

An Unusual Beginning

By Karla Van Drie about her mother Gladys Van Drie

My mother's father was a cowboy. Lee Allison was respected throughout western South Dakota for his incredible "horse sense." His wife, Gladys, died after giving birth to my mom and her twin brother in May of 1936. Lee's sons think the local veterinarian who attended the birth may have given their mom Gladys the wrong medicine. She hemorrhaged to death. There was no way Lee could raise the newborn twins along with their seven brothers and sisters.

A childless couple on vacation in western South Dakota were told this sad story by their hosts and heard that the newborns and seven other children were all going to be put up for adoption. They immediately went to visit Mr. Allison to see if they could adopt the newborns. Many other couples wanted just the boy or just the girl. Gerrit and Johanna Vander Wolde were willing to accept the twins together. Because of this, Lee picked the Vander Woldes to take the twins and they went home with Gerrit and Johanna Vander Wolde when they were six days old.

Even on his death bed, Lee talked about what a traumatic decision that was. He was very nervous meeting my adult mother for the first time, wondering "What is she going to think... me giving her away?" He shouldn't have worried. My mom thought her adoption was the greatest possible act of love.

Gladys did not meet her father, brothers and sisters until she was an adult. Her adoptive parents connected them together. It took ten years to meet all of them.

Her new parents, the Vander Woldes, lived in Colton, South Dakota, where Gerrit was serving the Reformed church. During the course of Gerrit's career as a pastor, my mother Gladys also lived in Doon, Iowa, Melvin, Iowa, Cochrane, Alberta, and Amherst, South Dakota.

Gladys liked living in the Canada Rockies best because you had to make your own fun. She describes it as very much like a Laura Ingalls Wilder childhood. She and her friends often went ice skating on local ponds and played crack-the-whip. In the summer, they would pick Saskatoon berries to make Saskatoon jam and pie. Another highlight was going to Banff National Park in Banff, Alberta.

Cochrane, Alberta was a settlement of first generation Dutch people. Gerrit would often preach one sermon in Dutch, the next one in English. Many of the first generation Dutch people there lived in sod houses. When I was a child, my mother and father took us to the little church in Cochrane to hear the last sermon ever delivered there. It was interesting to see these Dutch immigrant families, now on their third generation, living so prosperously twenty to thirty years after their sod hut beginnings.

My mom and dad knew each other from attending the same church together as children in Melvin, Iowa. In 1958, my mom happened to be visiting a college friend at Iowa State and stopped in my father's fledgling downtown Ames, Iowa, store to say hi. He asked her out and she knew on their very first date she was going to marry him. That was in February and they were married in August.

My mom supported my father as a teacher while he started his next business. He grew the *Ames Advertiser* and *Boone Shopping News* into very successful free community papers that were nationally recognized on a consistent basis by peers in the industry.

My mom was the quintessential “woman behind the man,” helping my father launch his political career and seeing him win every single one of his elections in the Iowa House and Senate. My favorite saying of my mother’s about her marriage and her husband was “I respected him more each day I knew him.”

She was a terrific mother. She taught us to be lifelong learners, politically active, and globally aware. One of the most wonderful things about my mom is that she is a hopeless sap. Even she laughs about it, saying she could cry over a treasurer’s report. She passed it on and now my sister, my children, and I are all proud, hopeless saps too.

My mom was famous for the lunches she would make us as children, especially her homemade malts. Kids I grew up with still talk about those malts. She took enormous pride in her home and in setting a beautiful table that silently communicated to all present how much she cared for them.

Her husband, Rudy, died suddenly and unexpectedly on the tennis court at age 45 of a heart attack.

Gladys was left a widow at age 40 with two teenage daughters to finish raising to adulthood. The way my mother handled this challenge is a well-known story in Ames. In 1977, when all women were just starting to really enter the workforce, my mother stepped in and took over running my father’s businesses without any prior paid work experience since being a teacher fifteen years earlier.

To say she was successful is an understatement. My mother tripled the revenues, became national president of her trade association, was elected to the Ames city council, and eventually sold the family business to a regional chain of newspapers headed by NBC News President Michael Gartner.

Believing that moving makes you grow, my mom followed her heart back to the mountains—settling into retirement first in Monument, Colorado, and how presently in Estes Park, Colorado. She serves on the Estes Park Hospital Board of Trustees and the local Rotary Foundation Board. She is cherished and active with many new and old friends who delight in her table, her warmth, and her conversations to this day.

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