

## AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Recently my children asked me to write an autobiography, including oft told stories that, in their opinion, should not be lost, and to put into words the wisdom that has been acquired in 75 years. Whether the philosophy I have developed over the years is wisdom is for others to say; but lifetime experiences have developed a few guidelines.

While reading James Michener's "Chesapeake", I came upon the following quotation: "A ship, like a human being, moves best when it is slightly athwart the wind, when it has to keep its sails tight, and attend to its course. Ships, like men, do poorly when the wind is directly behind, pushing them sloppily on their way so that no care is required in steering or in the management of the sails; the wind seems favorable, for it blows in the direction one is heading, but actually it is destructive because it induces a relaxation in tension and skill. What is needed is a wind slightly opposed to the ship, for then tension can be maintained, and juices can flow and ideas can germinate, for ships, like men, respond to challenge." To a large extent, this sums up my general philosophy.

My early upbringing was characterized by the admonition, spoken and implied, "to swim upstream". To run with the crowd, to follow popular opinion was frowned upon. There was within my parents and their ancestors this unwillingness to accept the dictates of the majority. My mother came from Quaker stock who left their birthplaces to testify against slavery. In 1833 William East and his children, with other Friends, left North Carolina and Virginia, where slavery was legal, to take up land in Michigan, a free state. No similar spectacular behavior characterizes my father's family, their origins having been in New Hampshire and Indiana. However the story is told about my great-grandfather McLellan (Andrew) refusing to deed his property to his wife (Alice) in order to avoid the losses incurred in bankruptcy. His associates in the business gave their property to their wives, thereby saving what they had accumulated and leaving little, if anything, for their creditors. The story goes that he was tempted to follow the example of his colleagues but that Grandma-great (Alice) said, "Now, Andrew," and Andrew desisted.

My essentially optimistic disposition stems from a very happy childhood in Auburn, Indiana. I was a daughter well-loved by both her father and mother. My sex was a disappointment to my father, I was told, but he soon forgot my femaleness. I helped him forget by being a "tom boy", which is to say I wanted to do all the

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things boys did, to play their games and to be their equal. Thus I never felt inferior to boys. I was always taught that I was as good as a boy. It was accepted that I preferred reading "Popular Mechanics" to playing with dolls. I'm sure my choice of college major was influenced in part by that attitude.

Growing up in Auburn was happy also because of my association with the Methodist Church. To be sure I have abandoned much of the Methodists' creed, but the love of hymn singing, the interest in foreign places, and the desire to do whatever good I can was certainly taught there. I chuckle about the way I sang a hymn that was used frequently in the Auburn church. It reads "If Jesus goes with me, I'll go anywhere". My limited knowledge about the lot of foreign missionaries---darkest Africa, steamy India, cold and strange Korea---made me unwilling to categorically promise to go anywhere. So whenever we sang the hymn, I stuck in 'MOST anywhere in the appropriate location. To be sure I sang 'Most soto voce. I knew that God heard even thoughts and whispers, so I was confident I'd made my position plain and would be called to go only 'Most anywhere!

Summers were spent at Birch Lake, Michigan from the ages of 4 to 21. This time developed in me an ability to live with myself without companions of my own age. Mother and I spent weeks at the lake alone, with Dad and Grandpa and Grandma East arriving for the weekend. Until Phil was born, when I was almost 10, there were no other children at the cottage, nor were there any neighbor children. I learned to make my own entertainment and to enjoy being alone. The younger generation must realize how simple life at Birch Lake was at that time. No electric power, no radio, no TV, no hi-fi, no telephone, no running water. But there was a lake with a shore line occupied by few cottages. The area was quite isolated. I had my own boat in which I was allowed to go anywhere on the lake. I could swim to my heart's content. I could walk in the woods. I could read, I could daydream. Mother and I, often I alone, had to walk a mile to pick up the mail and to get milk for the table. Groceries were brought in by car on the weekend, but supplemental supplies---that which she'd forgotten or we'd eaten up more quickly than she'd calculated---were available at a store in Williamsville. To get there we rowed to the end of the lake, paddled our boat down the lake's outlet into a mill pond. There we tied the boat, walked up the hill to the store. This would take much of a morning or an afternoon.

The lake offered another thing, too. It was an acquaintance with my family roots. The area around the lake was where William East and the other Quakers had settled in their flight from slavery. Over and over again the stories were told

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about this relative or that. I now know that that time created deep roots for me. Now when I return to the area, even though the cottage is gone and the shore line is filled with buildings, I am able to feel the strength of family as I stand on that ground. It is because of those happy growing years that I am devoted to "Family Row" at Birch Lake Cemetery. It gives me a sense of continuity to know that someday I shall be memorialized in that cemetery where my immediate and not so immediate ancestors are remembered.

Similarly I developed roots in Niles, Michigan, where my maternal grandparents and my paternal grandmother and her two daughters lived. When I was a young adult, I decried the fact that my family spent all holidays in Niles. But there was a positive side to that, I now see. Although I have no childhood memories of Christmas in my parents' home, I had very happy times with the extended family that was to be found in Niles. Christmas was shared with my mother's brother and his family (uncle Bi, aunt Norma, Jane and Dick). Aunt Norma's family lived in Niles also. It is that family, the Schmidts, to whom I refer as the extended family, as well as my father's siblings and mother. My Grandmother East, in whose house we headquartered on holidays, had an expression fitting the days we all were in Niles. "Surge in, surge out," she would say.

The winter I was 12, I was very ill with strep throat. Penicillin did not exist then and hemolytic strep was a very virulent organism. I wisely fell ill in aunt Ruth's bed in Niles. When the seriousness of my illness was apparent, she quit the private duty case she was on and attended me. Thanks to her skillful and loving care, I survived, though not without problems. The physicians decided that I was not strong enough to return to school. In order to keep me with my grade, my parents hired a tutor with whom I concluded 7th grade. One of the remaining symptoms after the illness was said to be insipient St. Vitus Dance. Thus my mother arranged with the Superintendent of Schools in Auburn that word of my tutor would be accepted in regard to my passing or failing courses, so that I would not be subjected to the stress of exams.

The following winter I had an even more severe strep throat. This was a post-pharyngeal abscess. Again I wisely fell ill in aunt Ruth's bed. Again she stopped work to care for me. This time the infection was so toxic that I nearly died. A surgeon lanced the abscess without taking me to the hospital, the nearest one being 10 miles away. Aunt Ruth repeatedly irrigated my throat with Dobel's (?) Solution, rousing me from the lethargy in which the infection was holding me. I can still recall how annoyed I was that she'd make me become alert enough for the irrigation. Of course, without it, I would have, in all probability, died.

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To complicate this illness and its effect on me was the fact that several months earlier, we had moved from Auburn (population 4,000) to South Bend (population 100,000). This move was devastating to me, socially. Had I stayed in Auburn I may have been able to go through puberty with little stress, but this new situation, the first move I'd ever had to cope with, was very difficult. My self-confidence was more or less destroyed. I didn't know how to establish myself in this new community. Insecurity and severe illness made a semi-invalid of me. And it is only thanks to aunt Norma's brother, Dr. Harry Schmidt, that I was saved from a more or less permanent semi-invalid status. The attending physicians had let me know that I had a rapid pulse. On the strength of that I was confined to bed each afternoon. I went to school—the new school—only in the morning. Unlike the rest of the kids, I had to come home in the afternoon and go to bed! But Harry, who had known me from infancy, contrived to take my pulse surreptitiously and declared I was fit. "Let her go, Reta," he said, "she only runs up a rapid pulse when she knows it's being taken. She's anxious about the results."

So I was freed. To Harry Schmidt and my aunt Ruth McLellan I am greatly indebted for my life and my well being.

Another medical problem arose during the same year. Having worn glasses for 2 years, my mother took me to an ophthalmologist in the new town for a check up. He, being more thorough than the country optometrist, used an ophthalmoscope. "Why," said he, "this girl has cataracts!" Ten years later they were judged to be congenital, but at the time of discovery the prognosis was grim: dimming sight, with eventual surgery and adoption of thick unsightly lens. An impossible future for a teenager. Annually these cataracts were assessed and it was my great good fortune to hear the examiner say each time, "They haven't grown!"

So I coped and learned by trial and error how to adjust to new social situations. Life was fairly smooth until the end of my Junior year in High School. My Dad was transferred from South Bend to Detroit. For my parents this was delightful. It represented recognition of my father's managerial skills, something for which he had longed. For me it was another one of those moves. However, it went more smoothly for me this time. Experience paid off. The blow came at Christmas of that year when he was transferred again. This time he was sent to Quincy, Illinois. That was more than I could bear, I thought. My aunts came to the rescue and asked me to live with them, thereby allowing me to return to South Bend High School and to graduate with my class.

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However my father wisely said, "No," saying that we would stay as a family. I consoled myself by thinking about the Bible verse that says something about all things working for good for those that loved the Lord. And how true! My last semester of public school was the happiest time I had in high school. Quincy was a friendly town, the high school and its students were accepting. SO---one lesson learned about hard situations: in other words, all things work for good, in the long run, even though it is sometimes hard to find the good. For me, I had more or less instant gratification, but it taught me the wisdom of accepting the inevitable and believing that it is part of some whole, that life is not capricious, even though at times it appears to be.

Mark Twain in "The Mysterious Stranger" tells of a chance occurrence that alters a man's life as well as the lives of others. Such an episode happened to me. During the summer after I'd graduated from high school aunt Ruth said to me, "Nancy, what are you going to major in in college?" Looking back now I doubt that she was doing anything more than making a casual remark, the kind of thoughtless ones many adults say to kids. Up until then the thought of a major had not entered my mind. But I sensed I would somehow not be measuring up if I went off to college without a plan. So, thinking I should have a major (and not wanting her to know this was the first time I had thought about it) I replied, "Chemistry." So there it was. Declared and I was stuck with it. I might very well have done better in some other major. But I do know it was that chance question and that quick reply that started events that led to my introduction to Bob. Some may not agree that subsequent events are related to the Chem. major, but read on with an open mind and you may agree with me.

As the record will show, I entered Knox College in the fall of 1928, a scared Freshman if ever there was one. And when I'm scared I am at my brashest. I so wanted to be the kind of college girl I'd read about in all those college girl novels. So I compensated with brashness and a brittle facade. My zeal made me unattractive to my peers and I was not invited to pledge a sorority. In a college where 95% of the students were fraternity or sorority members and in which all of the female students live in one dormitory and that dormitory is informally segregated in rooms and at table, by organization, a non-pledged freshman is apt to be miserable. That I was. The saving grace of that sad year was one of the chemistry professors, Ira Neifert. Ira never commented about my failure to be pledged, but in so small a school, given his interest in his students, he knew.

At the end of my Freshman year I decided to transfer to the University of Illinois, where my cousin was in school. She was a member of a sorority and had

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assured me that I'd "make" her chapter. I hadn't asked her for such a guarantee, but she had offered it when she learned I had not been pledged. One afternoon in the Chem. Department Ira and I were talking. I told him of my decision to transfer in the fall and, without making reference to the source of my unhappiness, he asked me, "Are you a quitter?" Well, quitting had never been a popular activity in our family and so, stung by his question, I decided to return to Knox in the fall. From that decision many pleasant things flowed: I was pledged to Alpha Xi Delta in the fall of my Sophomore year, I was hired as Assistant Storekeeper in the Chem Labs, (when I became a Senior I was Head Storekeeper, a job no girl had ever held), and I proved to myself that I could return to an unpleasant situation and face the fact that I had been non-sorority material in my Freshman year. By returning to Knox and staying to graduate I became a protege and dear friend of Ira and Martha Neifert. To quote one of them, "She's our kid." They had no children of their own and they became second parents to me. And index of the warmth of our friendship if that upon Ira's and Martha's deaths, a bequest came to Jane. They had honored the daughters of 3 other students as well as the local Pi Beta Phi chapter with similar gifts. Our close friendship continued until Ira's death in 1957. Martha died in 1954. Bob and I established a Martha Campbell Neifert '13 Memorial Fund as well as making a contribution to the Knox Building Fund that provided a memorial plaque in Ira's memory, in the chemistry department.

The first money I earned was made singing as soloist in the Christian Science Church in Galesburg. I was paid \$5 per Sunday for one solo and the responsibility of leading the hymns. Later I became soprano soloist in a quartet at the Universalist Church. They paid us \$2 per Sunday except for the 1 Sunday each month that each of us sang a solo. The soloist got \$4! During college I sang in the College Choir-Chapel 3 times a week and Vespers on Sunday evening--and in the Women's Glee Club. In the Spring of 1932 the college put on "The Mikado". Having sung in the chorus of that production when I was a high school Sophomore, I was well acquainted with the score. Although I was a lyric soprano (my top note was C above the staff), I did not want to be Yum Yum. I yearned to be Katisha. To my delight I was given the part. What fun I had with that role!

Near the end of my Sophomore year I received a letter from John Erskine, then chairman of the Board of the Julliard School in New York City. Prompted by Elwood Hendrickson, the assistant curator of the Metropolitan Museum who had been a guest lecturer at Knox in 1929-30, Mr. Erskine invited me to come to New York for an audition with a view of receiving a scholarship at Julliard. I was very pleased that my voice had impressed Mr. Hendricks so much that he had made inquiry on my behalf,

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but I did not accept the invitation. As a real Sophomore, I replied that I did not want to consider any educational change until I had completed my Bachelor's degree. I added that I would be glad to come to New York in the summer of 1932 for an audition. Of course, no audition was offered in 1932, the depth of the Great Depression. This was a real turning point in my life. In my youthful ignorance, confidence, and wisdom I rejected the idea of singing professionally. To this day I marvel at my foresight. My singing has been a joy to me all of my life and, hopefully, it delights other people from time to time. My music has been made, for the most part, in church choirs. It is a setting in which I am very comfortable. Solo work was part of my singing until I was in my late 50s, but I was the happiest doing solos when they were a part of a service of worship. When my singing, alone or with others, can create a mood for worship or reflection or meditation, I am delighted. Other singing is fun, but it is in services of worship that I find my greatest satisfaction.

My remaining three years at Knox were happy ones. I felt a sense of belonging that was very much needed. The trauma of moving about in high school was assuaged and I put down spiritual roots in Galesburg and Knox. From these roots I still draw strength.

Summer of 1932 was a grim time economically in the USA. There were no jobs for college graduates. Once more aunt Ruth came to my rescue. She arranged for me to be a summer volunteer in the clinical laboratory at Sparrow Hospital, Lansing, Michigan, where she was Superintendent of Nurses. At that time, Volunteering was not the honorable profession it has grown to be. In fact, volunteers were resented by employees. A volunteer that was willing to work for nothing took a job from someone else who might have been paid. So my summer tenure was resented by the others in the lab and they knew very well I had the job because I was Miss McLellan's niece. However, I got valuable experience and it put off the time when I had to find a paying job. Fall came, the volunteer job terminated, and no paying job materialized.

To not find a job was quite a shock to me. I'd been raised to believe that if one was willing to work and if one looked hard enough, one could always find something to do. So the question in my mind was, "What's wrong with me? How have I missed the mark?" It never occurred to me that I was a casualty in the Depression. It was I who wasn't good enough.

As you may know, Aunt Kate and Aunt Ruth with Grandma McLellan lived in East Lansing, the site of Michigan State University. Aunt Kate had been widowed in 1930 and had a small daughter to rear. It was suggested that I stay with them in East

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Lansing, enroll in MSU for my Master's degree, and act as baby sitter for Ruth Ellen and general factotum in the household. I liked the idea of continuing in college; it had been evident to me that my lack of training in Bacteriology would prevent me from finding work in a hospital laboratory. And I liked the lab setting. So without asking my father's permission to be on his payroll for another year, I enrolled in MSU and got my Master's in Bacteriology in June of 1933. (There is a large crop of my vintage that hold graduate degrees, better known as depression Master's and depression Doctorates.) My father was dismayed, because he thought I'd be supporting myself by the end of the Summer of 1932. Money was very scarce and he was hard pressed. But to my everlasting appreciation he did not refuse me; he accepted the situation.

To receive a Master's degree one had to have a passing grade in both one's major and minor. The first quarter I got a C in my minor, the equivalent of failure in graduate school. I told my father that I was going to quit, because I wouldn't be able to get good enough grades in my minor to balance that failure. My father, probably stung with my extended study for which he was paying, but also realizing what havoc quitting would create in me, said, "No, you'll go back and you'll bring your average up to passing." It was hard going; I wasn't sure I'd succeeded until grades came out in May. But what a lesson my wise father taught me! I am so grateful to him for refusing to let me quit.

My year in East Lansing, which extended to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  years, was a great learning time. What did I learn besides Bacteriology?

Never having been a baby sitter as a teen ager, my supervision of Ruth Ellen was a new experience for me and I surely did a bad job. Poor child, she was afflicted with too many bosses--her mother, her aunt, her grandmother, and now this older cousin. Her mother was very permissive and Ruth Ellen was fast becoming a brat. The only good thing out of my supervisory experience was a resolution that if I ever had children they would not be raised permissively and I would <sup>begin</sup> ~~begin~~ with them from birth with love and affectionate firmness.

My year of graduate study was fun. I broke out of my mold of selfconsciousness, allowing myself to flirt with boys and really begin to feel socially confident. During the year I met a State student with whom I thought I fell in love. And he returned the feeling. There was one impediment: he had grand mal epilepsy. Our affair lasted 18 months, in spite of warnings from <sup>my</sup> parents, my aunts, my laboratory supervisor, to name a few. What was an illness if one loved someone? That could be surmounted. Of course, I blinded myself to the fact that his personality was changing. He was becoming more and more hostile toward his family, but the hostility never was directed



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at me. In retrospect I have great sympathy for my parents, in particular. What a worry I was to them to persist in seeing this young man! When I got a job in Ann Arbor at University Hospital in the Spring of 1934, I knew I would see him cured. As soon as I was established there, he came up and went through the neurological clinic for diagnosis. After he'd gone home, I spoke to the neurologist and asked him what was the prognosis. Ethically, the doctor had no right to discuss the case with me, but fortunately he overlooked ethics. He asked me if I intended to marry the man, and when I told him I did, he replied that if we married I'd become hysterically epileptic myself. That brought me to my senses. I realized the foolishness of continuing to date him. So, I wrote him a letter telling him not to come to Ann Arbor the next weekend and that we were no longer "going together". Upon receipt of my letter, my East Lansing friend went to his room and shot himself in the head! He lingered for a week without gaining consciousness.

It was in this atmosphere of sorrow and guilt that my life took a decided turn for the better. The wife of the minister of the church in East Lansing, Mrs. McCune, who knew the above story in all its details, came to Ann Arbor while her husband was a surgical patient in University Hospital. We ate meals together frequently. One Monday morning, at breakfast, she pointed her finger at me and said, "I've met the young man for you."

The night before she had had supper with an old friend who was a staff nurse at University Hospital. The nurse, Gertrude Yeomans, had a practice of having Sunday night supper with Bob Merritt. She'd known Bob from the days when she had lived in St. Joseph, Michigan. Bob had dated her daughter. Even after Bob quit dating the Yeomans girl, the friendship with Mrs. Yeomans continued. It was with that twosome that Mrs. McCune had had supper. And this Bob Merritt was the man she had decided was for me. The two women agreed that Mrs. Yeomans <sup>would</sup> ~~would~~ arrange a meeting between Bob and me.

It was arranged that I would have Sunday night supper with Bob and Mrs. Yeomans. The fateful night was October 21, 1934. After supper and a movie, Mrs. Yeomans found she was busy and asked to be excused. Bob took me to a student hangout, "The Hut", where we could dance. Then he took me home to my apartment and said, "Good night." I had to ask him his last name before he left. I couldn't remember it! After the door closed behind him and he was gone, I leapt into the air, kicked my heels together, and announced to the empty room, "I'm going to marry that man!"

Some may say it was rebound, some may say I was crazy, but whatever it was it was right. And the years stand to prove it.

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Bob was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, working on his Master's degree in Chemical Engineering when we met. Our friendship grew with the weeks and months after October '34 and by the first of the year we wanted to marry each other, but without a job for Bob that wasn't possible. His philosophy, his upbringing, had been that the man earned the living and the wife made the home.

Bob did have a job with Engineering Research that supported him and made it possible for him to continue in graduate school. The industry for which he did research renewed its contract annually. We ~~agreed~~ <sup>agreed</sup> we could wait until the contract was renewed. Then between his salary and mine, mine was \$1000 per annum, we could support ourselves. So on July 6, 1935, one week after the contract renewal, we were married.

The wedding took place in Niles, Michigan in the Methodist Church and minister was Dr. G. W. Switzer. Dr. Switzer was a retired Methodist minister, who lived in St. Joseph and was a friend of Bob's parents. His early ministry had been in Indiana and at one time he served the Door Village, Indiana church where my father's people were active.

Bob continued in graduate school until he had done all his research and needed only to write and defend his thesis for his Ph.D. National Starch and Chemical Corporation (then known as National Adhesives Corporation) offered him a job. On August 29, 1937 we moved to Plainfield, New Jersey, where he began his 40 years with National. His initial salary was \$175 per month.

It seemed like the thing to do, to take a job and to write the thesis nights and weekends. But it wasn't, as events were to prove. But Bob was anxious to be the sole breadwinner and jobs were so scarce that we moved to Plainfield without the slightest anxiety.

During the college year 1937-38 Bob had frequent letters from his major professor, Dr. A. H. White. Dr. White, head of the department, hoped Bob could come to Ann Arbor to defend his thesis before he, Dr. White, went on his sabbatical. As a new employee, Bob couldn't go West until May, the date agreed upon with National for his vacation. In May we went West, stopping in Ann Arbor for the thesis defense, and going on to St. Joe for the remainder of our vacation. Bob came out of the Engineering Building that day a defeated man. He'd failed. All kinds of criticism had been leveled at his paper by the examining committee. There was not enough research, they said. The findings were incomplete. The committee said he had to

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return to Ann Arbor and do additional research. When National heard about this they said they could not give Bob a year's leave of absence. And at the same time, National questioned the committee's refusal to accept Bob's thesis. National pointed out that this man had received all As from the University, as an undergraduate as well as a graduate student, that his research had been overseen by the head of the department(now on sabbatical, to be sure) and that all that was without the department head's approval was the actual composition. National pointed out the terrible morale problem that had been created. Bob had come to National as "Dr. Merritt" and now he wasn't "Dr. Merritt".

Neither Bob nor I was willing at that time to see this as a political problem. But events bore out that diagnosis. There probably was some departmental rivalry that surfaced while Professor White was absent. Bob was Professor White's protege and he became the victim of the jealousy, or whatever it was.

Finally the committee told National that if Bob would hire a Chemical Engineering graduate student at Rutgers to do additional research, incorporate it in his thesis, he'd receive his degree without another oral exam. They said that additional research would ~~accept~~ <sup>create</sup> enough data to warrant accepting the thesis.

After additional research Bob was faced with re-writing his thesis. And he couldn't find any new way to write it. The new data added nothing to the former conclusions. He became very melancholy over his dilemma. He was in a Catch-22 situaation and could see no way out.

Our marriage reached a crossroads. We were at each other's throats, I pushing him to write and he resisting by doing nothing on the thesis. In despair I went to our minister, Alson H. Robinson. After listening to my problem, Robbie asked me to come back to see him in a few days. He must have gotten in touch with Professor White-now returned from his sabbatical-and with National and heard from them their views of the situation.

When I revisited Robbie's office, he asked me how quickly I could get the thesis typed and sent to Ann Arbor. When I told him my estimate of time, he said, "Do it." And so I did. Using the original manuscript, I retyped the thesis. This time I double spaced between the lines and triple spaced between the sentences. Thus the page numbers were different from the original thesis, a copy of which was in the hands of the committee. Then I had the manuscript bound, and I mailed it to the University. After I put it in the mail, I told Bob what I had done. I can see

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and hear him yet. "You've ruined me!" he cried. But it didn't ruin him, it saved him. His thesis was accepted without defense and he received his Ph.D. degree in absentia in February 1939.

All this taught me that when one is in a crisis, one seeks competent advice and one acts on that advice, if it is at all reasonable.

I can't say if Bob's career was progressing during the above. He was so new at his job and I was equally new at assessing him. But after the thesis was behind him it soon was evident that he was "going places", though I must admit I never dreamed he'd go as far. Each step up was enough for me. Women are foolish, I believe, to push their husbands to succeed. Women can best serve their husbands in their career growth by doing their own job well and creating a home atmosphere of peace and security.

Sometime in March of 1939 I knew I was pregnant. How happy we were! We had to scurry around to find an apartment large enough for "the new Baby". When Jane was born I was happier than I imagined one could be. To have a loving husband and a beautiful baby! What good fortune.

War clouds began to gather. While I was in the hospital after Jane's birth, the daily talk was about the German pocket battleship, The Graf Spee, that had been scuttled in Montevideo. World War II began the day we moved into our new apartment, September 3, 1939. But there was no indication the USA would be involved. Anti-war sentiment was extremely strong in the country.

When Jane was less than 2 months old the company sent Bob to Toronto to fill in because the plant manager had broken his leg and would have to be away from his work for 6 weeks. This was a great opportunity for Bob. He became acquainted with Arthur Meredith, the former owner of the Toronto branch. Mr. Meredith was impressed with Bob's ability and wanted him to stay in Canada. Eventually we moved to Toronto and lived there for one year. Then Bob was sent back to Plainfield, where we lived until his retirement.

While we lived in Canada, I sang in the Mendelssohn Choir, directed by Dr. John Fricker. A memorable concert was a benefit affair for the bombed-out St. George's Hospital in London. We sang Handel's "Messiah". The audience was particularly attuned to us, each member of which probably had family or friends who were living through the horrors of war in England. Most listeners brought with them copies of the Messiah score and followed the music from it. The rapport between

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singers and audience was strong and, for me, unique. I shall never forget it.

War came to the USA on December 7, 1941. All of our lives were changed. Bob's and mine were less altered than many, because Bob did not have an ROTC commission and because the adhesives business was essential industry. For those reasons Bob was exempt from military duty. He and other technical men who were similarly exempt kept the Plainfield factory of National going, providing the necessary products for the war.

One episode earned National Starch the coveted "E" (for excellence) award. One Friday afternoon in late April or early May of 1944, Bob received a phone call from the Quartermaster's office in Newark saying that a terrible mistake had been made. Their office had neglected to order 1500 five gallon containers of a certain adhesive which had to be on hand to go on a convoy on Monday morning. The question was: could National fill the order? Although that much adhesive had never been made before at one time, and although there were no 5 gallon drums on hand, Bob said he would get the order done, if the Army would provide the containers. Jane and I were assigned the job of getting the Army labels printed. Everyone in the plant worked non-stop for 60 some hours with much improvisation. The trucks met the Monday convoy. Later, after June 6, 1944 (D Day), National was told that this order had been necessary for the landings in Normandy. Large containers of supplies, which were tossed into the surf, were divided up on the beaches and made into smaller packages for the units of the invading soldiers. This adhesive was needed for the large packaging as well as the small packaging! The quantity of adhesive ordered is an index of the size of the invading forces.

We returned to live in the USA in May of 1941. On the last vacation day that year, while we were in St. Joe, Jane and I were in a very bad automobile accident. Jane was not seriously injured, although she was in shock for several hours. I appeared to be in good shape also, but a week after the accident I collapsed. At this time I was staying with Bob's parents, having been dismissed from the hospital 24 hours after the accident. This was the first time I faced death. I asked Jane to get her Grandmother, because I didn't feel well. As I spoke to her, I looked at her very carefully, for I was sure I would never see that beautiful red head again. I still remember what she was wearing. I watched her and I watched her, because I wanted to remember her for as long as I could. And I do!

A skillful surgeon, good nursing, a healthy body, and a loving family pulled me through. But I began to accumulate social debts from that episode. Mama Jane cared for my baby girl for 7 weeks. I was hospitalized for 3 weeks and then

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recuperated at Bob's parents' home for 4 weeks. This loving service, plus the uncounted hours my mother gave me and my children through the years, has created a debt that I am only now beginning to see the possibility of repaying.

My Grandmother East had a philosophy which I have adopted. When someone would thank her for a service she'd done for them and would say, "Mrs. East, how can I ever repay you?" she would reply, "Do something for someone else." And so through the years when I have been able to do something for the family of either of my children, it allows me to discharge some of the obligation I've incurred with my mother, my mother-in-law, and my father-in-law. (My father died in 1938 and doesn't feature any more in my life, except as a memory of love and wisdom.)

This automobile accident put a hold on the growth of our family. The surgeon, the attending man, and Grandpa Merritt (C.W. Merritt, M.D.) all said that I must not get pregnant. They thought I'd be unable to carry to term and if I did I would have an exceedingly difficult pregnancy. We heeded their advice, but frequently I'd ask my father-in-law whether a different opinion had developed among the three men. I asked him so often that my mother chided me and told me I must cease putting my father-in-law in so difficult a position. To be sure I was having adhesion attacks with frequency. No one seemed to know what to do about them except to administer seconal so I could go to sleep.

One day, near Thanksgiving 1943, a letter came from Grandpa Merritt. He said that he and the other 2 men had had a conference and had concluded I could risk another pregnancy. Well! By Christmas I knew I was pregnant. And on September 4, 1944 Tom was born.

We announced his advent (in utero) by putting a card on the Christmas tree for my mother. On the card was drawn a line from the Messiah with the words "in August, the doctor concurring." The music was the opening line of the chorus of "For Unto Us a Child Is Born". Poor Mother! She puzzled over this. She went to the piano and played the notes over and over again to try to learn our cryptic message. Finally she tumbled.

We didn't know how prophetic we were, because at that time the sex of the baby was not at all important. It was a baby! That was enough. The song has come to be Tom's song, because his birth announcement carried the same line of music. Subsequently when Bob and I walked to the front of the church for Tom's dedication, the organist chanced to play the same music! Mother and Jane and Tom sat in the front pew to await the Dedication Ceremony. Bob and I were in the choir. We collected

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Tom from Mother and started forward to where the Minister was standing. To my delight and surprise, Jane ran and stood with us. She wanted to be in the party, too. And well she should.

Once again, Mark Twain's "Mysterious Stranger" philosophy comes to mind. It is regrettable that Tom and Jane are separated by  $4\frac{1}{2}$  years, but had Tom been born 2 or  $2\frac{1}{2}$  years after Jane, would he have met Sharon? And how our lives would have been narrowed without her and the daughters she has borned!

I may have been blind, but I believe that the difference in ages minimized sibling rivalry between the two children. Jane entered public school two days after Tom was born. In fact, she was one of the lucky ones who had her Dad enroll her in school. Because of this new and exciting activity there was no need for us to manufacture interest in Jane's life. She got a tremendous amount of attention in spite of the novelty of the long awaited new baby.

The entrance of Jane into the Plainfield Public Schools sparked our interest in public education. The country, coming out of the Depression, grossly underpaid the public school teachers. At that time teachers were not unionized and most of the members were very skilled. To be sure, the state legislatures had mandated a certain number of Education credits as a requirement for a teaching certificate; but in general the profession was filled with liberal arts graduates who were dedicated to their task. In fact, dedication was the only reason many stayed in the profession. It certainly wasn't financially lucrative.

Bob and I were among those in the forefront for increased salaries for teachers. It became almost a consuming passion as we prepared annually for the Battle of the Budget. One year, the newspaper reported that it was expected that \$100,000 would be cut from the school budget. We organized a protest. We used the sanctuary of the Unitarian Church for our meeting. Feelings were very high. One woman in our protest group, whose husband was a councilman, told her husband that she wouldn't sleep with him any more if he voted for the cut! (Through a maze of legal procedures, the Common Council gave final approval to the school budget.)

To underscore our point to the councilmen we agreed to attend the next meeting at which the budget would be considered. Our group numbered about 500, filling the Council Chamber and overflowing down the stairs. News coverage was great. My memory fails me about the outcome that year; but each subsequent year another Battle of the Budget was organized with Bob and me in the lead. Of course, we were not alone. We were joined by many like minded citizens and we were opposed by

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others.

But this I learned: that an organized group, working in concert, can influence legislative actions far out of proportion to the size of the group. One needs to be awfully sure that that for which one is campaigning is right. One's responsibility is enormous, because elected representatives will be influenced by your actions. The reason they are so impressed is that few citizens take the time or trouble to speak out.

Another axiom we learned during the school budget battles was: Nothing keeps an elected official as alert as to have his/her constituents watching him/her at work, even though the constituents say nothing.

We encountered a lot of hostility and criticism with our espousal of higher taxes for better schools and we also found a large group of supporters, some of whom worked with us and others, for one reason or another, could only give support on the side lines.

Soon it became evident to Bob and me that Plainfield would outgrow its school buildings. There seemed little, if any, concern about this problem, even among the School Board members. So I started visiting individual members in their homes, telling them how I thought the need for double sessions would soon arise and that now was the time to start to make building plans. Private conversations were fruitless. So I started attending the monthly School Board meetings. Each month, when the privilege of the floor would be given, I'd ask my question, "How are your building plans progressing?" At first this was reported in the newspaper but no ground swell of public concern developed.

My monthly visits continued for several years. During that time, using my current officership in a local PTA, I got other PTAs in town to press the School Board to face the problem of outgrowing schools. At last the Board agreed there was a problem, but they did not want to ask for building money without ample citizen support. A Committee to Study School Buildings was formed to which a cross section of the community was invited. Each PTA appointed 2 representatives, the Chamber of Commerce had its representatives, the ELks and the Hibernians had theirs, and the American Association of University Women was represented, to name some of the organizations. Although I was President of Maxson PTA, at that time, I preferred to be the AAUW representative (thus freeing Maxson to have 2 representatives without me).



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I was elected chairman of this all city organization. Its only power was advisory. The School Board could receive our recommendations but was not bound to act on them. In-fighting in the committee (about 50 members) was strong. Some were for the status quo, others were for new buildings. Some hid behind their status as representatives of a group and would not vote on any question without consultation with their constituency! It was a big fight and I learned to cope with defeat and to try to persuade people to change their minds. For the most part we were divided into two camps: parents with school age children who wanted enough building space to avoid double sessions and others who opposed the additional taxes that new buildings would cost.

At the end the Committee recommended the organization of a junior high school plan and the necessary buildings to house it: convert Maxson and Hubbard Schools into 3 year junior high schools, build 12 elementary schools. These latter became Woodland and Cedarbrook Schools. After the School Board accepted this recommendation and decided to go ahead with the scheme there were legal hurdles to surmount.

I can't remember the precise details now; but the law has safeguards to prevent an appointed school board from issuing bonds against the city's credit without approval of the Common Council and the voters. There were those who thought the whole scheme would die, even though the Board had approved it. No elected or appointed official would take the leadership to see the bond issue to the ballot and to its ultimate approval. It was too political and school board members were supposed to be above politics. It was a political hot potato and no councilman wanted to burn his fingers.

So the local PTAs stepped into the vacuum and I became chairman of the support group. Not only was I willing to do it but I also had had ample exposure so that I was recognized as a supporter of the bond issue.

The details of the bond issue's preparation were legion and a failure at any point would have prevented the question from reaching the ballot in an off year election. During the summer of 1954, after schools had closed, critical decisions had to be made by the Common Council. We wrote Letters to the Editor, we wrote letters to the Council members. In the end the question got on the ballot; but who would rally support among the voters?

There was plenty of opposition to the question. The School Board would not publicly support the position beyond placing on the ballot the request for a

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\$1,500,000 bond issue. Again the PTAs became the political force to support the question. We made flyers, we passed them out, we spoke publicly. As we approached Election Day we realized we were short one important tool. How could we know if "our people" had voted? How could we be sure they went to the polls? New Jersey provides that all candidates for office can have challengers in each polling place and she/he can record the names of those who vote. It is customary on Election Day for a runner to go into each poll about 4 P.M., ascertain who has not yet voted by using the challenger's list, then go out and start phoning the not-yet-voters.

But election law provided no challenger for public questions. PTA policy forbade members to participate in partisan politics. We had no tool by which to go in and out of the polls and collect names of those who had voted. To do that one had to wear a challenger's badge for a particular candidate. Our strength in supporting the bond issue was the PTA and PTA policy forbade partisan activity. What to do? We discussed it with the State PTA and found no satisfactory solution. Feeling against the bond issue was great enough that we expected no one would look aside if we, vocal supporters of the bond issue, came into the polls as runners. So it was decided that on Monday night before election we'd hold a highly visible mass resignation from the PTA, collect challengers' badges, work on Tuesday, and then hold a mass rejoining on Wednesday. Our ~~charade~~<sup>Charade</sup> of form did not have to be used. A few days before election, the chairman of the Republican City Committee, who also was Principal of Hubbard School, came to me and said, "Nancy, send in your people to the polls when you please. I've instructed challengers in all districts to run a second sheet for you."

The vote was close. We won only in the Second Ward, but by a sufficiently large enough margin that it off set the losses in the other three wards.

Backtracking chronologically, in the Spring of 1950 the Nominating Committee of the Women's Alliance at the church asked me to be the new President. I was overwhelmed and delighted. The older women of the church, called "The Ladies" by Serina and me, were so poised, dignified and wise that I wondered why they should ask me to be President. At that time the Women's Alliance in the Unitarian denomination was a highly regarded and influential organization. There was a national body which met annually in Boston. Locally, upon election, each Alliance President was automatically a Trustee of the local church. Such responsibility I had never carried before. Bob had been a Trustee for several years and President of the Society for one year, at that time; but it never occurred to me that I had the wisdom to be a Trustee. To my mind, I was moving into very heady company.

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In order to be Alliance President some arrangements had to be made at home. Tom was in afternoon kindergarten and Jane was in 5th grade, in the same building, Maxson. The Alliance held its monthly meeting at 1 P.M. on the first Tuesday of the month. So I delegated Jane to take on the role of "brother sitter" that day. She came home with him from school and was responsible for both of them until I got back from the meeting. Jane had early shown ability to assume responsibility. She and Tom got along quite well ( as near as I could tell!). But I had not yet observed another characteristic Jane had. Acceptance of duty is the best way I can describe it. In the Spring, after a year of "brother sitting", awards were given at school for after school athletics. I went to school for the ceremony, expecting Jane would be among those who would be recognized. When she was not, I asked her what had happened. "After school athletics are held on Tuesday, Mom. I had to take Tom home." "Oh dear!" thought I. To this day, I have mixed feelings about that episode. Jane reinforced her quality of responsibility and I started on my way to leadership in organizations, but it was at Jane's expense. I'm glad I got started, but I regret depriving Jane. It should be noted that not once during that year did she complain about having to come home with Tom. It was character building for her, but had I known, I doubt that I would have tried to build her character in that way at that time.

As Alliance President I had to go to the annual meeting of the General Alliance each May in Boston. To save expense, the church would send the Alliance President as one of its delegates to the annual meeting of the American Unitarian Association. Thus the Presidency boosted me into national experience. Subsequent to my four years as Alliance President, I became a board member of the Unitarian Service Committee. That was additional national experience.

The USC board membership happened after the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. Refugees from Hungary were flown into nearby Camp Kilmer. Refugees were received and resettled in the USA by various religious organizations. Thinking that some Hungarian Unitarians might be among the arrivals, I organized a group of Plainfield Unitarians to work at Camp Kilmer to assist with "our" refugees. The Unitarians that came were under the auspices of the International Rescue Committee, so it was with that group that we worked. The USC office in New York helped us resettle people. It was from that association with the USC that I became known and subsequently invited to be a board member.

Board meetings were held quarterly. They were held in Boston three times a year and in other locations throughout the country the fourth quarter. To

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promote the Service Committee's work and to try to increase financial support for it, board members filled the pulpits of the neighboring churches when we were meeting outside of Boston. Those assignments were fun and I look back on them with great pleasure. It gave me a national outlook on the denomination as well as giving me excellent experience as a public speaker.

During this period (1956-62) I often thanked the Public Speaking professor I had had at Knox. He taught me that when I had something to say I could say it publicly without any fright. He taught me to be so concerned about my message that there was no time to think about myself and the fact that I was exposed to the public gaze. I regret that when I learned to appreciate these teachings he was no longer living, so that I could have given him my thanks.

The years 1946-56 were busy ones. The children were growing; I had a household to manage. Sometime before 1948 Bob had turned over the management of our money to me. His theory was that a woman needed experience in making decisions about the handling of money. He, in his business, had much experience in the maintenance of accounts and the preparation and following of budgets. I, too, to a lesser degree, but of no less importance, was given the job of looking after our money. Before that time it had been a joint affair, but now it was mine alone. His only requirement was that I had to have ready cash with which to supply him, whenever he asked for some!

This responsibility was mine until he retired. During his working years I learned how to borrow money, how to save money, how to meet bills, and how to always keep our credit green. From the time National went public we had options from the company that we could exercise from time to time. Beginning with the first block, all purchases were made with borrowed money. These experiences taught me how to get a note and how to get the best interest possible. I learned how to shop around and how to dicker. After a few years we were quite comfortable financially, but only on paper. Because Bob was an officer of the company he could not sell his stock. Our indebtedness at the bank was great enough so that it wasn't possible to buy stock other than our National options. We didn't have to take up these options, but we wanted to and we did, although it was a gamble. All of our eggs were in one basket. It worked out; our gamble paid off.

Sometime before the end of World War II, my mother moved to Plainfield. She had lived in various locations after my father had died: Haverford, PA., Camptown, N.H., Ralston, N.J., and Bound Brook, N. J. It was very fortunate thing for all

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of us-Bob, Jane, Tom, and me-that Mother came to live near us. My children had a loving grandmother near at hand, making their lives very rich. I learned to know my mother better, although I never did outgrow my adolescent rebellion against her. Not having gone through that rebellion at the usual pre-teen and teen years, it was impossible to work out that phase of my life when I was a young and not-so-young adult. Proximity to Mother helped me to become more and more independent of her, although it was not an easy transition. Bob helped me and for that I am most grateful.

We bought our first home in 1948. Because we didn't have enough money to qualify for a mortgage, we bought the house on a two year land contract. At the end of that time we had enough equity in the house so that a building and loan company would give us a mortgage. Bob frequently would challenge me, financially. How well I remember this challenge! He told me that of course I could pay off the house in ten years. When we sold it at the end of eight years, I was on schedule with the ten year payments!

Although much of my growing time took place in that house, 757 Kensington Avenue, it is the house at 922 Hillside Avenue that I recall with the most joy.

Memories flood my mind when I think of that house. In completely unrelated vignettes they appear----

Watching the driveway for Jane to return that first time she took the car.  
The red nail polish Tom put on the feet of the bathtub in Tom's Quarters.  
Tom coming up the kitchen walk, followed by 3 friends, Ron Cornetta, Gus Masmith, and Chuck ?? . Tom was calling, "Mean, Mean". The others were calling, "Good, Good".

Birthday parties with all the family(Meema, the Easts and the Karks) Easters and Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Picnics in the summer house and later around the pool. My mother said she would like to have a nickel for every trip I made out of the TV room door down the hill with food!

The phone call in September 1963 from Bill Land asking for Jane's Boston address.

Tom and Sharon walking up Hillside Avenue from the bus, after having flown from college at the close of their Sophomore year.

Jane, crimson in the face, in the TV room on January 13, 1964, telling me that she and Bill were going to be married in May.

Tom and Sharon at the breakfast table in the summer of 1966 when he read a letter telling him he'd be commissioned December 16, 1966. That date allowed them to set their wedding date.

The phone call in the summer house that Kari Jane was born.

The darkened hallway into which Bill walked the evening of June 9, 1965 telling Tom and me of Bob's birth(Grandpa was in Indianapolis and Grandma Hazel wasn't at home.)

The Messiah sings with the Hickoks.

The sight and sound of Bob's car as it swished down the driveway as he was coming home from work.

Ann in the highchair in the breakfast room.

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John on his back, bottle in ~~hands~~, on the floor of the playpen. He'd pull himself around and around by hooking his toes in the playpen fencing.

Ann giggling when I'd say, "I want a pickle", or was it "Have you got my pickle"?

Kari in her "fancy jacket".

Tom diving off the board and Sharon scoring him 1-10.

Bob cleaning the pool each Saturday.

Backwashing the pool and adjusting the pH and chemical balance of same.

Meals on the screened porch.

Meals on TV trays in front of TV. (How ~~is~~ I resisted that!)

The beautiful garden in which we lived. Bob and I walking "like Adam and Eve"(but with our clothes on) on dewy mornings, while we inspected our holding.

Some years before Bob's retirement, after Jane and Tom were well and truly married and I was on the Board of the Chamber of Commerce and a member of the Plainfield Parking Commission, I had a surprise, politically. The chairman of the Republican City Committee, Erving Velinsky, and a former Mayor, Dick Dyckman, asked me to run for Councilman-at-Large. Plainfield was still strongly enough Republican that a Republican candidate at large was assured election. To their amazement I politely refused the invitation. One of the reasons for refusing shocked them and they left in disbelief of its truth. I told them that in me they'd get only half an officeholder, that I would always need to consult with Bob about actions to be taken. This they found unbelievable. Here was this vocal woman, apparently fearless of public criticism, who frequently made unpopular statements and sometimes did unpopular things, saying that she was not her "own man", that she needed advice and counsel from her husband. I doubt if I persuaded them that what I said was true, but it was and it is.

At that time, formerly, and now, Bob and I present a united front to the world. We tried to do it with our children and we have tried to do it outside of our home as well. For me, I can take unpopular stands, make unpopular moves, and the reverse, without any anxiety, as long as Bob and I are in agreement. When there wasn't/isn't agreement, I didn't/don't act.

It is my belief that such an arrangement helps to strengthen a marriage and to strengthen the partners in the marriage. I learned from my parents, and I believe Bob got his philosophy from his parents. To my mind it is very destructive for a married couple to place themselves publicly on opposite sides of a question. Those differences should be settled between them privately. Lacking a settlement, the less said the better.

Like most young people, I dreamed about and yearned to do things that

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would make the world a better place in which to live. In time I found that that task was at hand, at home. In my chosen profession, wifehood and motherhood, there was no one but I to be wife to Bob and mother to Jane and Tom. I came to realize that the greatest contribution I could make to society was to do whatever I could to keep a husband happy and contented, to create a home that was comfortable and secure, and to do my share in rearing my children to be well-adjusted, contributing members of society. With that standard it was easy to see what I should or should not do away from home. Home was my primary responsibility. The siren calls of outside activities had to be balanced against my primary duties. There was no one, but I, accountable for those tasks.

Perhaps one of the most important things my father ever said to me was on my wedding day. After saying about my mother, "I thought I loved her when I married her, but I didn't know a thing about it," he added, "Never go to sleep on a quarrel between you and Bob. Always make up before you go to sleep." When you start married life with someone you love very much, with that guide to follow, it makes a strong marriage. It makes it even stronger if the other partner wants to have the marriage succeed as well. There are frequent pitfalls in early marriage and there are less frequent ones later. But one must cherish the institution and the partner in the institution. It is dangerous to ever take either for granted.

From where I sit it would appear that both of my children have made happy marriages and that they are nurturing their spouses and the lives that they live together. To see this happen to one's children is the most wonderful gift a mother can receive. In all probability, the grandchildren, given the living examples of their parents, will make successful marriages as well. They are learning now, by example, how good marriages are kept alive.

For years I've groped to define what religion means to me. After years of searching I have been able to define it. Religion is that which creates a climate in which individuals can grow to their highest and best. In that light, I look upon my 50 odd years of marriage as a religious experience. I know I've failed to always create a climate for growth, but it has been my goal. To look at my happy husband, my beautiful (within as well as without) children, their loving spouses who became a part of this family because of the beauty of my children, and the four grandchildren for whom the future holds great promise is a eulogy that gives me great joy.

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To write about current history is only to chronicle it. It is too near for reflection. Suffice to say that the removal from that beautiful house in Plainfield to Kalamazoo, traumatic thought it was, has been a joy and a contentment. We did the right thing to leave Plainfield on a high note. We did the right thing to choose to make our headquarters in Kalamazoo. It is a location not too strange to us and it has been very warm and generous in accepting us. Once again we are indebted to our children for this pleasant situation. It was Jane who said we ought to settle in Michigan, where our roots are. She was right. It was Tom who found Parkview Hills and brought us here to see it the first time. Other locations with which we toyed would not have been the right choice at all. Bob's and my lives continue to be rich and full, as they were in Plainfield, and each day we are blessed with another day with each other.

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If these stories and observations can help any of you as you continue your lives, it will please me; but the compilation of the above has been a revelation to me. I've found out who I was and have a glimmer of who I now am!

June 11, 1986  
Kalamazoo, Michigan



Nancy McLellan Merritt