

## Harriet Wierenga (née Westra)

In celebration of her 80th birthday

April 10, 1996

by Ann Vanden Born

So much has happened in the world since April 10, 1916, the day my grandmother took her first breath in Randolph, Wisconsin. How many of us will experience 80 years of life with the calm and gentle manner of this woman from the U.S.?

Born the fourth child of eight, to Dutch immigrants who took up dairy farming in the lush Wisconsin countryside, Grandma arrived in this world the same year that the Battle of Verdun claimed 350,000 lives in World War I. Ford's Model T was getting 20 miles to the gallon. But there was no Model T in the Westra farmyard. There would be only horse and buggy for many years to come. Running water, electricity and indoor plumbing were other conveniences that the Westras would also have to wait for.

It must have been a busy household. Eight children to care for, cows to milk, cream to separate, milk to ship, black currants and red currants to pick, corn to harvest, laundry to do (in the double wooden washing tub), church to attend. Was my grandmother a good child? Probably. She doesn't like to talk about herself much. The year Grandma turned one was the year that the U.S. started using their new recruitment poster: "Uncle Sam wants you". Many of the boys from Randolph were spared from service during both World Wars because the country depended on the farmers. But did those boys, boys like Uncle Andrew, Grandma's oldest brother, play hockey on the pond. Did they dream of playing in the NHL like boys do today? Did they even know that the NHL had just been formed?

In 1918 Grandma was a toddler, climbing and talking with the enthusiasm of any two-year-old. It was the year the Raggedy Ann doll was introduced. I doubt if Grandma had one. Were the rages and crazes of the early 1900's any different from those of the 1990's or are children today so different? Many more events took place in the world before Grandma entered school in 1922. A flu epidemic claimed 21 million lives; the Treaty of Versailles was signed; dial telephones were introduced; prohibition started; and Babe Ruth signed with the Yankees. The events that most of us know only from the history books took place in Grandma's lifetime. And although she may not remember them, although she was but a child, she was alive during some pivotal moments in world history.

It was time to get some schooling. "Nobody went to high school in those days", Grandma tells me after relating that she left school after grade eight. "My teachers tried to get me interested in high school". Grandma reflects, "but I knew my parents wouldn't let me go." Like with other events in her life there is neither anger nor bitterness as she tells the story. So, after leaving school, she began some four or five years of helping out on the farm, singing "When the Moon Comes Over the Mountain" at the top of her lungs when coming into the house after milking. There was catechism and Young People's. There was the radio for entertainment and the Milwaukee Journal for information. And in the world, not far from Wisconsin, "Pretty Boy" Floyd was making a name for himself as a bank robber in the American midwest. Al Capone was heavily involved in bootlegging liquor in Chicago. Such crime and corruptness was far from the quiet life on a Wisconsin dairy farm. But was Grandma dancing the new dance, the Charleston, in the barn late at night?

Did she listen to the Grand Ole Opry? Did she celebrate when Charles Lindbergh landed the "Spirit of St. Louis" in a Paris airfield? Did she get a copy of *Little House in the Big Woods* by Laura Ingalls Wilder when it was published in 1932?

Soon Grandma wouldn't have as much time to think about world events. An older man at church kept asking if he could take her home after Young People's. This Dutch immigrant, Herman Wierenga, was alone in the U.S. The rest of his family was in Neerlandia, Alberta. Herman liked to read. He liked to talk about Holland. Once, Grandma tells me, he wrote an essay for her to read at Young People's. That part was fine. But answering the questions people asked her afterwards was more challenging. He was a man of strong character and convictions, this Herman Wierenga. Soon he had convinced Grandma to marry him. On September 26, 1934 they married under a flowered archway in the living room of the Westra home. The next morning there were cows to be milked on the land the young couple now farmed together. There was no honeymoon.

It was the Depression but there was work to be done and children to be born. The first child, Edigna (the woman we all call Dixie or Mom), arrived in August of 1935, born in the hospital. It was the same year the Dionne quintuplets were born. I'm sure Grandma was glad there was only one child, not five. The doctor told Grandma she was lucky she was young because her bones were more flexible. There weren't any prenatal classes in the 1930s nor was Grandpa allowed in the delivery room. He must have been there, though, when Andrew was born at the farmhouse in 1937 and Gladys in 1940.

By now World War II was occupying much of the world's attention. And Grandma had her first taste of Canada. In 1938, the young couple, their children Dixie and Andrew, and Grandma's parents drove through the Black Hills, Yellowstone Park, Wyoming, and passed by the Great Divide on their way to Neerlandia, Alberta. Was it an exciting time for Grandma? What did she think of Neerlandia and the Dutch community there. These immigrants certainly had closer ties to Holland than the people in Randolph. And all those Wierengas! Did it take Grandma a long time to keep them all straight?

The next time the family made the trip north, in May 1942, it was for good. Two adults and three children immigrated from the U.S. to Canada, not the usual direction. But Grandpa wanted his own farm, something that was easier to attain in northern Alberta than in Wisconsin. It was wartime but, once again, life in a farming community offered more protection than living in the city. The attack on Pearl Harbour, the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, were events far from the Canadian prairies. Grandma does remember needing coupons for coffee, tea, jam and sugar. She remembers having to go to church with bare legs because nylons weren't available. And "the Neerlandia church was cold", she recalls.

The seven years spent in Neerlandia saw the end of World War II, D-Day, the coining of the word "antibiotic" and the birth of a fourth child, Peter, in the Westlock hospital in 1945. But soon Grandpa offered a new proposal, life in the city. In 1949, the family would sell the farm and move to the city where Grandpa worked as a fieldman for the Dutch immigration society. 1949 was a momentous year in the world as well as in the life of the Wierenga family. East and West Germany were established. South Africa imposed apartheid. George Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Were these events viewed as momentous in 1949 or is it only in retrospect that we see their significance?

The kids, as Grandma recalls, were glad to move to the city. Running water and indoor plumbing were just two of the luxuries Edmonton afforded them. And in 1950, into this new world of more modern conveniences, a fifth child, Jean, was born. 1950 was

the year Smokey the Bear became a symbol for forest fire prevention. A little brother, Herman, made his entrance in 1952. This time Grandpa, tired of being relegated to the waiting room, insisted on being in the delivery room. As Grandma told me, she wasn't terribly concerned if Grandpa fainted (that being the common notion in those days). "He'll wake up again", she commented. In addition to having two young children in the house again, a polio epidemic was sweeping Canada and the United States. Peter succumbed and after the initial scare, all were grateful that he had experienced only a mild case.

These younger children were not to experience the love of their father for long. It was a dark day on July 3, 1954 when Grandma and Dixie arrived home from grocery shopping to find Reverend Hanenburg at the house. There was terrible news. A car accident had taken the life of the husband she loved. The man who had made her laugh, the man who had made her cry, the man with whom she had had six children and with whom she had moved to another country, would never again lie beside her in bed talking about the day, about their children, about their future. There was so much pain. There was pain for Grandma and pain for her children. The older ones had lost the father they had known and loved; the younger ones had not even had the chance to know their father. To be widowed at 38, to have six children lose their father. It was a difficult time. Dixie and Andrew were very strong, very supportive, Grandma tells me.

Years passed. Grandma would meet with the public trustee to get money for food, clothes and the mortgage. The money came in small amounts and, tiring of constant trips downtown. Grandma requested \$1000.00 from the public trustee. "What for?", he asked. "Oh, for this and that", replied Grandma. She received the large sum she wanted. Life at home continued. Gladys once again was able to do the belly laugh she was famous for. Andrew teased Dixie about anything he could think of. Peter, Herman and Jean went to school. The kids were obedient. They prepared the garden in spring when they were told. They mowed the lawn and shovelled the snow and picked the beans. Each of them carried their grief in their own way.

In 1958 there was a wedding in the family. Dixie married Bill Vanden Born in June of that year and they promptly moved to Ontario so Bill could go to graduate school. By this time, Andrew and Gladys were both at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Grandma recalls that it was hard for her to have her older children so far away. As well, it was hard not to be able to see her first grandchild, Karen, who was born in Ontario, until Karen was a year old.

But few people knew of Grandma's struggles. Her strength is shown in the way she bore her pain, with dignity and faith. She would need more strength in the years to come. Andrew had married Carolyn Steenstra in 1960. And, in 1963, Gladys was to be married as well. The tragedy that took place on August 11, 1963 was to be almost more than Grandma could bear. On that day, a few days before Gladys' wedding day, Andrew, Carolyn and Gladys were killed in a car accident on the way to Neerlandia. Another minister at the house to break the news. Another funeral to attend. Three more burial plots in the Westlawn cemetery to commemorate the lives of her loved ones. Would she ever be happy again, she wondered. A heart shattered once and then shattered three times more. A daughter buried on what was to be a joyous day, her wedding day. A young grandson orphaned. An older daughter whose closest siblings were gone. Younger children who had lost cherished family members. Grandma remembers how it was especially hard on Peter.

The deaths of her son, her daughter, and her daughter-in-law as well as the death of her husband affected the whole community, Grandma tells me. And I have heard that as well. Like the people who can remember where they were when JFK was killed, many people can remember where they were when they heard of the tragedies. Herman, Andrew, Carolyn and Gladys were well known in the community. These were deaths that affected not only those who were living but also those of us either very young or not yet born. The sorrows of Grandma's life carry through the generations as we grieve our losses as well. What would Grandma have been like, we wonder, if there had been no deaths? What would it have been like to see Grandpa and Grandma together? What would family gatherings have been like with more cousins and aunts and uncles?

Still, with children at home. Grandma had to go on living. She sold Avon. She went to church. She took care of Jean and Herman and Peter. She had Bill and Dixie and family over for dinner on Sundays. She watched Mark, Andrew and Carolyn's son, roll down the hill by her house with his cousins, Bill and Dixie's kids, with whom Mark now lived. Did she ever have to wipe the tears from her eyes as she watched young Mark, thinking of the loss of his parents. She tried hard not to let her sorrow spill over into other people's lives. When other couples were celebrating anniversaries, when parents were watching their children marry, even when others were burying their loved ones. Grandma made sure she was "with them" on those occasions, reminding herself that this was not the time to think about her own pain. Another sign of her strength.

In the years after 1963, Grandma saw Peter struggle at school and at university. There was so much anger in her second son. And when he went off to Europe at a young age, she let him go. She had the wisdom to see that he needed something that she could not give him. And when Jean started dating a young shoe salesman from Calgary, Grandma merely asked if Jean liked him rather than worry about his profession. With Grandma's blessing, Jean married Clarence Weening in 1971.

The world, too, was experiencing much exhilaration. Neil Armstrong had taken man's first steps on the moon two years earlier. Television shows like MASH and the Waltons were just starting their runs on TV. Did Grandma ever watch these shows? Did she even have a television?

In 1974, the year Watergate broke and the year Nixon was impeached, Grandma was planning a trip. Peter had returned from Europe the year before with a young woman from Australia. They decided to marry and Grandma made the long trip to Adelaide, South Australia to celebrate Peter's marriage to Anne Liebich. Her son would stay living in Australia but Grandma would never pressure him to return to Canada. Her children's happiness was more important than having them live close to her.

In the 1970s Grandma began making her living as a housekeeper. First for Mr. Allan, cooking his meals, buying his groceries. She had a suite in his house and rented out her own house. Then in 1975 a change. At the age of 59 Grandma starting working in a Catholic parish, cooking meals for the priest and the sister that served the congregation. It was a six day a week job with Thursdays off. It was close to Dixie's house and it was often there that Grandma headed on Thursday nights for dinner. It was a chance to have someone else cook for her. Living close to Dixie also meant it was easier to have Dixie do her hair. That too was a common occurrence. Another common event was a trip to Calgary to see Jean and Clarence and their four children. She would drive to Calgary in her Volkswagen bug on a Wednesday night and return on Thursday night. Did she ever

complain about having to take such short trips or about always working weekends? Probably not.

World events in the 1980s ranged from the repatriation of the Canadian constitution to IBM's introduction of the first personal computer to the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle to the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. Did these events touch Grandma's life? Or are these the events that have played a part in our lives? As you get older do your interests change? Does your focus shift? Grandma, at over 65 years of age, learned new things. She took up painting and weaving. She still weaves regularly today.

The 1980s and 1990s also saw Grandma travel to Ottawa, Ontario to visit Herman and his two children. The trips to Calgary continued, more often by bus now, and there was another trip to Australia to see Peter and Anne and their two children. There was a trip to Holland, and one to Israel. In 1986 Grandma "retired". She stopped working for the priests and moved into an apartment in McQueen. At first, she had to learn to shop for only herself. Eating out was also an initial treat after having spent so many years cooking for herself and other people. But soon she began to long for her own cooking. The years at McQueen were good years. Grandma recalls. She had freedom. She had a little money. She had good friends. She had good health. She had her family.

It is now 1996 and Grandma still has freedom, a little money, good friends, good health and her family. And we, her family and friends, have her. The small apartment in Summit Village is always a good place to stop for some tea and cookies. In the summer there are bedding plants to enjoy on the south-facing porch.

She has lived for 80 years. From World War I to the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Grandma has gone from being a child herself to being a mother, a grandmother and a great-grandmother. The world has changed from a place where communities were strong and offered support and protection to a place where the individual must be more self-reliant. The world has changed from a place where news came via the radio to a world where we have instant pictures from Africa and Asia and Australia. But through it all, Grandma has not changed. Her faith in God, her gentle manner, her acceptance of people with all their shortcomings, her quiet way. She is a constant woman. She is filled with unconditional love. We, as family and friends, are honoured to have her in our lives. Grandma, we love and cherish you!