In my four years of high school, I had the same four teachers. Our principal was Mr. McCauley, and we had Ralph Richardson, Grace Jones, and Marcella Fawcett. Mr. Richardson was my favorite. He was the basketball coach but also taught physical education and social studies.

After graduation I helped my parents on the farm. I did go out to do housework once in a while for \$5.00 a week. I worked one month in Chicago doing housework and then came back home to help my dad on the farm.

In my senior year on January 19, 1937, I met my future husband, Milton Gundlach. We became engaged on Christmas of 1938. The following year at Christmas, we were married in San Pierre in the parsonage. My sister, Val, and Milton's brother, Bill, stood up for us. We left on a honeymoon for Blue

Island, Illinois, where we were both going to work in Bill's "Royal Blue" store. Milton was a butcher. We got \$15.00 a week and free rent in the back of the store. We lived there three months and then came back to Indiana where Milton was going to work for Art Gumz. In 1940 we lived in George Podell's house for a year. We had no electricity, so I had a wooden washing machine for clothes which was rocked back and forth like a cradle.

On December 7, 1941, World War II was started at Pearl Harbor. We were married just two years, and our son, Ron, was one year old. We lived in a rented house in San Pierre where we paid \$10.00 a month. Milton was working for Art Gumz. All the young men were leaving to fight in the war. They needed men on the farms, too; so Milton and his brother, Melvin, were able to stay home to farm. Lots of people worked at the Kingsbury Ordinance Plant at LaPorte making ammunition and supplies for the army. Gas was rationed, and you were allowed just so much according to the sticker you got for your car. You got more gas if you drove to work. Sugar and coffee were rationed, too. My brother, Rudy, was in the army in Australia. Brother George went later, and he was in the Panama Canal Zone. Thank goodness they both came back home.

Our first little girl was born in 1942 and died in 1943 from whooping cough. That was heartbreaking to lose a three-month old baby. Her name was Judy, but we were fortunate. Along came Betty, our second girl, in 1945. Three years later we had Nancy. We were blessed with a nice family.

Milton worked hard on the farm and also drove semi-truck, hauling potatoes and onions. When we farmed on shares for Art, we had teen-aged girls working with us out in the fields weeding mint. We took these girls roller skating for a treat.

In December of 1954 we moved to North Judson and lived there four months. Then we moved to a farm near Wanatah in 1955. We bought the farm in 1956, and the kids got their first pony, Lucky.

In January of 1960 I started working at Engel's grocery store in Wanatah. I worked there for fourteen years. Milton quit his factory job in Valparaiso and stayed home to farm. I have to say here, how the wages have changed in my life. Back in 1937 I topped onions for Bill Gehring and got fifteen cents an hour. Or maybe we were paid by the crate. I also worked on the potato grader and weighed potatoes in ten-pound bags. We picked strawberries for two cents a quart. Dorothy and I worked in the mint field for the "Gundlach Brothers" and got sixty cents an hour. When I started at Engels' store, I got \$1.00 per hour and quit fourteen years later with \$1.75. I worked at Sheelys' in LaCrosse for 2-1/2 years. I started at \$2.00 per hour and got \$2.20 when I retired at the end of 1977.

In 1975 I bought my first organ, a Hammond Sounder. Since then, I have had two Kimball organs and now have a beautiful, big Hammond organ. I love to play the organ and make music!

In July of 1981 a tornado struck and demolished our machine shed. We were lucky to be alive. After that, we had an auction sale, sold out and moved to Walkerton.

I am living now in LaCrosse where I am near my daughters. My hobbies over the years have been camping in our motor home, bike riding, swimming, sewing, walking, and making music on the organ. I will celebrate my 90th birthday on February 21 with my family and friends.