

Memories of Marian Adams Elder, Part 1

[Taken mostly from answers to questions from her granddaughter Lorna Elder]
Grampa=Robert S. Elder Jr.; your dad=Robert S. Elder 3d; my parents=Birney
and Hazel Adams]

Family

My mother was named Philippa Hazel Paine, after her father Philip Henry Paine. My father was named Birney J Adams, with only the letter J for a middle name. His father James Bion wanted James, but his mother would only yield the first letter, J.

My mother and father met when he was teaching in the high school in Mother's hometown. He had established and was head of the commercial subjects department. He dated one of her sisters first. My grandmother didn't think it was very nice of him to switch to Mother, and Mother felt a bit guilty about it, too.

He left to become secretary of a company in Lansing before they were married, and she taught music at a girls' school in Texas for a year after graduating from Oberlin College in Ohio. Then she taught music and art in schools near Lansing where they could be closer to each other. My father's uncle [Walter Riggs] was Superintendent of the school district, which helped.

Aunt Kick got her nickname from our parents trying to get my brother Bob to call her "Sister." He said "Kikkie," so that's what I called her, too. Paul and Jean were smarter and called her Sister – still do.

Her daughter Carol was the first grandchild in the family and called my parents Dad'n and Nana. We guessed that "Dad'n" came from hearing us say "Dad and Mother".

Birth

Mother always said that my birth in March 1917 kept my father out of World War I. The United States entered the war in April and men with up to two children were eligible to be drafted. I was third in the family.

I was named Bernice Marion after my father, Birney J Adams, and my aunt Marion. She was called Aunt Mugga by our oldest cousin when she was little, and that name stuck. (Kick's husband Dick used to call me Mugga sometimes.)

My parents tried to have me say my name was Miss Marion Adams, but it came out "Mitta Maina Ahmens." Ann Adams (Bob's wife) calls me Maina sometimes.

World War I

Aunt Marion's husband, Samuel J. White, was the only relation I know of who served in the army. I remember his metal helmet and pictures of him in his uniform. He had an ashtray and cigar lighter made from hand grenades.

He was the one who taught us "Kaiser Bill went up the hill to take a look at France; Kaiser Bill came down the hill with bullets in his pants." And "Bean soup and johnny cake makes a Frenchman's belly ache; bean soup and johnny cake three times a day." Needless to say, Mother didn't think either was very nice for us to be repeating – which we did when she couldn't hear.

Early memories

I think my earliest memory is of being at Grandma and Grampa Adams house, which was around the corner from ours. I was barefoot and the sidewalk was hot from the summer sun. I remember a man with a mustache picked me up, and think it must have been my grandfather. (He died in 1920 when I was only 3.)

Mother had graduated from Oberlin College Conservatory of Music and was choir director at First Methodist Church in Lansing for a number of years. My father sang in the choir, too, and on choir practice nights, Grandma Adams baby-sat us at her house. There are two pieces of furniture I remember in her house: a green Morse chair and a black horsehair sofa. I remember falling asleep one choir practice night, and when Dad came to get Bob, Kick and me, I awoke as he picked me up, but quickly closed my eyes again for fear I might have to walk home.

Grandma always had Peonies growing in her back yard. We always thought it was funny that she called them PYonies. Not too many years ago I discovered in a garden book that the botanical name (Latin) is Paeonia – which goes to show that she knew more than we did.

Grandma came to live with us shortly after Grampa died and was with us until she died in 1943 – after we were all married.

1223 N. Capitol Street

Until I was 12 we lived twelve blocks from the capitol building in Lansing, Michigan; ours was the last block north. In those days the street was gravelled. During the summer horse-drawn trucks with wood water tanks often came by to sprinkle the street in order to prevent the dust from blowing around. It was a pretty street lined with large maple trees on either side and brick sidewalks – no good for roller skating. Later our next-door neighbor had their section of sidewalk paved and we could skate there (they probably regretted doing it).

Because we were only twelve blocks from downtown Lansing and because we had only one car – as most families did – and Mother didn't learn to drive until she was 69 (after Dad died), we were able to walk the distance. There was always a parade on July 4th and Decoration Day and whenever a circus came to town. Central Methodist Church across the street from the Capitol building had a big auditorium where they showed movies on Saturdays for 10¢. I remember seeing many Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks movies there. They were the biggest stars at that time. And then there were free band concerts in a park near there with a typical bandstand in the center. Mother would take us to hear the concerts quite often – I think on Friday nights. There were concerts at the Pruden Auditorium also – Mother and Dad had season tickets, and whenever he was unable to go with Mother, she'd take one of us. (For many years Dad was president of a Credit Association for auto parts manufacturers, and had to attend meetings in Detroit, Chicago or New York.) The only concert I remember was John Philip Sousa (the March King) and his band.

Our driveway was quite long from the street to the small barn at the back of the yard, and was covered with cinders that had to be replenished. The cinders always had lots of nails mixed in them from scrap wood that had been burned to make them. Dad paid us a penny for each nail we found. We spent days looking for them, each of us with a tin can or pail of our own to put them in; this made counting them easier each day. Pretty smart of our dad to hire his own crew; it kept us busy and prevented possible tire punctures.

The house had been built by a family during horse and buggy days, so they had built the small barn and also a chicken house. When Mother and Dad bought the place, they scrubbed and fumigated the chicken house, then papered the walls inside to make a playhouse. Between the barn and playhouse was a tree just made for climbing – the trunk curved so that it was very easy to climb to the roof of the playhouse. As we grew older, we probably spent more time straddling its roof than we spent inside. A plum tree grew on the other side of the playhouse with a branch large enough to hold a swing. Dad built a teeter-totter in that same area and a large sandbox next to the barn – our own private playground.

The ground level of the barn was divided into a parking area for the car and two storage rooms – great places for hide-and-seek if you didn't mind cobwebs. The upstairs, which had been the hayloft originally, was one big room. Dad put a basketball hoop on the back wall, which made a good place to play except for one thing. Most of the light came from the door where hay had been tossed in and out of the loft. The bottom of the door was at floor level, so it was easy to lose the basketball through that opening – or toss it out if one wanted to be mean or get even.

One more story about the barn ...

After we had radios, it was necessary to have them attached to an antenna, so Dad put his on top of the barn. In order to climb up there, he nailed narrow strips of wood like steps up the roof, which had wood shingles. By that time my brother Bob was old enough to help him. He carried climbing the barn roof into his own form of exercise or activity by sliding back down. He would stoop down, put his arms around his knees and slide. When he got almost to the bottom, he'd jump to the roof of the playhouse – and never missed. In all the years of that, and all of us sitting on the roof of the playhouse, none of us ever had a broken bone.

One day I went to get something from what was called “the closet off the bathroom” (a storage and linen room) when I glanced into the sleeping porch. There was Dad sitting on the edge of the bed with Bob over his knees with his bare bottom sticking up. I was surprised because I thought he was about to get spanked, and I didn't know he had done anything wrong. He hadn't – except to get a sliver in his bottom from sliding down the roof. That was the worst that ever happened there.

Our roofed front porch was another place for many activities, especially on rainy summer days. I had my very first haircut there. Kick talked me into playing barber and cut all but the back two curls off one day. Our neighbor across the street saw us and phoned Mother to tell her she'd better go see what we were doing. That saved the two curls in back, which were always longer than the rest.

I remember helping Mother hem diapers on the porch one day. These were for an expected baby – who was Jean. In those days mothers made their own diapers out of flannel. Mother taught Kick and me the “feather stitch” for hemming. Kick and I were only 7 and 5 at the time, so I doubt we did very many.

We used to walk along the railings from one post to the next and I don't remember anyone ever falling off into the big Spirea bushes that grew along the front and side of the porch.

Many summer evenings were spent there waiting for Dad to come home from playing golf. He was a member and at one time President of the Walnut Hills Golf Club near Lansing. When we thought it was about time for him to arrive, we'd each guess how many cars would turn the corner onto Capitol Avenue before his. Quite often he would bring candy bars or ice cream for all of us. One of our favorite candy bars was named Fat Emma – very much like today's Milky Way only square.

Pets

Our first pet was a little dog, part Airedale, whose name was Sandy. He was a nice little dog who always stayed outside. His only problem was that whenever

we went out in the car, he'd chase us for miles before giving up and going back home.

Later we were given a pure white collie whose name was Laddie. He was an affectionate dog, too, but he tried to bite the tires of cars going by the house. He eventually succeeded - and that was the end of Laddie. To keep him pure white, we washed him in a big wash tub in the back yard and put "bluing" in the rinse water. (Bluing came in a small bottle, and was a dark blue liquid that women put in their rinse water to keep white things from turning yellow.)

Someone gave Paul a black and white rabbit. He kept him (Peter) in a cage in the back yard. One day Peter tried to get out, and the top fell on his back and broke his spine. An aunt, uncle and cousin were staying with us until they found a house. The uncle killed Peter and Mother cooked him for dinner, but nobody could bear to eat him.

Cars

The first car I remember was an Olds "touring" car. That meant open sides with curtain-like coverings to close it in. No glass side windows then. Cars had running boards - a kind of step that ran along the side of a car to step on when getting into the car. There was usually a big toolbox that sat on a running board on one side of the car.

The next car was a Chrysler sedan - dark blue and a pretty car, I thought. That was the first car I remember having a heater, which was like a register on the floor in front of the back seat. There was much more legroom in the back then. We used to go for a Sunday drive quite often, sometimes to look for wildflowers in woods near Lansing. We took my mother's parents sometimes, and in order to get everyone in, Mother would put two folding camp chairs in front of the back seat for Kick and me to sit on. The problem in cold weather was that we had to sit facing each other with our feet on the heater. When our feet got so hot we could no longer stand it, we'd start complaining and we were allowed to close it - until the rest complained of being cold.

Music

When I was in the 5th grade, we started having city-wide music festivals. Each grade in all the schools learned a song and sang it together; Junior and Senior High bands and orchestras performed, too. That year we were sitting at the front of the auditorium where we could see those on stage. I was fascinated by the cello, and told Mother that night that I wished I could play one.

There was always music in our house. When we were little, Mother would start dinner and then say, "Come on - let's sing." She played the piano and we all gathered around and sang from a community song book called *Pat's Pick*.

We sang some of the old Stephen Foster songs, Scottish songs (my great grandmother was Scottish), Civil War songs, and lots of children's songs – Twenty Froggies Went to School, The Brownies Dance. My Aunt Marion (Mugga) had been a kindergarten teacher and gave Mother some of her song books. (I used to sing some of those songs to my children especially during bad storms to keep our minds off the thunder and lightning. And some I've sung to you and Matthew. Do you remember? "Sleep Baby sleep. Your father watches the sheep. Your mother is shaking the dreamland tree, and down come little dreams on thee. Sleep Baby sleep.")

Later we practiced our music lessons. Kick and Jean and I took piano lessons. Jean started when she was 5 or 6 and continued through 2 years of college. I switched to cello after one year and Kick quit after 2 or 3 years. Bob took a year of trombone lessons and Jean and Paul both had voice lessons. So almost all our music was classical. I can only remember having 2 pieces of popular music that Kick bought once: one was "When the red, red robin goes bob, bob, bobbin' along." The other was "Mood Indigo", I think by Duke Ellington.

I always practiced an hour every day and then Mother and I would play together before dinner or in the evening. Dad always asked us to play "The Swan" by Saint Saens.

Jazz and Swing were the popular music then with all the "Big Bands". Mother used to ask us to please turn down the radio because all she could hear from other parts of the house was the bass going "thump, thump, thump."

[In Junior High] I was allowed to substitute orchestra for sewing one term, and that was my first orchestra experience. There were three other cellists. Mr. Chambers, the Director, had each of us play the same piece and asked the other orchestra members to vote on who would be first cellist. Believe it or not, they chose me.

Being in the orchestra meant playing for special occasions and, because we played for plays, we didn't have to pay to get in. The same was true in High School, too. I always had to wear dresses with full skirts because of playing cello.

When I was a junior in High School, the Lansing Civic Symphony Orchestra was organized and I passed the audition and became a charter member. There were about 10 cellists, and I started out at about 7th or 8th and finally worked up to 3rd place. For our first concert, Mother bought me a really pretty dress with a full black skirt, pale aqua satin top with full sleeves, and a black vest and sash embroidered with flowers to match the top.

In High School we had a quintet – 2 violins, a viola, a cello (me) and piano. We played at meetings and teas etc. around Lansing. We even got paid once in a while, and we had fun together – 4 girls and 1 boy.

Christmas

Thoughts of Christmas started with the arrival of the Fall edition of the Sears catalogue. We took turns looking through it and writing our names on pictures of toys or clothes we'd like to have. Mother did most of her shopping from that catalogue, and it was always so exciting when big boxes finally arrived before Christmas.

The next sign was early in December when Dad would bring boxes of Christmas decorations down from the attic for us to look through. We'd say, "Oh, I remember this ornament" or "This is my favorite." Then they'd be put back again until it was time for decorating the house and tree.

The earliest tree I remember had brass candle holders. I don't remember lighting them, but I suppose they were lit at times. The first electric ones were the kind where if one bulb went out, they all went out, and Dad or my brother Bob had to find the one to replace.

A week or so before Christmas when we were getting ready for bed, Mother would gather all 5 of us in her bedroom, then send one of us out of the room while she told the others one gift that that person was going to receive – with promises not to tell. The year I had asked for a cello, my little brother Paul (3 years younger than I) said to me one day that he knew what I was going to get, but, "I'm not going to tell you, but it starts with c-h." Being so much older, of course I knew that it was a cello.

We didn't have a fireplace in our first house, so our stockings and those of our cousins who stayed Christmas Eve with us were all hung from the stair railing. One year some older boy cousins and my older brother Bob hung a pair of Dad's pajama pants instead of socks, and "Santa" filled them with onions and potatoes.

Christmas day was not different from these days except we had dinner about noon after all the other relatives had arrived. Because we had the largest family, we had the largest house, so we got together there. Eight of us – parents, Grandma Adams, and we 5 kids – Grandma and Grandpa Paine and 2 aunts who lived with them, and 4 pairs of aunts and uncles and 8 cousins = 28 people. We had a big round dining room table that could be extended by at least 3 leaves. Then Dad had someone build a long extension table that fit the end of the dining room table, so that together, the whole table stretched into the living room. We had either 2 turkeys or a turkey and a goose – always one at either end of the table.

When everyone had arrived, one of us Adams kids would have each person draw a slip of paper from a bowl or hat. On each slip we had written a job to be done – the simplest ones for the younger children. The jobs included: set the table, put chairs around, wait on table (i.e. refill bowls), clear the table, serve dessert, carve the turkey, do dishes. Everyone had something to do. Carving the turkey or goose was the most important, and we saw that Dad was always one of the carvers.

The Depression

During the summer of 1929 we moved to a new house in one of the newer neighborhoods. Mother told us we had to take good care of the house because it had cost Dad \$16,500.

The stock market crashed in October of that year and banks closed for a week or so. The cash on hand was all that was available during that time. My father and mother must have kept their worries from us, because I don't remember ever being frightened. We were lucky because my father was Assistant Secretary of the Motor Wheel Corporation and in charge of office personnel. I remember talk of his having a 10% cut in salary at least once – probably more. Motor Wheel was the largest manufacturer of brake drums in the country and made car wheels, too, some with wire spokes and others with wood spokes. (He always had a load of rejected wood spokes delivered every year for use as kindling in the furnace.) We never felt we were hard up for anything, but Mother had ways of stretching food. I never knew that creamed-style corn was so thick until I was married and had to cook, because in those years there were 8 people to feed (parents, grandmother and 5 kids). Mother took a can of corn and added a quart of milk to it – we loved it even though there wasn't much corn in it. We had those darn green beans, boiled potatoes and milk (a favorite of my father's) very often. Pasties made a little meat go a long way and were a favorite dish.

Mother had always made some of our clothes and taught Kick and me, so we were making some of our own clothes in High School. At one time Mother tried mending the worn-out soles of our shoes with a rubber sole that glued on. Sometimes they didn't stick very well and would start flapping when we walked – utterly embarrassing.

We always had vegetable gardens and Mother did lots of canning. We drove out in the country to favorite farms to get potatoes and apples and other vegetables and fruit in season. Dad knew which mushrooms were edible, and would get permission from farmers to pick them.

So I don't have bad memories of the Depression. We learned not to go into debt. Your grandfather wouldn't let us buy anything we couldn't pay cash for or pay off in 2 or 3 months. He even insisted on paying cash for our house. He was

upset with me once after we moved to Oregon because I bought the World Book Encyclopedia for \$10 down and \$10 a month for 10 or 11 months.

Reorganized by Bob Elder