

The Charlotte Ohlschlager Story

By Phyllis Preston

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My name is Phyllis Preston. I am the daughter of Charlotte (Ohlschlager) Agnew and the granddaughter of Kate (Bellin) Ohlschlager and Otto Ohlschlager. This is my memoir.

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Kate Ohlschlager's father, Grandpa Bellin, came to Creston, Iowa from "the old country" (Germany). I don't know how he communicated with the rest of the world, but within his own family Grandpa Bellin spoke exclusively German. Even his grandchildren were required to address him in German (*auf Deutsch*) If they didn't, he simply wouldn't respond. In spite of appearances this wasn't expecting too much of children, really, because between their parents and their Sunday school teachers all of us grandkids had picked up enough German to be able to carry on simple conversations with the German-



speaking adults in our family. All the children learned their catechism in German at St. John's German church one block up the hill. Of course the grandkids didn't normally speak German with their parents or with each other so Grandpa Bellin must have still missed out on a lot of dialogue. I'm not sure that he cared, though. He was the type of fellow about whom you could tell, just by looking at him, that he'd left his heart in the Old Country for good....

**St. John's in Creston, Iowa
a.k.a. The German Church**

Grandpa Bellin never swore. When he got angry he'd yell, "Donner und Blitzen," (just like Santa Claus addressing his reindeer) which actually means "thunder and lightning" in German.

Kate Bellin's mother died when she and her sisters, Louise and Minnie, were quite young. There was no money for a housekeeper, of course, and Grandpa Bellin never remarried (widowers often didn't in those days) so the three Bellin sisters had to take over their mother's duties around the house. They divided up the work more or less equally, with one cooking, one cleaning and one doing the sewing for the family. Nowadays you could probably fudge on the cleaning, and even more so on the sewing, but back in those days (the 1910s) when people did practically everything for themselves, you couldn't fake it.

By the time all her children had been born (all the ones that lived anyway) Kate was setting a table for 12 every day. In addition to own nine children there was couple of houses away and Ohlschlagers. And that's not dinner guests... As the



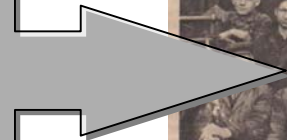
hungry people at least twice herself, her husband and her Grandpa Bellin, who lived a ate all of his meals with the even counting the frequent children multiplied Otto had to

put a second story on his house to contain them all. The downstairs had two bedrooms, a parlor with a piano and a Victrola (for 'Company'), a living room, a large dining room with a large oak table to seat 12, and a small kitchen with a cook stove that had a hot water reservoir at the end. There was also a good-sized porch with a porch swing, and a pantry off the kitchen. The house was about four or five steps up from the ground, which

must've become a little tiring for Grandma Kate. On Sunday afternoons the family sat out on the front porch even when it was raining. That's what you call a family tradition...

There was a small outhouse (a two-seater!) at the alley and my mother Charlotte had to scrub it, as well as the sidewalk that ran out *to* it, every Saturday.

My Grandfather Otto Ohlschlager was a boiler inspector for the CB&Q (Chicago, Burlington and Quincy) railroad and made a good living. Following the German traits of thrift and self-sufficiency he also grew a big garden a couple of blocks away from the house on a plot of land the family owned. Grandma had to be frugal too in order to make the money stretch for food and clothing for her big family. I recall her saying that a woman could throw out more money with a teaspoon than a man could bring in with a shovel.



An old photo of the CB&Q maintenance crew featuring a young Otto Ohlschlager (Charlotte's father) --from the archives of the *Creston News Advertiser*.

Kate and Otto never owned a car and walked pretty much everywhere they needed to go, which was relatively easy to do in a small town like Creston. I remember

walking with Grandma to the grocery store and to church and I knew that Grandpa walked several blocks to the railroad “roundhouse” each day too, so between them they got a lot of exercise. All that walking couldn’t have been easy for them.

In addition to her own children Kate raised her sister Minnie’s two daughters who were about junior high school age when Minnie’s husband left her, sometime in the early 1930’s. From then on Minnie had to work hard just to feed herself, so she really needed Kate’s help with the children. She worked outside of Creston and sent money home to help with her children’s care.

My mother Charlotte was born in 1904 and was the third oldest and the fourth eldest of five sisters. All of the Ohlschlager girls (Grace, Alma, Zelma, Charlotte, and Ottlie) learned to cook, crochet, darn, knit, sew and clean house. I suppose the older girls taught the younger ones. I recall Grace and Zelma both worked at the bank in downtown Creston, not far from home. Zelma worked there for ten years, leaving sometime around 1929 to marry Cleo Clayton (who later became the mayor of Creston). Shortly after marrying Zelma and Cleo paid cash for a new two-bedroom house on Sumner Avenue and even had enough money left over from their combined savings to furnish it. Buying a house with cash was almost unheard of those days, the more so since this was during the Great Depression when few people had any extra money on hand. On the other hand, back then the price for a house was also quite modest by today’s standards and I believe Zelma and Cleo only paid around \$5,000 for their home.

When our kids visited Grandma Charlotte in Creston she sometimes took them to her sister Zelma’s house to play. That gave Charlotte a chance to visit with one of her two

sister's who still lived in Creston and to do some shopping, since Zelma lived so close to downtown Creston.

Another thing I remember about Aunt Zelma is that she taught me to knit, and I soon used this skill to good advantage, knitting stockings for the Navy at the beginning of WWII (when I was still in high school). An interesting fact about Charlotte and Zelma was that they looked rather similar and people around Creston often confused the two. This information was astonishing to my son David, who claims that Charlotte's face surely must have been unique in all the world.

Local Orphan Makes Good

Charlotte met my dad, John Agnew through her brothers. John's parents had separated while he was still in high school and pretty much left him to his own devices. He lived with his dad (Caleb's mother, Almira) for a while and tried to stick it out at school but finally dropped out sometime during the 10th grade. This must have been somewhat of a disappointment to his older sister Mervyn, who had not only encouraged him to finish high school but had encouraged him to go on to college as well. "You should really go to college. John," she said. "If you don't go to college you'll miss the Big Parade." Although my dad was intelligent and could easily have acquired a college degree, he had no money for school, so I understand why he decided to take his life in a different direction. Many boys in Creston during that era didn't see the value of a high school education, let alone a college degree. Since his parents separated and left him out in the world at such an early age you could accurately say that my father became an orphan, and not the adorable little Oliver Twist kind of orphan either, but rather a

confused and awkward teenager. In other words, the kind of orphan nobody's interested in adopting. In retrospect, I admire Dad for sticking it out at school as long as he did. I'm also grateful to Grandma Almira for taking care of him when his own parents had essentially abandoned him.

After Dad left his Grandmother Almira's house he took up residence in some sort of garden shed on the Ohlschlager property, which was located about two blocks away from the house on Elm Street. He was "hiding out" there in a manner of speaking, since his residence in the shed was not officially known to Kate and Otto—at least at first. But it *was* known to the four Ohlschlager *boys*, who were probably instrumental in John being invited to establish his domicile in the shed in the first place, and through them it eventually also became known to the five Ohlschlager *girls*—one of whom was my mother Charlotte. I'm not sure on the details here, but I believe that Charlotte may have met John through her brothers.

Eventually John left for Kansas City to find work and was jockeying cars in a garage when a building contractor took a fancy to him and asked if he'd like to learn the plastering trade. He said he would, and he *did*. And eventually he made it his life's work.

Kate and Otto probably would've vetoed any idea of a marriage between Charlotte and John so they decided to get married in secret. The wedding took place at a Justice of the Peace in the next county (Decatur), just days before Charlotte graduated from high school. However much the Ohlschlager boys may have approved of young John Agnew as a shed-dwelling co-conspirator, once he became an official member of the family by pulling a fast one on everyone (except Charlotte that is) they started to view him a little more critically. They let him know that they didn't think much of his choice

of profession, ridiculing the trade of plastering as being “just about as low as you could get.”

Fortunately, John didn't take this too much to heart and was ultimately able to stay on good terms with all of his in-laws. He eventually became quite an artisan at plastering too, and always made Charlotte and other folks who knew him very proud of his work. The contractor he was working with at the beginning, Hutter Construction, plastered Catholic cathedrals all over the eastern half of the country from Wisconsin to Pennsylvania to Florida. Unfortunately, the men were never able to take the time to admire their work. They'd finish one job on Friday and be at a new one on Monday.

In my early childhood years Mom and I followed Dad around the country on his jobs and as a result we never stayed long enough in one place for me to make close friendships or to complete a whole year in the same school. I attended eight first grades for example. This constant change of surroundings was pretty stressful for me, as it would be for any young child. Mom recognized this though, and did what she could to make the situation easier on me. I remember how she shooed away my fears about changing schools by convincing me that it was a special thing, a privilege really, to always be the “new girl” in class. That was the kind of thing where Charlotte really shone as a parent. She always seemed to know just how I was feeling inside and knew exactly what comforting words she needed to say in order to make me feel better. It also seemed to me *at the time* that she never got blue herself and was always upbeat, even when life was bleak. Perhaps she “made” herself be happy, but if so I couldn't tell. A lot of folks looked at life like that way back during the Great Depression and really...what other

choice did they have? A popular song during the era suggested that the way to be happy was to simply “pack up your troubles in your old kitbag and *smile, smile, smile*”.

Traveling with my folks had other aspects that were clearly advantageous for me. Just like a sailor, I got to “see the world”. I remember skiing in Wisconsin as a child, for example, which was certainly something none of my Creston friends ever got to do. I remember too, that I attended the only Protestant grade school in the mostly Catholic town of O’Fallon, Missouri. There were only six pupils in the school and the teacher had me working on multiplication tables in first grade! We lived in a home where one of the school board members, a bachelor, also lived, and he personally informed my teacher that I was “smart” but that my last teacher was teaching only addition and subtraction. This school board member, whose name escapes me now, was a great friend of mine. We’d go for walks together and as we walked along we’d sing the old church hymn *I Come to the Garden Alone*, whose refrain goes:

**And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.**

Ultimately my folks decided that we would stay put in Creston, apparently for my sake. As a result Dad ended up plastering many of the larger buildings built there during the 30’s and 40’s. I remember Mom quoting me from the Bible that: “the laborer is worthy of his hire” (Timothy 5:18) and saying many similar things which made me very proud of my dad’s work. Many of those buildings still stand in Creston to this day and are

excellent examples of Dad's skill as a plasterer. Sometime around 1941 Dad and a friend from Minnesota plastered the Methodist Church in Creston for example and the decorative plasterwork on that church still looks magnificent to this day. The historic band shell in McKinley Park is another example of his work... and I could name many more.



Actual Photo

Taking a few steps back in time now, my mother had not yet turned 19 when I was born. Being a very young parent has its up side and down side of course, but I think that in this particular case the advantages were mostly in *my* favor rather than hers. I remember Mom being lots of fun for me as a young girl. In a way she was like more of a playmate to me than a mother because of the way she'd turn everything into a game. When we carried Dad's lunch through the woods to work for example, she'd get this oh-so-serious look on her face and tell me to stay close to her and 'watch out for the wolf'. She'd then proceed to tease my imagination until –what do you think—she had me believing that there really *was* a big bad wolf chasing us, at which point I'd light out of there so fast (with Mom right behind) that we'd both of us get to Dad's jobsite before our shadows could catch up!

I also remember sledding in Creston whenever we got enough snow. Fremont Hill was only a couple blocks away from our house there at the time, and whenever there was enough snow for sledding the city authorities would close Fremont Hill to cars so all the kids in the neighborhood could go sledding. Mom would go along too of course, and we'd have a big bonfire going so we could all keep warm in between sledding runs. We'd also sled in Bunzendahl's pasture and would shoot across a small creek at the bottom of

the hill. We also had wiener and marshmallow roasts in the fall. I remember Mom tagging along on *lots* of these outings with me –especially for the group events where a chaperone was mandatory. For example, when I was 11 or 12 and in Campfire Girls we’d have campouts at the Creston Country Club or at the public cabin on McKinley Lake. A chaperone was required for that of course and since Mom was usually six or seven years *younger* than the other mothers (and so much like a kid herself) the kids always wanted her to be the chaperone. Far from being embarrassed by this, I was delighted. Having the most popular mother automatically put me in the running for most popular kid....

During the depths of the Great Depression Dad couldn’t get much work as a plasterer because nobody had the money to build houses or other structures. The federal government was still building things though, if only as a way to jump-start the economy. Dad had heard there was good work to be had on the Boulder Dam (later named Hoover Dam) so he hopped a freight car (just like a hobo) and rode to the dam site in Nevada hoping to get work on the project. But he wasn’t a welder and that’s what was chiefly needed at that time, so he was turned away. Dad also worked at a CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) camp for awhile building roads and parks, but was eventually let go from there too because he knew a trade (plastering) and the CCC was supposed to be strictly for unskilled men who couldn’t get any other kind of work. Dad was mad about that because as he saw it he was in the same boat as the other men –even though he had a trade-- because plasterers couldn’t find work at that time either. In his later years Dad never had a good thing to say about big government or unions. One of his famous remarks was, “The unions are killing this country!”



Charlotte (in back) and friend in 1971. What kid wouldn't want her for a grandma?

To make ends meet Dad had to take plenty of odd jobs and 'day labor' type work during that period. One of them was working with a crew chopping ice on Summit Lake all night in bitter cold and his face was always red and raw whenever he was doing that job... The huge blocks of winter ice would be covered with sawdust and stored in a special warehouse and then cut up gradually throughout the year and delivered to folks to use in their ice boxes.

'Grandma Honey'

To my children Charlotte was always known as "Grandma Honey". How she got that name is as follows: Our eldest, Debbie always considered herself the equal of any adult. So when Charlotte would address her by saying "Debbie, Honey", Debbie responded in kind, saying "Yes, Grandma Honey." Eventually the other kids starting imitating Debbie and the name "Grandma Honey" stuck.

Our kids always looked forward to Charlotte's visits to our home in Des Moines, but they relished their visits to Charlotte and John on their Creston farm even more. We were raising our kids in a fairly strict fashion in the city, but at 'The Farm' everything was different. To the kids that farm must've seemed like a kind of paradise. First of all it was a FARM –and to a city kid that's about the same as being on some kind of wonderful new *planet*. Secondly, there were no rules there –other than to try and stay out of

Grandpa John's way. Thirdly, and most importantly, ***Grandma Honey*** was there, with seemingly nothing to do all day but play games, read storybooks, and otherwise entertain *children*. Where I was always BUSY whenever the kids wanted to play Grandma Honey, by contrast, was always READY. Where I threatened them with retribution if they didn't eat their vegetables she would ask them whether they preferred their hamburgers and root beer floats made to order by her, or prepared by the nice folks at the A & W restaurant. Where Dick and I made them mow the lawn, scrub the bathroom and finish their homework, ***Grandma Honey*** took them fishing at the pond, apple picking in the orchard, hunting for pheasants' eggs in the cornfield, slopping the pigs in the pigpen, gathering eggs in the henhouse, swimming at McKinley Park, romping around town with their cousins and generally adventuring all over creation. Oh, my dad John would occasionally get a little crabby with the kids (like the time my son David gnawed some serious teeth marks into his windowsill) but ***Grandma Honey*** would always get between him and the offender before John could even seriously scare them, though I'm sure he gave it his best shot.

I think one reason Mom was such a chum to the worlds' children was because she was so much like a child herself. One day in the early 1960's while Charlotte was visiting us in Michigan (my husband Dick was doing his medical residency there) she had been riding around on eight-year-old Debbie's bicycle when she crashed in full view of the kids. I'm sure she didn't crash on purpose, but while she was lying there it somehow struck her that it would be a hoot to fool the kids into thinking she was really hurt. Well, among her many gifts was the ability to turn her eyelids inside out and while no one was

watching she employed that trick and then lay there for a few minutes as still as the grave.

After staring anxiously at her for a few moments my son Mark, who would've been five at the time, and was an extremely tender-hearted boy, finally worked up the courage to nudge her with his toe just to verify that she wasn't faking it. Well, after a couple such nudges she did finally blink, and a look of great insight passed over little Mark's face as he exclaimed: "Aw heck. *She's not dead!*" Though it wasn't her intent Charlotte must've put a serious dent in Mark's faith in adults that day; a faith which was never more than tenuous in the first place.

Our children were still young when we lived in Michigan and as new parents we worried a lot about them, particularly when Charlotte wanted to take them on one of her adventures. She loved to go exploring around water and since there was an abandoned rock quarry conveniently (or rather, inconveniently) located a few blocks from our house she couldn't resist the urge to take the kids there to look for turtles or whatnot. Needless to say I was strongly against the idea but eventually I gave in, against my better judgment, and let her take them. As a 'condition of release' I gave her crystal clear instructions not to go anywhere NEAR the water and since she was an adult I figured that that would be enough. But when they finally got back, guess whose clothes were completely soaked with lake water? *Charlotte* was the one, not the kids, who'd fallen in! I don't know if I was more mad or exasperated with her that day. Thank goodness it had happened to her and not one of the kids though. If one of them had fallen in that surely would've put an end to her days of chaperoning the kids by herself –which would've been a fate worse than death as far as she was concerned.

All this is not to say that Charlotte was a pushover, or couldn't be tough with a kid when she wanted to be. I recall that once when she was scrubbing the floor I was dangling my pretty red necklace over the bucket of soapy water and she sternly warned me that if it fell in I'd have to get it out myself. Of course that necklace fairly flung itself into the water as soon I acknowledged Mom's warning, and to save it I had to reach my whole three-year-old forearm into that dirty water to keep it from going down the toilet!

In 1942 America finally got into WWII and Dad, always looking for opportunity, went 'Out West' to apply for work at the Boeing factory in Renton, WA. Charlotte followed him a few months later when he was settled. Dad worked inspecting airplanes on the assembly line I think, while Mother got a job running the electrical wires out through the wings of those huge B-17's. (They hired women for that job since they could get into the smaller spaces of the wings more easily than could men.) In spite of being away from their Creston roots I think John and Charlotte were happier then than at any other time in their lives. Other Ohlschlagers had already moved out to the West Coast by that time, including Charlotte's brothers Louie, who was in Oakland, Lawrence, in Washington State, and her older sister Grace who lived in Oregon. I visited my folks in Washington a couple of times and mother and I would row out to the center of Five Mile Lake near Puyallup, where they had cabin near the lake. From there we had a beautiful view of magnificent Mt. Rainier.



Charlotte, Phyllis and John,
sometime in the 1940s.



John and Charlotte, somewhere in the Puget Sound or Eastern Washington region (probably) in the late 1940s or early 1950s.

Down on the Farm – Part 1

Mom and Dad were frugal by nature and saved all the money they could during the war. After they came back to Creston they used all the money they'd saved to buy the old McDonald farm (no pun intended), which Dad's mother Daisy Vickers Agnew had inherited a 1/3 interest in from her father and grandfather. That farm is now in a trust in Dad's name and my husband Richard and I spend quite a bit of time on it each year. I'm sure Dad would be amazed at all the new flowers, trees and shrubs Richard has planted there, as well as the pretty new white fence and the new pond... We look at these improvements to the place as a kind of a memorial to Dad. We started the project while he was still living there in fact, and even though he pooh-poohed all the redecorating we

were doing around the place I think that he secretly appreciated it –because he knew that somebody cared about the place and wanted to keep it in the family.

When Mom and Dad bought that property, back in 1948 there was already a farmhouse on it, which dated back to 1854. But the farmhouse was in pretty bad shape by the time Dad acquired it so he tore it down and built a new one close to the same spot, using much of the frame from the old house to build the new one. Dad said the wood from the old house was better than anything you could buy new then, and he was probably right. After he got the new place framed in he plastered the inside and stuccoed the outside all by himself! Once they got settled in the house it became a kind of hub for other family members living in the vicinity. Both my grandmothers stayed there with them at various times, and they *loved* the spacious view it offered. From the front yard (facing north) on a clear winter's day, you can see the tops of the co-op storage bins in town and from inside the house, looking out the picture window to the south you can see miles and miles of corn and soybean fields rolling away to the horizon.



The Agnew farm as it looked when the folks bought it in the late 40s. Most of the buildings visible in this photograph are now gone.

Although I was already grown when the folks purchased that farm, I still have many fond memories associated with it. Once, when Grandma Kate and Aunt Zelma were there visiting my mother, a wrestling match broke out between my sons Mark and David who were about five and seven years old at the time. Kate thought I should intervene but I declined, saying that they would eventually have to establish “the pecking order” for themselves anyway. Not convinced by this argument Grandma replied that *her* [nine] children NEVER fought when *they* were growing up.

Though I didn't contradict Grandma (no one *ever* contradicted her that I remember) her comment brought a grin to my face; the kind of grin that says: “I know you're just blowing smoke!” You see, as Grandma Kate was telling me how her children *never* fought I was distinctly remembering my mother telling me how her little brother Lawrence would go and deliberately camp out on the outhouse stool “forever” –just so she couldn't scrub it and get her work done. She'd pound and pound on the door yelling at him to finish his business, but he wouldn't budge. -After all, how could she make him? The outhouse, humble though it was, was the occupant's personal domain: his castle so to speak, for the duration.... And if Lawrence decided to rule over his kingdom when mother was supposed to be scrubbing it out, then so be it. You couldn't argue.

I looked first at Aunt Zelma and then at mother, expecting them to burst out laughing at Kate's claim that her children never fought. But they were sober as judges. They never even *thought* to contradict Grandma Kate –even as adults.

The Ohlschlager kids were basically good children, but they were far from the angels their mother made them out to be. In addition to Uncle Lawrence's outhouse malingering I also recall mother telling me how, when she was in high school, she used to "borrow" Zelma's clothes when Zelma was at work. And as regards my own behavior I recall how when I was a little girl living with the Ohlschlagers I used to get into my Aunt Ottlie's Dentyne chewing gum, carefully unwrap it, lick the flavored powder off each stick of gum in turn and then put it back in its wrapper and tuck it neatly back into the package. Ottlie could always tell what had happened of course and she yelled at me a lot over it. Her boyfriends had given her the gum so it must've seemed doubly treacherous to her that someone else should've gotten to enjoy it before she did. At that time I was too young to know or care anything about *boyfriends*. But the sweet taste of gum.... Now *that* was something I *craved*. So much so in fact that when I was a kid Dad would never give me a nickel if I asked for it. "You'll just buy gum with it," he'd say –and he was probably right. Needless to say my Dad didn't approve of gum. But then, he didn't approve of most of the things I liked back then, including Dick Preston, at first anyway.

I got straight 'A's' all through grade school, except for Citizenship (due to whispering) and Art. Some of my friends were getting hefty rewards from *their* folks whenever they brought home an 'A' grade, which I duly reported to Dad, asking what he, as a parent, thought would be an appropriate reward for me. His response? "I'll give you a kick in the pants for every grade that *isn't* an 'A'!" He had a funny little grin as he said it, so I knew not to take him too seriously, but at the same time I was disappointed. Softening the blow however, was the Coca-Cola Company, whose policy it was at that time to reward all 'straight A' students with a six-pack of Cokes. I'd take my six pack of

Cokes and drink them, one bottle after the other, all by myself, sitting on Grandma's back step, listening to the doves coo. Ahh! Now *that's* a fond memory.

Déjà Vu All Over Again

A major event in Charlotte's adult life was welcoming another girl into the family long after she thought her child-rearing days were over. After WWII the Germans were hard up for food and the Utz family of Hamburg, which was distantly related to the Ohlschlagers, had contacted Kate for help. Although times were still pretty hard for Kate too during this period (having lost Otto in 1943) the family did send some food packages to Germany to help out the Utzs. Helga Utz, one of the teenaged daughters in the family, had studied English in school and so she was assigned the task of writing the "please help" letters to the Ohlschlagers. Those must have been some well-written letters because eventually Dad and Mother decided to go beyond sending food packages and "sponsor" Helga so she could come to the U.S. and finish high school. Helga was 14 or 15 years old at the time and came over on a ship from Germany to New York City, where my parents met her and drove her back to Creston. She was certainly a brave girl to leave her home and family at that age and start life anew --a "stranger in a strange land". On the other hand things could've been just tough enough in the war-ravaged Germany of that time to make our quaint little Creston seem like Paradise. In any event, Helga was a good, obedient girl (even by my dad's high standards) and adapted to life in Creston quickly. As a result of being older and mellower Dad went a little easier on Helga than he had on me... but not so with Mom. Mom expected Helga to do every bit as much housework as she had expected me to when I was Helga's age. Even so Helga got off easy because by

then at least the folks had an *indoor* toilet! When I was growing up I'd had to scrub not only the outhouse but the whole walkway leading up to it.



Helga, Charlotte and John in 1953.

Helga did well in high school and then finished nurses training, in Omaha (I think). She eventually married Creston farm boy Chuck Nelson, who landed a lucrative job with the railroad investigating train accidents and eventually rose to be a vice-president of the company. Chuck and Helga had two boys, both now grown, and are retired in Florida, which they use as a base from which to launch their large yacht on long ocean cruises. To this day Helga remembers John and Charlotte almost as fondly as if they were her own parents.

Down on the Farm – Part 2

When I was growing up in Creston my Uncle Frank (Herbel) and Aunt Grace lived on a farm outside of town and my city cousins and I always had plenty of fun visiting my country cousins there. By the time I married and moved to the “big city” though, Frank and Grace had left for Oregon and Mom and Dad’s place was the last farm left in the Ohlschlager line. Kids will always love farms, and just as it was with my own children, my cousin’s children enjoyed visiting my folks’ farm too. But the biggest attraction the farm had for kids, I think, was the fact that Mom was there. She’d have them come out and do some perfunctory chore, like picking up the pinecones that were always piling up around the outside of the house, and they would then be rewarded for

their “diligence” by being taken fishing at the lake or swimming at McKinley Park. After a full day of playing and generally being indulged the visitors would then be “rewarded” once more with ice cream or some other treat that kids craved.

Some of my cousins and their kids came out to the farm during the summertime from Washington State. Others came from Indiana and still others made the short trip from Creston (lucky rascals). Though they usually didn’t come out all at once, most of them tried to make it at least once a year or so. I remember that all the girl cousins were crazy about Duane Wilson the unmarried neighbor fellow who has been farming the Agnew farm since 1947. The girls tagged him everywhere (even riding along on the tractor with him at times) and couldn’t get enough of him. But in spite of all the attention Duane has somehow managed to remain single.

A Test of Faith

The Ohlschlager family has had somewhat of a love/hate relationship with medical science. There are two doctors in my own family (my husband and oldest son are both psychiatrists) yet there’s also a sizeable contingent of folks who subscribe to the Christian Science faith (founded by Mary Baker Eddy), which eschews medical treatment for illness –and my mother, a passionate Christian Scientist for most of her adult life, was one of these.

In some ways Christian Science can be seen as a product of the rural way of life. It’s a pragmatic way of looking at health care. When Charlotte was a girl, doctor visits were limited by the fact that folks simply didn’t have health insurance, nor did they have enough cash on hand to pay for a doctor visit –even though doctors’ bills back then were

a tiny fraction of what they are now. People tried home remedies first whenever someone got sick. They also prayed a lot, and that's where Christian Science appealed to folks.

So in a sense you could say that Mom was merely a product of her times. The only time she *willingly* saw a doctor was for my birth at her sister Alma's house and even then I think the doctor was summoned as much in an official capacity as a medical one. Back in those days (the 1920s) you had to call a doctor to get a birth certificate. It was \$10 if you had the doctor come before the birth and \$5 when you called him after the birth. Grandma Kate told me once that her children –10 altogether—had cost \$55. Grandma was neither complaining nor boasting –she was just telling it like it was.

The Christian Science faith is a profoundly optimistic one and meshed very well with Charlotte's naturally positive and cheerful personality. After some lengthy specialized 'instruction' she became a 'Christian Science Practitioner' (which is like a combined faith-healer and psychological counselor) and in this role she helped many of her friends in the Church through some very trying times. Sadly, during the last seven or eight years of her life she herself was afflicted with bipolar illness, which caused her to bounce wildly between the opposite emotional poles of intense depression and euphoria. During the depressions she would sit silently for weeks at a time, refusing to talk to anyone or do the most basic things to take care of herself. During the euphoric states by contrast, she would become very excited and unpredictable. To the extent that Mom accepted that she had a disease she refused medical help and tried to cure her condition by applying the principals of her *faith*. Unfortunately her efforts met with little success. But most of the time she seemed to be in denial about her illness altogether; refusing to accept that she was ill and refusing the medicines that doctors had prescribed for her.

(Note: This denial state is actually common among people with bipolar disorder and isn't necessarily a product of the Christian Science religion.) The rest of the family was painfully aware of her condition however, and it broke our hearts, especially mine, to see her suffer so. My dad John did everything he felt he *could* do for Charlotte, but he was a great respecter of individual rights and was reluctant to force his wife to accept medical treatment against her will. During her last few years Charlotte had to be hospitalized a few times for surgery for broken bones and when she was in the hospital we did what we could to get her treatment for the bipolar illness as well. Other times, when the bipolar became particularly unmanageable, we had her hospitalized for that alone. That was a tough call, but I have no regrets on that score as the care she got while in the hospital really helped her. Those times were like islands of serenity in a sea of turmoil.

Charlotte's last years were a difficult time for her as well as for her family. It was tragic that she had to endure so much pain when she had worked so hard throughout her life to give joy and comfort to others. When Charlotte finally passed on in January, 1988 we gave her a Christian Science funeral, just as she would've wanted. At the funeral were many folks who hadn't seen or spoken to Charlotte for years, but who remembered some good turn she had done them or their family. I'm sure she would've been glad to see those folks again and to know that they remembered her for the good-hearted person she really was.

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Looking back I can only say that Charlotte was a wonderful mother to me. She and Dad made many sacrifices on my behalf, most of which I never even knew about. I remember both of them being at my bedside every night when I was a little girl (how

many parents could say that now?). We were poor through my grade school years, but I never even realized it. As a plasterer Dad had to balance a mortar board filled with heavy dollops of plaster on his shoulders all day and Mom crocheted countless runs in ladies' silk stockings for 10 cents a run, on top of all her housework –while I had tap dancing, piano and voice lessons. Depression? What Depression? That was just something in the newsreels for all I knew. My parents worked hard to make my childhood a happy one in spite of the hardships *they* endured. That's real love in my book, and that's what I'll remember most about them as long as I live.

--**Fin**



“Depression? *What* Depression?”
Phyllis Preston on top of the world.