

Memories of Bertha Groot née Vanden Born

Bertha Groot was my sister, my only sister, and I loved her. Probably not so much when I was very young; then she was just there. I was second in line in the family, and not that much younger than Bertha, so in many ways she and I grew up side by side, and I have known her for almost her entire long life.

Even so, unfortunately, I have very few memories of Bertha's growing-up and school years. We walked to and from the same elementary school and were even in the same class one year, but I have no memories of that at all. She was a girl, and she had a friend, daughter of the only other family in the village that attended the same church we did. My playmates were my younger brother and a couple of boys down the street.

After Grade 6, Bertha went to the equivalent of Junior High for a couple of years and then went off to a Home Ec boarding school. I did not see much of her then because she was home only on some weekends, and during almost that entire time I was boarded out to go to high school 20 kilometers away. Contact with Bertha, therefore, was quite limited.

I do know that when our family's emigration plans took shape, and after we were actually told about those plans, Bertha was enrolled in English classes for some time. In May 1949 we left for Canada and settled on the farm in Busby, where Bertha was the one who helped our mother in the house while the rest of us slowly learned what farm work was all about. In the fall, I was sent off to work for a farmer a few miles away and when I came back from there Bertha was simply gone. Our Dad had found her a job in Edmonton, because our family needed money badly. Bertha had just turned 18, she knew a little bit of English, and she worked as a maid, in a place where she was really treated as just the maid. Not nice.

Bertha was very frugal then, called herself stingy, and sent most of her earnings home to our parents. She has told us that what saved her was the fact that a lady for whom she had done some ironing and sewing, took an interest in her, took her to the library, got her a library card, and introduced her to the librarian who then helped her often with books that she was able to handle and from which she could learn.

I don't remember seeing much of Bertha during the next three years. I am sure she came home from time to time but it did not seem to happen very often. After I was shipped off to the big city to go to school in the fall of 1952, things changed and I soon saw a lot of Bertha. She became my go-to person for family contact, and she even was my sole source of money for the first four months of my university time. At the time, she and a friend worked as cooks and housekeepers in the Delta Upsilon frat house, a building that is now Rutherford House on the university

campus. It appears that she was even a bit naughty sometimes, as in when she and her partner made a nice chocolate cake for the student residents and laced the cake with Ex-Lax.

When Bertha's friend moved away in December, I was offered a job as her assistant for the next four months, in exchange for free room and board. I had to help her with the dishes every night and also with changing the beds on the top floor dormitory on Saturdays.

During the next few years Bertha worked her way through several different jobs, from working the night shift making wieners at a packing plant to working at a bank. The places where she lived during that time, both before and after she married Bill, were in many ways my home away from home for the next six years. Bertha even persuaded me to join her in singing in what was then the Edmonton Mendelssohn Choir for three or four years, even if I did not know a bass from a tenor when I started. She sang in the alto section.

When Bill Groot became part of the scene, the trips to Busby changed because he had a car, a nice new car at that. On the return trip from one of those visits to Busby, Bill asked me to take over the driving when we reached the pavement at Legal Corner, while he moved over and put his arm around Bertha. It was dark and I kept my eyes on the road.

One of Jack's memories from those visits to Busby is the tender farewell kiss Bertha shared with our mother each time before heading back to Edmonton. The other is the fact that Bill had season tickets to the Eskimos football games. That was really something for a 10- or 11-year-old.

After Bertha and Bill got married, and I was slowly getting acquainted with Dixie, we spent many a pleasant Sunday afternoon at the Groot house on Fort Road, where Bertha always was a fine and gracious hostess.

Fast forward twenty years to the time when Dixie and I traveled with Bertha and Bill to far away places several times. They were always great travel companions and we have wonderful memories of those trips. The same is true for the many dinner dates and lunch outings we enjoyed over the years, always fine occasions for conversation and for staying in touch with each other's lives and families.

Bertha was my sister, my only sister, and I loved her.

William Vanden Born, with help from Jack Vanden Born
10 September 2021