

Walter Doll historical tapes

This time it's Doris's turn

MARCH 21 - 1991

by Marion Litscher Erickson

Part 1 of 2

The historical tape is reeling as usual, only this time Doris is the interviewee.

Most of us like to boast of humble beginnings in rural America. Doris is no exception to this boasting. Along with the other 'rural greats' she can boast that she won the race with the doctor at the farm home on PF where she was born. Winter was coming early that fall in Wisconsin, Oct. 23, 1928, at the home of Carl and Grace Litscher.

Doris reviews, "I already had a 2 year old brown-eyed sister sitting in the baby crib. About five years later a brother, Lenard, was born; and five years further along the line, a brother, David.

"I'm of pure German Swiss stock on both sides of the family. My grandpa, John Litscher, came from Switzerland when he was 17 years old, and Grandma Susanna Bartnick Litscher came from Germany when she was 12 years old. Grandpa Litscher was a mason with a good sense of humor. He claimed he saw the mermaids when he crossed the Atlantic. Grandma, Susanna, was a kind, humanitarian, who had a homespun philosophy of life.

"Father's family consisted of Rose, Walter, Carl, Dick and John, each an individualist in his own energetic style.

"Rose met with a bit of trouble when she had her own campaign going against fighting German relatives in World War I. Robert LaFollette, Sr. came to her rescue and everything turned out fine. Edna Ackerman Ehl, who roomed with Jake and Rose Litscher Meyer when she taught school at Cedar Hill, recalled, 'Rose was a wonderful person. She would be outside running the steam engine and the next minute she would be in the kitchen baking the most beautiful angel food cake, and, cooking dinner for Fighting Bob LaFollette.'

"On the other side of the family, Grandpa Felix Sprecher, a Black Hawk farmer, and Grandma Sarah Wintermantel Sprecher were also of Swiss German descent. Their parents were the pioneers. When Grandpa Sprecher was around one was aware of his presence. At times he had a jovial wrinkle in his eyes



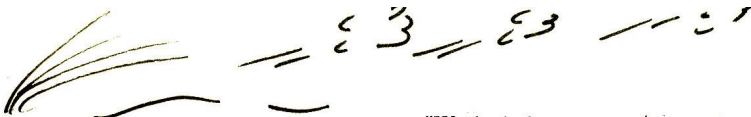
Grandma, Sarah Wintermantel Sprecher, was a well organized, steady person with a flare for drawing and was a beautiful seamstress. Aunt May, mother's only living sister, enriched our lives by giving us experiences that farm kids might not otherwise have, like taking us to Cliffy Kaufman's restaurant for one of those sundaes, with hot fudge melting real ice cream, and taking us to the new Prairie du Sac outdoor pool for a swim.

"Our family farm was located about 15 miles west of Prairie du Sac on Highway PF. We didn't go away very often. It wasn't necessary. We had the most beautiful things in the world right where we were, hills all around us to climb about in summertime and knolls at the foot of the hills for sledding in winter. We had a well constructed play house built by Grandpa John Litscher, and Father. It was fully

furnished and had beautiful morning glories growing around the front door to greet the sun in the morning. We had cows, pigs, dogs, cats, horses and chickens each with their own personalities. I could roam around the silo area, which was built inside of the barn. That was my medieval castle, dark and intriguing.

"I was 9 years old when we got our first rubber tired tractor, a Farmer's Union. I had the good fortune to be the driver for the grain harvest that year and many more. It was a delight to work with Father because he had such an inner energy and joy for his work. It was fun to scramble around in the house trying to help mother with the work, too.

"We had a big hill we called the blackberry hill because everyone liked to come and pick blackberries, even our Wintermantel cousins from Iowa. Sometimes we would take a lunch along and sit amidst the logs and bushes eating.



hoping not to see a rattler crawl out. The cows also grazed on the flat top of the blackberry hill. It was always an enjoyable hike at the end of the day to go and get the cows.

"One time Lenard and I were nearing the flat, where the cows liked to graze about and hide in the grasses and bushes to make their round-up a challenge. All at once an outrageous storm seemed to appear out of nowhere. I grabbed Lenard's hand and turned to go back down the hill over the rugged cow trails lickety split. I looked up and the trees were wild. The sky was wild. I thought, 'Oh, my goodness, is this the end for Hansel and Gretel?' When we got down to the windmill the water was up to our knees and we still had nearly a half a mile to get home. I felt victorious when we got back home except that we didn't have the cows. About a half an hour later the world was clear and peaceful. I walked around the hill behind the barn and looked down the road. There were the cows waiting patiently by the windmill.

"Country school was great. I liked the fact that we had to walk two miles to school. When we were little it was quite a challenge for mother, Grace, to get us bundled up for the walk.

"My teachers were dear people. The first two years I had Miss Klotz, from Denzer. I really felt foolish when she found a note I had written to myself that said, 'I like my teacher.' Then, in third grade I had Miss Gross and then, Miss Simons for short times. Next Evelyn Padrutt Schoephorster came to help us along until we got our permanent teacher for the next two years, Lena Vogel from Reedsburg. Evelyn was friendly and caring, and one couldn't help but like her though she was a bit strict during school hours. Nora Conner from the Baraboo area, was my teacher during my last four years of rural school. She was bubbly and creative. During this time our father was on the school board.

"At the time I attended Pine Grove Rural School, kids who came from the north on PF were Rischmuellers, Gassers, Boettchers, Buddy Hager, Seitzes, and later Buehlows. For a time Landons came who lived in one of Boettcher's houses. Coming from the east were Enges and Steubers, and later from the south, Raceks, Rosenbaums and Klotzes.

"We had pine trees and a wooden ladder in the woodshed to climb on. We played the old games, 'fox and goose' in the winter, 'birds in the nest' and 'wind the clock' in better weather. The most exciting piece of playground equipment was the ocean wave, related to the merry-go-round, only we could soar up into the air and down again.

"During the last four years (grades five through eight) of my elementary education we were fortunate to have WHA radio programs broadcasting from Madison. Some I remember now are 'Science' with Ranger Mac, 'Let's Sing' with Professor Gordon, 'Let's Draw' with James Schwallbach, and 'Rhythms and Games' with Fannie Steve. They were great, like having a one to one relationship with a specialist. Professor Gordon wrote his own song book each year and had a big song fest for multitudes of Wisconsin children in spring in Madison. We sent our art work to James Schwallbach for evaluation and how exciting to hear your name on the radio for honorable mention drawings. Mr. Schwallbach's theme was, 'We DO NOT copy.'

"Our trek home from school at the end of the day could be a nature hike, an Olympic challenge or play in an imaginary world. Headed home, north on PF was a creek in spring that raced along heading for Witwen. When we were in the lower grades, my father made Marion and me each a good-sized wooden, ship-like boat with a string on it so we could have more fun playing in the creek on the way home. Horrors! One time the stream swished my boat away, string and all. There it went gushing away. I was saddened and walked home. The next day, what a surprise! Nathan Enge came rushing into the schoolhouse with my boat. The creek formed a huge triangle, with the school as a right angle, stretching from PF going north to PF going west. As my boat reached the bridge on west PF Nathan rescued it. What a hero!

"The roads were graveled. The corners were more like right angles and hadn't been streamlined. Buehlow's hill (where Maurie Enge is now) was steeper. There were wild grapes growing on the fence around Rischmueller's corner. They provided a sweet sour puckering snack in fall. We would scout the roadsides for interesting spring flowers and plants. In winter we would lie down and make angels in the snow or hike along a 'mountain trail,' the crusted snowbanks, along the side of the road.

"George Yanke drove the road grader to smooth the gravel and

when we hit it just right, he kindly had the fun of letting us jump aboard and ride home at the back of the grader. The transportation was slow enough so that when we reached Ferdinand Keller's place, at the foot of Buehlow's hill, we had time to jump off and get the apples he had left for us in a hollow corner post in a fence around his lawn, and jump back on the grader again. The last couple years in grade school I timed myself to see how fast I could finish the two mile trek."

Doris attended Prairie du Sac High School and graduated in 1946. She explained, "All of the town kids knew their way around. As for me, I had the embarrassment of popping into the wrong room, at first, for classes. At that time, Mr. Doll was teaching only history classes. A group of us were gathered about a desk in his room one time and I am sure the laughter, that was too loud, was caused by me. Mr. Doll dryly asked me to leave the class for the day. Which I did. But, then, again when I drew a picture of my favorite history character, Socrates, he posted it on his modest bulletin board. That balanced my emotions. I continued my interest in art, drama, and physical education, including basketball. I liked the hot lunches. We were lucky if we could get into the line for second bread and butter sandwiches.

"Mrs. Alice Meyer was a great 'Mother' for eight of us girls. We stayed at her home nights now and then. We'd crawl around in the spacious hallways upstairs during the night and scare each other.

"In those days Sauk and Prairie always played the football Homecoming game. The dance was held at each school on alternating years. I was elated when Marion was elected queen in 1943. Two years later when I had that same honor I thought the kids probably voted for me to be kind or something. It was war time. June Greiber (Dettman) made my crown out of white cardboard and two shades of yellow crepe paper.

That artistic ability, evident in the sketch of Socrates Doris sketched in history class, was given encouragement by another

outstanding person in Doris' life, high school principal Arlie Koten. Doris relates, "We had no art classes but Mr. Koten presented me with an art award graduation night because I always helped everyone I could in that capacity. Rev. Charles Bender gave the Baccalaureate address in which he emphasized, 'What I am going to be I am now becoming'."

The tapes are tuned on Doris

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Part two of two

After graduating from high school Doris (Litscher Gasser) attended the Sauk County Normal in Reedsburg and graduated in 1948. There she enjoyed drama, art and sports along with academics.

She states, "This education was most practical. We started practice teaching after six weeks of the first year. The instructors were personable and we had a lively class, perhaps spiced up a bit by a group of G.I.s who came back from service to join our course." Doris began her career in education teaching in one room rural schools in Honey Creek, Stone and Irish Valley.

Doris explained, "Our curriculum was pretty much guided by the state and county. Enrichment activities, which can be the most valuable part of education, was for the most part, left to the individual teacher. The children were dear, cooperative and caring. Evelyn Accola reminds me and others now and then that I was her teacher. I hope it is a happy thought. At the time I thought it was good for teachers to do their own janitor work. It balanced the day.

"One time we were running out of kindling and I didn't want to bother anyone so I took (yes, I had permission), my father's two ton Dodge truck with my little brother, David, along and went up to our wood-sawing site near Oscar Rischmuellers and loaded a half a load of slabs. We delivered them to the wood shed of the school ready for me to slit for kindling to start fires."

Doris then moved on to teach in Badger Village in the early 50s. She recalls, "We had children from plant workers as well as children of University graduate students who commuted to Madison daily. A highlight for me was the time Evelyn Schoenoff and I wrote and directed the Christmas play for 300 children. What a nice ovation we had!

"Badger had an all woman teaching staff and the community demanded basketball for boys to compete with other schools. Hilda Cavanaugh, county supervising teacher, requested that I take the assignment. I enjoyed it. It was different.

"I tried to teach a United States history course to seventh and eighth graders built around the personalities of the presidents. There

wasn't time to work it out properly so I can't say it was a great success."

From there Doris went back to her home area in Honey Creek to teach with the Tower Rock consolidated school. The school wasn't ready for classes as scheduled and teachers were assigned, with an overload of pupils, to the one-room schools until they could move into the new school. Doris recalls, "Moving was a lot of work. Things were kind of unfinished when we started, but dedicated people like Andy and Eva Feigl, the custodian and cook, helped Tower Rock School on the road to success.

"Like most other teachers, who graduated from a two-year normal school course I started to further study education during the days I was teaching in Badger. Eventually I received my bachelor's degree from Platteville State College and master's from the University of Wisconsin-Madison (1961) plus further credits from various places.

"My outstanding experience in all of my higher education was a project I created in government to use in teaching upper elementary grades. I made tape recordings of 16 local and state government officials with a 150 large-sized flip chart to accompany them. It was interesting. I felt victorious, especially after I had hauled that 50-pound reel tape recorder around the Capitol only to discover that I had

to carry out a research project with the material. That I did, with the help of Hilda Cavanaugh and teacher Carrie Licht from West Baraboo.

"I had a brief article written on the project in the national education magazine. About the same time I had 'Socrates, the Snowman' with my illustration, published in the Grade Teacher, which I later put into book form."

Doris taught college students art and supervised practice teachers from grades one through three in Sheboygan County Normal. She supervised public schools for the state in Green, Columbia, LaCrosse and Monroe counties.

She states, "Supervising was a delightfully versatile job. An outstanding event was the regional State Historical Society meet for all upper graders in the area. It was held in New Glarus with Secretary

of State Fred Zimmerman as guest speaker. Godie Schutz, a typical Swiss gentleman from the old country, held our planning meetings in the back room of his tavern in New Glarus. We also planned big county-wide conservation days for seventh and eighth graders, including field trips, demonstrations and speeches with foresters, agricultural agents and our own assistance and planning. This was abolished with consolidation. How fortunate there is a new upsurge of interest to save our earth now again.

"The handwriting was on the wall that reorganization would eliminate the county supervising teacher. I decided to join the the Army and teach American children of military families. I don't know the reason, but I had to go to Chicago to get my physical. I was in line with a bunch of young men and all at once the announcement came from the loud speaker, 'Take off your shirts!' I said, 'I'm not going to do that.'

"I was fortunate to have met a Colonel in the Chicago Airport, who was headed for the exact destination that I was, Camp Zama, Japan. That was great for me. I was at the bottom of a bunch of orders, something that I didn't know anything about in civilian life.

"We flew to Japan with a fuel stop at Alaska. When we arrived in Haneda, the Japanese Airport, the pilot was greeted with congratulations for having made it through the stormy skies from Alaska. It was still raining. Japanese ladies came tripping out with gigantic umbrellas for us. We took a taxi to the Sanno Hotel in Tokyo, at that time an elite American Officer's Club, prior to that an elite club for Japanese officers. Now it has been demolished in the name of progress. We had a snack and headed for Camp Zama. The Colonel's wife was an individualist who gave me a rundown on the American-Japanese wife's organization. She was proud of their school system under the leadership of Mr. Kunkle. Unfortunately they were undergoing a change, in which the Air Force would be taking over the military educational system in that part of the world. The Colonel and his wife gave me an evening tour of the camp, featuring the Officer's Club, with a bar and money jingling slot machines. They introduced me to the general. It was delightful. I felt like a million dollars.



"The next day I was assigned to the smallest of dingy rooms in a large khaki colored dormitory with a toilet and shower some distance down the hall. There was a monotony about the place. It was a downer. I was delighted when I was ordered to head north to the Island of Hokkaido to Kuma Station next to Chitose, about an hour from Sapporo, the capital. I took off with the crew in a freighter with bucket seats around the sides.

"Arriving at Kuma Station Airport was exhilarating. The sky was clear and free. The front end of the lane was opened like a big jaw and a crew member escorted me down the plank. It was Oct. 23, 1963. What a beautiful way to celebrate my birthday.

"There was somewhat of a desolate wandering around of American soldiers and Japanese civilian employees inside of the quonset building. There was a weird saw-like hum from the planes in the background. It was exciting. Hokkaido was wonderful from day one. I was the last of the teachers to arrive for the school term and was met by the principal, a slightly built gentleman in a blue suit and well greased heavy, black hair. The Japanese ladies admired him and tittered shyly what their hands over their mouths expressing, 'He looks like Don Ameche,' - not that much delight for his wife who was headed back to the states.

"One almost had to have been brought up in a spirit of energy and ruggedness to enjoy the heavy, bleak, snow laden winters. I did enjoy it. Midst that climate and atmosphere people took refuge in the clubs at night to share stories, watch sumo wrestling on TV with 10¢ martinis at happy hour to inspire their imaginations and come out with tales that were more awesome.

"Unfortunately, Hokkaido was a one-year assignment and I was transferred back to Camp Zama on the main island. Highlights of those years were the delightful varieties of cultures and races of chil-

dren in my classes, the dear appreciation of the parents of the children, the puppet shows we created and presented, and our classroom international food fairs. Also, at this time I had another story published in the *Grade Teacher*. This one was entitled 'The Funniest Thing' and was written to inspire creative expression in children.

"As for my personal life on base, I had two highlights. I planned a woodblock art exhibit at the service club for a friend from Hokkaido. He was an ex-Kamikaze pilot who was alive because the war ended six days before he was to take off. He was a jewel. We would walk around the countryside outside of Sapporo and say, 'My cousin is rich. They got the family money and have a beautiful garden, but do you see those mountains? That is my garden.'

"A few years later I had an art exhibit of my own. Teaching took a lot of time and energy. It was necessary for me to paint all night sometimes to complete my pictures. (That was in a lighting situation not recommended by artists.) Then came the weeks of the exhibit and the time for my evenings of entertaining Japanese and Americans. The Chaplain's wife, Jean Irwin, whose little girl I had in my room, was a great supporter of my activities and made sure the class got to the show. Dee Beckman, the director of the service club, a stately woman, with deep red hair, had been a former Olympic swimming champion and was then training others. She was an action person who invited American and Japanese officers, including the General. At one point she sent out a message that one of my paintings was stolen. I had a little suspicion it might have been an advertising gimmick.

"If one remains in a foreign country long enough there is time to travel. Four different trips I especially remember in Japan were through Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku and Tohoku area, with my little red 14" x 14" suitcase and three cameras in a case. I did some stupid things like getting myself stranded on some remote peninsula where everyone had tickets to get out but me. What did the Japanese do? Put me in the front seat of the next tour bus with gigantic clear windows so I could get a real panoramic view of the scenery. Well, there are multitude of stories to be saved for later writings. Back

in Prairie du Sac. I find my *Doll Historical Tapes* to be fascinating."

I asked Doris how she began the project.

She answered how she began the project.

She answered. "Joann Bacon, then the Tripp Memorial Librarian, wanted someone to tape people of historical interest for the Doll room, which had been beautifully decorated by Leah and Edward Gruber. Then, brother David said, 'Why don't you interview Roy Peterson, he's a good guy.' Roy can boast that he is the oldest businessman in Prairie du Sac. David is Roy's customer.

"Yes, people are most interesting and considerate to share their stories and I could tell something special about each of them. I'll just give one highlight. After the story of Frieda and Ernest Koenig came out in the *Star*, Ernest, in his 90s, called and thanked me dearly in his own creative way and never mentioned a gross error."

Doris was asked, "How do you choose people to interview?" She answered, "Intuition. It has been implied that I interview MY FRIENDS. If that were the case how fortunate I am to have such outstanding friends. If you know someone who has an interesting history with stories to share - drop a note."

Doris Litscher Gasser