

LISTENING TO CORN GROW



MY CHILDHOOD
ON A NEBRASKA FARM

MARILYN HOEGEMEYER

For my sons,
Stephan Becerra and Joshua Becerra

ON THE COVER:

Always ready to travel, I perched on the bumper of Grandpa Fred and Grandma Gertrude Brinkmeier's beige Plymouth, a big, fancy car with whitewalls and a Venetian blind in the back window. They parked it along the side yard of our Nebraska farmhouse during their visit from Missouri.

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“MEMORY IS THE DIARY WE ALL CARRY ABOUT WITH US.”

— *Oscar Wilde, Irish author, playwright and poet*

“WHAT MATTERS IN LIFE IS NOT WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU
BUT WHAT YOU REMEMBER AND HOW YOU REMEMBER IT.”

— *Gabriel García Márquez, Colombian novelist and screenwriter*



FOR ALL MY LIFE, I have been carrying around memories of my childhood on our farm in Nebraska and stories of my school days in our nearby one-room country school. Friends and family, especially my sons, Stephan and Josh, have listened patiently as I described some moments, both ordinary and some “can’t believe you survived” that!

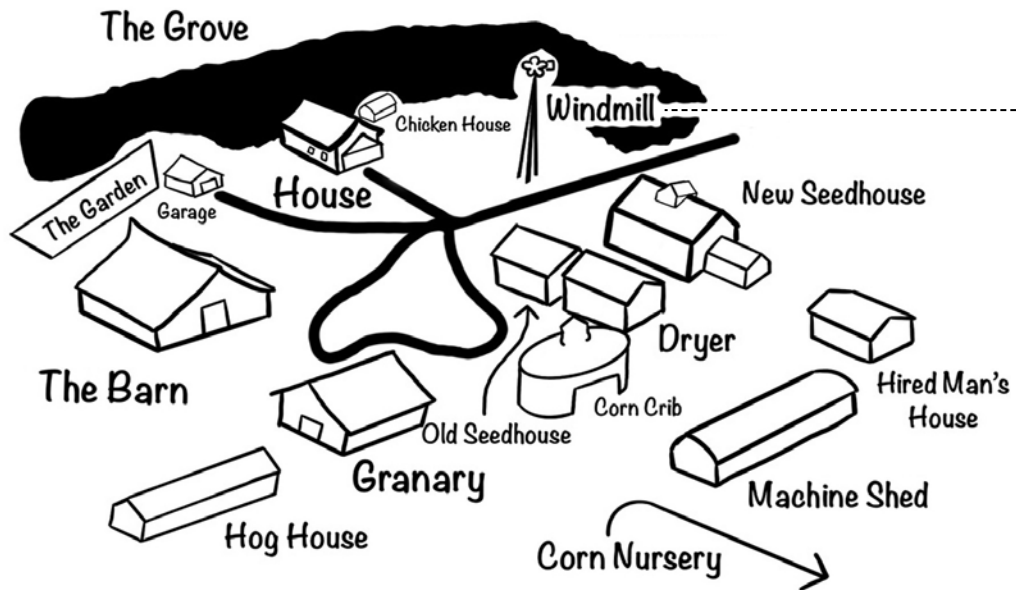
Now, finally, in 2020 with the Covid-19 pandemic requiring “stay safe, stay home” isolation, these memories, these stories are written, recorded as I remember them.

These memories are mine alone. That is worth noting. Others who were present and experienced the same moments might remember them differently. Certainly these memories have mattered in my life. They have shaped me in great measure, made me who I am. When I wondered if I was simply succumbing to nostalgia for life in the past, it helped to read Nebraska author and poet Willa Cather’s words: “Some memories are realities and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again.”

My aim here is to present reality — as I experienced it. I have used the real names of all those who influenced my growing-up years. I have tried to honestly describe my blissful, but also sometimes, fraught childhood living on a Nebraska farm and attending District 16 in the 1940s and 1950s.

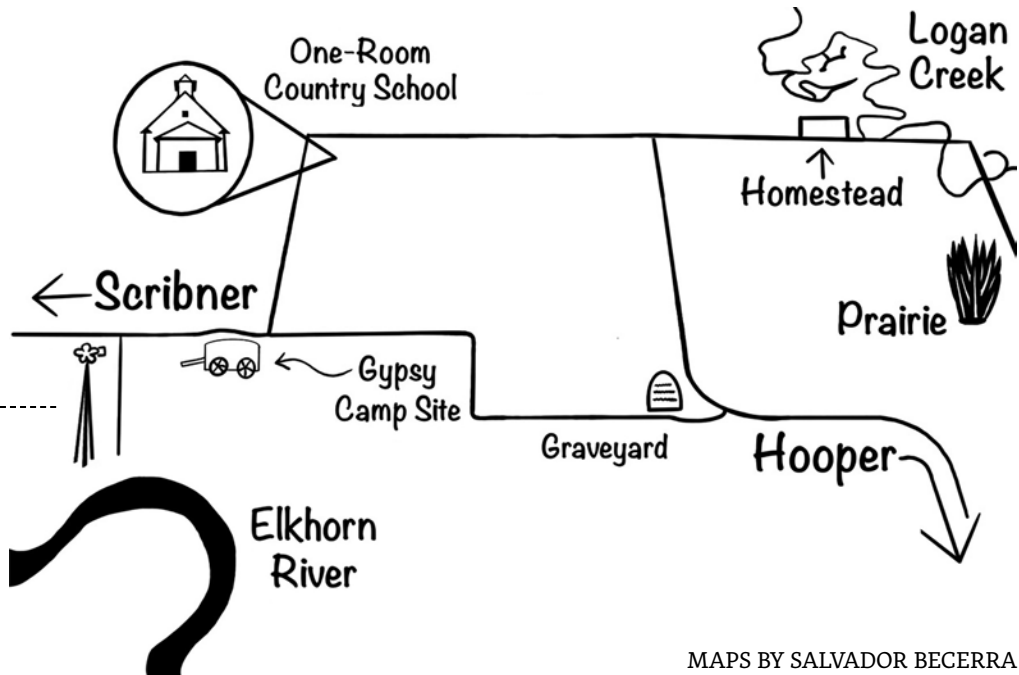
—*Marilyn Hoegemeyer*

AERIAL PHOTO, CIRCA 1950, AND MAP OF OUR HOEGEMEYER "RIVER FARM."



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PROLOGUE



IT WAS MID-AFTERNOON and 110 degrees when I was born in an Army hospital in Wichita Falls, Texas, on Saturday, July, 15, 1944. No air conditioning in those days. No fans in that Army hospital “delivery room.” I weighed 8 pounds, 6 ounces. First baby. My 5’2”, 120-pound mom managed. And she only mentioned it a time or two as I grew up!

During those years of World War II, all materials and goods went to the war effort. People donated their iron skillets, scrap metal including tin cans, food from their “Victory” gardens and fabric. So, it wasn’t surprising that there was no baby bed to be found for my arrival. My parents, Leonard and Carolyn Hoegemeyer, did what other new parents did: They emptied out the bottom/largest drawer of their “chest of drawers,” lined it with a blanket and pillow case and that became my bed.

When he heard the story, my son Stephan teased: “So when night came, they just closed the drawer up until morning. That explains a lot of things, Mom.” His brother Josh concurred!

That was my beginning.

In 1945, when Dad was discharged from the Army Air Corps, he, Mom and I moved to the farm in northeastern Nebraska where my Dad was born and raised. It is there that I took first steps to the barn during milking, rode Dad’s pony, Patch, around the farmyard, shook mulberries from a tree with Grandpa Chris Hoegemeyer, heard the strong winter winds rattle my bedroom windows, saw the beginnings of life and how death comes, sometimes unexpectedly. It is there that my character was forged. I learned to be responsible, resilient, resolute.

Facing page: My early introduction to a cornfield — Grandma Emma and Grandpa Chris, holding me, soon after we arrived on the farm after World War II.





For a time, after World War II, Chris and Emma Hoegemeyer's son, two daughters and their spouses all returned to the Hoegemeyer farmhouse. Here, left to right, Emma Hoegemeyer, Lillian Hoegemeyer Hawks, hidden, Carolyn and Leonard Hoegemeyer and I enjoyed a chicken dinner at the kitchen table. Grandpa moved out of the way of the photo, which was taken by Bob Hawks.

The farmyard was my playground. It provided security and was protected by our grove, a double row of Austrian pine trees that were hand planted along the north and west of our place by Grandpa Chris and Grandma Emma soon after Grandpa built the farmhouse in 1916. Dad, as a boy, watered each tree to keep them alive and growing during the 1920s and the dry years of the '30s.

The grove protected us in winter from snow blowing horizontally at 50 miles per hour from the northwest. And from violent summer thunderstorms that bent those pines, whipping their long, pin-sharp needles, making them howl in the wind. But those pines didn't break. They were always there, keeping us safe. Dad would walk out beyond the grove to see if rain clouds were moving in the right direction to bring much-needed moisture, to watch for a sky with green-tinged clouds that could bring hail or to gauge whether the weather report on the radio was accurate.

The rest of the world beckoned beyond the grove.

To the north, fields of blooming alfalfa, bright green oats and deep green corn stretched for miles, interrupted only by roads a mile apart, laid out by early surveyors of the Nebraska prairie. Here and there were other farmsteads — a house, a red barn, a granary, corn cribs, hog and chicken barns — often protected by their groves of planted trees that helped shield all who endured the cold winters, hot summers and the always-present Nebraska winds.

To the west and south, the land gave way to tree-lined 90-foot bluffs that dropped down to the Elkhorn River, which flowed east another 40 miles to the Platte River and into the Missouri River. There were freshwater springs that gurgled from those bluffs below our farm. They fed an oxbow lake in the bottomlands where large cottonwood trees, whose flickering leaves, bright green in the spring, then yellow in the fall, made sounds in the wind like distant lapping water. There were elms and willows, mulberries and the occasional bur oak and black walnut. They created a haven for wildlife — deer, coyote, fox, beavers, hawks and cranes, raccoons, skunks, opossums, muskrats, red squirrels and jack rabbits.

Just two miles east, the land dipped down to the valley of Logan Creek, which in the spring became a fast-flowing tributary of the Elkhorn River. The 2-mile-wide valley lifted into hills that continued east for 20 miles, all the way to the Missouri River. These lands had long been tended by the Omaha, a tribe that met and welcomed Lewis and Clark along the Missouri River in August of 1804 as the explorers and their crew made their way west to the Pacific Ocean. Lewis and Clark called the Omaha people “Mahar” and noted that the name Omaha means “those going against the current.” Today the Omaha reservation runs along the Missouri River about 60 miles north of the city named for them. It includes the beautiful undulating hills that extend to the bluffs and the river below.

I ventured beyond our farm’s grove on my own for the first time when I was 3. It’s my first memory. From kindergarten to 8th grade, I walked the mile and a half from our “river farm” to and from our one-room country school, District 16, just as Dad had. I imagined mountains in the giant cumulus cloud formations that floated in the bright blue Nebraska sky. I saw rivers in the ripples of heat waves on the gravel road ahead of me.

I’ve yearned to travel all of my life. And I have — to South America, to Asia, Europe, all over North America. Still, the 20 acres of never-plowed prairie land in the Logan Creek bottom, part of Great Grandfather Casper Hoegemeyer’s Nebraska homestead, is dear to me.

My grandchildren, growing up in Omaha and in St. Paul, Minnesota, in the 21st century with all its technological tugs and pulls, patiently explain over and over to me how to create a new computer file, how to save photos to the Cloud, how Instagram and TikTok work. They roll their eyes when I once again forget and say “supper” for what they call “dinner.” They can hardly imagine my childhood with only a radio placed high on top of the refrigerator and, on the kitchen wall, a wooden telephone, metal mouthpiece in the middle, a receiver with a long cord hung on a hook on the left side and a crank on the other side to ring up neighbors on our 13-party line or to call “central” for long distance.

Especially for you, my inspiring grandchildren, for Sebastian and Salvador, Isabella, Angelina and Magdalena, here are my stories.



I am in my pajamas, sitting with Grandma Emma in a rocking chair, just before bedtime.
PHOTO BY BOB HAWKS

FIRST SOLO TRIP



MY VERY FIRST MEMORY is the day that Mom took my baby sister Ann in our 1940s-era gray Plymouth Coupe to Hooper, 4½ miles away, to buy some groceries, leaving me, 3 years old, with Dad and Grandpa Hoegemeyer. Dad was working in the machine shed and Grandpa was hoeing in our garden near the house. I wanted to go, too. Sometimes when we went to shop at Fleers' store, we got an ice cream cone. No, Mom said, not this time. So I talked to Grandpa for a while, then said I'd go see Dad, across the farmyard fixing some machinery. Dad was too busy to talk, so I soon wandered off and headed down the lane, instead of going back to Grandpa, as I told Dad I would.

I knew the way. Out the lane, turn right on the road to Hooper. I was nearly to the John Schroeder place, about a mile from home, when Pete Sick came along in his old pickup truck. He farmed a couple of miles farther east. He stopped and asked me where I was going. "To Hooper" to find Mom, I told him. He helped me into his big, old rusty truck and gave me a ride. Right back home. Dad and Grandpa were wondering where I'd gone. Pete told my Dad he knew right where to take me. I was the only red-headed girl around. Dad scolded. I cried. And Mom came home. My first solo trip. I didn't get where I wanted to go. But I got back home. All was well.

FORGING AHEAD



UNLIKE MOST FAMILIES in our farm community, who had both sets of grandparents living nearby or sometimes right in the same house, we had Grandma Emma and Grandpa Chris Hoegemeyer living in Fremont, where the “H” Street Grocery’s candies and ice cream were just pennies or a dime, and where there were playmates so nearby: Dickie Sims, who lived across the street, and Linda Hauser, who lived next door. Grandma Gertrude and Grandpa Fred Brinkmeier lived on a farm near Hannibal, Missouri, then a nine-hour trip by car. It meant we traveled a lot more than most others — almost every week to Fremont and at least once a year to Hannibal.

On one of those long car trips to Hannibal, I was desperate to get there and desperate to get out of the car. “Where are we?” “Where are we now?” my version of “Are we there yet?” I whined from the back seat. Repeatedly. When Dad said, “We’re at Monroe City, about 20 more miles.” I jumped up and down and yelled to “Let me out, I’ll walk!” “I want to walk. Let me out.” At first Mom and Dad laughed. Finally, Dad told me in his stern voice to sit down and be quiet and to emphasize the point, he swung his arm over the front seat into the back seat of our beautiful new 1950 turquoise Studebaker so I had to sit back down or get swatted.

There were three of us in that back seat then: Ann, Tom and me. I usually sat in the middle, so they could lean on me if they fell asleep. Baby Susan was in Mom’s lap in the front seat. When Nancy arrived, she sat on Mom’s lap and Susan joined us in the back seat on my lap. It’s amazing to me how most children these days climb into their car seats or the back seat and buckle up immediately, many without being told. Some even warn their parents that they are not yet buckled in. I honestly hate seat belts. I know it’s safer with them. I know they are required. But sometimes I yearn for the old days when we bounced along in the back seat or next to the driver on the front bench seat and didn’t feel harnessed up like horses.

TEAMS OF HORSES



WE HAD TWO TEAMS of horses when I was a child: Tom and Queen, and Patch and Maude. Like many farmers, we continued to use horses into the late 1940s and early '50s, before tractors became more affordable and common. Tom and Queen were tall, chestnut brown with black tails and manes. They had to do heavy work — pulling plows, the disk, harrow, planter, the corn picker, cultivator, baler and hay wagons. And they pulled the old wooden-wheeled wagon that we used to plant oats. Dad taught me how to hold the reins — between my index and middle fingers, with my thumbs holding the reins down in my hands. Then he tended the seeder in the back of the wagon. Tom and Queen knew how to walk a straight path back and forth across the field. But I loved pretending I was in charge. “Whoa,” I’d say when we reached the end of the field. Dad pulled them around to make another trek across the field. Then I “took over” again. Such a feeling of power, holding the reins of those big horses.

Tom and Queen became notorious in the neighborhood when they galloped away one day, not having been tied up properly when Dad and the other workmen came to the house for their noon meal. The pair were already on the main road and running as fast as they could, harnessed together in all their gear. Dad ran to our Studebaker, told one of the men to get in and drive! Off they went down the lane, turned left as the horses had and sped along until they caught up with Tom and Queen on the straight road heading north, just past the Peters’ farm. The man driving told Mom later that Dad ordered more speed and to drive up as close to Queen, on the left, as possible. Dad opened the passenger door, slid out and jumped up on Queen’s back like an acrobat at the circus, grabbed the reins and managed to pull the horses to a stop! He rode them all the way back to the farm like that. Gave them a drink, hitched them up and drove them hard back to the field and for a full afternoon of work. They had better never try that again. And they didn’t.

BREAKING GOOD



THAT WASN'T DAD'S ONLY episode of bravado or, in his view, "getting the job done." He once broke one of our horses he bought wild from somewhere out in the Sandhills of Nebraska. After the saddle was on, he needed repeated tries to get up on the horse, a beautiful buckskin we named Cookie. He rode her around and around and up and down, just like in a rodeo! After more than an hour, Cookie followed him docilely back to the water tank and into the barn for some feed and hay.

Our Missouri grandparents happened to be visiting. Grandpa Brinkmeier was outside watching with me, my sister Ann and brother Tom. He gave me a look, which I understood: Your Dad is going to kill himself and leave you kids for your mother to raise.

TO THE BOTTOM



WE THREE REGULARLY got to ride down in the feed wagon when Dad drove our first little tractor, a Farmall “C,” down to the bottomlands near the oxbow lake. The lake, fed by a number of freshwater springs that flowed right out of the river bluffs, provided fresh water for the wildlife and the hogs we raised there. A dozen small sheds, one for each sow we raised, were where they gave birth and nursed their piglets. We replenished their feed and checked on them every week or so.

The lake flowed onto the Langemeiers’ land next door to our farm so, in addition to the fenced border, Dad had constructed a barbed wire fence across the lake. Once when Tom, Ann and I were along for the ride, he found that the fence was loose, floating away into the middle of the lake. Good that he always had some tools along, in case he needed to repair the sheds. After feeding the sows so they’d gather away from the lake, he got the tools out, took off his shoes and socks and all his clothes, except his boxer shorts.

Before he got into the water, he threw a big rock into the middle. I remember that it was because there might have been water moccasins lurking about. (My brother tells me he doesn’t think there were ever poisonous water moccasins in the lake.) Nothing slithered out so he waded into the lake and then swam out to the middle to untangle the barbed wire and pull the loose end back to shore. He made sure it was taut and nailed the wooden end to a nearby post on land. Then he walked back to the wagon, where we were all watching, got back into his clothes, socks and shoes, checked on the sows again and drove us back on the two-track little road that led around and up the bluff and home. I told Mom the whole story when we got home, so amazed and proud of my strong, sure Daddy, who could do anything. Always “getting the job done.”

DRIVING UP



ONE SUNDAY AFTERNOON, to save time, Dad drove our Studebaker straight up out of the bottomlands, directly up the river bluff, about 90 feet to the farmstead above. Up and over the terraces that had been carved into the hillside to prevent soil erosion. Up and over. Down. Up and over. Down. Every time, we hit bottom with the car. Mom was in the passenger seat, holding on to baby Nancy. The other four of us were hanging on in the back seat. Dad didn't want to take time to drive the two-track road at the bottom of the river bluff and up the more gentle slope around the grove and to the farmyard. We had driven down that little road on a Sunday afternoon adventure — maybe to check to see if the wild grapes that grew down there were ripe yet.

It didn't seem fun anymore. Finally we got to the top and Dad stopped at the 8-foot plank gate that led to the cattle yard. Then he told Mom to get out and open the gate. She gave him a look, handed Nancy back to me and got out. She unwired the gate from the post and tried to move it through the muck of the cattle yard. Dad could see it wasn't budging and so he put on the emergency brake, got out, slammed the car door and opened the gate. Mom was furious with him: "Too bad you didn't marry a female Goliath," she said as she headed back to the driver's side of the car and drove it through. Chores got done. Supper got made. We got cleaned up and into bed. And not a word was said.

COULDN'T BE TAMED



YEARS LATER, DAD WAS in the cattle yard looking over the load of new Angus yearlings he'd bought from a rancher out in the Sandhills. We fed them hay, corn, oats and protein and when they were market weight sold them at the Omaha stockyards. A couple were especially appealing for 4-H calves. Nice straight backs, short, sturdy legs, nice-looking heads, shiny coats and full tails.

The first one he singled out and moved into another yard near the barn started running around immediately. With her tail straight up in the air. She looked a little wild in the eyes and didn't stop running. But she was beautiful, so Dad went to get a couple of rope halters and with help from several hired men, holding gates to crowd her over to the fence, got one halter on her while she bucked and pulled away. He held on and tied her to a fence post. She didn't stop moving or pulling, so he put another halter on her the opposite way so she could be led from either side and kept under control, one man holding a rope on one side, Dad on the other. The heifer didn't stop bucking or pulling. But between the two they managed to get her out of the cattle yard and tried to walk her around the farmyard. She didn't stop bucking or pulling, so finally Dad got his rope around a tree that stood between the house and the dryer and tied her up there.

"We're going to call you Dynamite," he said, smiling. After chores were done, he took a bucket of feed over to Dynamite and a bucket of water. She bucked and moved around and kicked both over. Dad filled the bucket of water up again and left the corn and oats on the ground, figuring she'd calm down eventually and eat and drink.

We could hear her out there thrashing and bawling all night. In the morning, the water bucket was tipped over again. She may have eaten a little of the grain. It was mashed into the ground and hard to tell.

Her eyes still had that wild look. Dad just shook his head. And when the morning chores were done, he got that little Farmall “C” tractor out of the machine shed, drove it over to the tree, managed to untie the rope from the tree and tie it to the tractor and began driving it slowly back to the cattle yard. At first, Dynamite resisted. Pulled back hard from the tractor. Then maybe she saw where she was going. Several men stood near the opened gate as the rest of the Angus inside gathered closer to see what was happening. Dad stopped inside the fence, the gate was closed and then he got down and managed to loosen the halter and slip it off her head. At first she ran among the other cattle, bawling, tail in air. Finally she calmed down and headed for the water tank.

Dad culled out another good-looking yearling for me and had her halter-broken in less than an hour. He had me lead her over to the special small cattle pen next to the machine shed where we tended our 4-H calves. Eventually she would follow me around the farmyard without a halter.

I called her “Sally.” But that’s another story.