

Leola Gruenzel's St. Marcus Memories

Leola Stabelfeldt Gruenzel (1905-2002) was a lifelong St. Marcus member whose parents and grandparents were also St. Marcus leaders. Our oldest photograph is of Leola's father at St. Marcus School in 1888. Her grandfather John Stabelfeldt was a carpenter who worked on the construction of the 1881 church building. Leola was a 1919 graduate of the school and provided significant leadership in the Women's Service Guild, Altar Guild, and church office.

In 1994 the congregation celebrated the 100th anniversary of our historic school building. Leola sat down and wrote the following memoir about her experiences at St. Marcus.

“When I came to St. Marcus (School) from public school, I had just finished first grade. I apparently already knew what was being taught in 2nd grade, so I was put into 3rd. I mention this because when I was in 7th grade, the school was accredited and we all had to cram in two grades of learning in one year. I don't remember how many children attended our school in those days but it seemed like 200 or more. In fact, when my class graduated, there were only 13 students; that was the only small graduation class St. Marcus had had to that point.

In my 6th year, the parents of the school children and the school board got together and wanted our school to be equal to the public schools because our children could not go to public high school until they went to an eighth grade somewhere to get caught up. Mr. Dorn was my teacher for 3rd & 4th grades and Mr. Herman Martin for 5th & 6th. When I was in 6th grade negotiations were in the works for accrediting the school. Mr. Henry Braun was the principal and taught 7th and 8th grades. He did not wish to participate in this program, and since he was nearing retirement, he decided to leave St. Marcus. Mr. Martin advanced to 7-8th grade, so he was my teacher for another two years. The whole school worked very hard, because each grade had to master two grades in one year. We passed with flying colors, which put St. Marcus on the map.

During my years at St. Marcus, every child was expected to be in church every Sunday morning, and most of us attended Sunday School too. If a child was unable to attend Sunday morning service, an excuse had to be brought from home as to why he or she missed. All the children sat in the balcony under the supervision of two trustees. Unruly children were reported to the pastor and the next step was a session with the pastor. I remember it well because here I was a junior in high school with a summons from the pastor! Pastor Dornfeld said it was reported to him that I hadn't been listening to the sermon last Sunday because I was writing all during the sermon. What happened was, I thought I was being smart; since I was going to be looking for a stenographic job the next year, this would be a good time to practice my shorthand. I had to keep writing because he kept talking. This was a first, I think, because Pastor Dornfeld was speechless for a while. He then said that I wasn't being unruly because I didn't disturb anyone, but it did upset the trustees so I shouldn't do it again.

During my grade school days the janitor and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Kressin, lived on the premises. Their living quarters were on the school's first floor in the northwest quadrant. They had a kitchen, bedroom, living room, and bath. I recall that Mr. Kressin was usually grumpy with the children, and he wasn't their favorite person either. For some reason I liked the old gentleman, and when he fell and broke his hip and couldn't do his janitorial work, Mrs. Kressin had to do it all with the help of the 8th grade boys. They pitched in willingly, as though it were a privilege.

In 1914 the church was being built so all our Sunday services as well as weddings were held in the school's assembly hall on the second floor. Many dinners and bazaars were held there until Rev. Dornfeld decided that we shouldn't have bazaars anymore. At first there was grumbling, especially among the women who liked to stitch, sew, crochet, or knit and wanted to show off their wares, but they got used to it after a while.

The room in the southwestern corner of the basement of the school was the first church office. When Rev. Dornfeld decided he was spending too much time doing clerical work, he took it up with the school board and trustees. The result was that Edna Vitense was hired. She was Rev. Dornfeld's suggestion. She had no office experience, but he thought she could learn, and learn she did with the help of several businessmen, one of whom was William Jens. He had started as a messenger boy at Wisconsin Ice & Coal and worked his way up to be head bookkeeper. He was an intelligent man and gave Edna a lot of help. She was a good worker and an asset to St. Marcus, even though she would not accept any help from us girls who thought we knew something about office work, but she did all right without us. She had a method all her own and it worked.

The little office where Edna worked during the day was the meeting room for the evening: the trustees met there, the school board, the choirs, the Bible classes, and young people's society. The choirs soon moved upstairs to the assembly hall because they needed space. In those days we had a men's choir of between 50 and 60, a ladies choir which had about the same number, because they were mostly spouses of the men in the male choir, and a Mixed Choir which had about 80 or so members. We had an excellent mixed choir when Christian Heine was director because he was no-nonsense. We rehearsed for two hours every Tuesday evening with a 15-minute intermission and there was absolutely no talking while one voice was rehearsing. Also, if a member was absent on the Tuesday before we were to sing in church on Sunday, he or she was not allowed to sing on Sunday.

Sometime in the 1920s, I think, the bowling alleys were installed. There were four lanes and three rows of benches along the east wall of the bowling alleys. The first two rows were for the bowlers and the last row for visitors or the "rooting gallery." On the south side, where the kitchen came to be set up, was the bowling alley manager's desk, which was actually a candy and gum case so we could spend an extra dime or two while bowling.

In those days the kindergarten and 1st grade were in the southwestern classroom on the first floor, 2nd and 3rd grade were in the northeastern classroom, 4th & 5th were in the southeastern room, and 6th-7th-8th were upstairs. Dorothy Gamm taught kindergarten and 1st grade, but later her sister, Lenora Gamm, was hired to teach kindergarten and Dorothy was given 1st and 2nd. In 1926 the custodian moved out and into the 1884 parsonage, because the Dornfelds had moved into the new parsonage on North Ave.

After the custodian no longer lived in the school building, the northwestern quadrant was converted into a kitchen. Now they could have dinners in the upstairs hall, but it was quite inconvenient to carry the hot food up the stairs and bring the dirty dishes back down. That job was the men's, and it worked for a while until the men got tired of it. This is how the dumbwaiter came into existence. It was a marvel because the food didn't get cold on the way up. All it took was two strong arms to pull the ropes. When it was new, all the men wanted to play with this new toy. The dumbwaiter really got a workout.

It was when I was in 8th grade that Eleonore Otto wanted to start an English Sunday School. Pastor Dornfeld reluctantly gave his permission, as long as it would not interfere with the German Sunday School. We started with four pupils—Eleonore’s sister Sarah, ma, and two other girls from public school. It didn’t take too long to increase the enrollment, though. We had to have the Sunday School on Sunday afternoons so it would not interfere with the German classes. I went to both for a while but then dropped the German, which made my teacher very unhappy. She said she was going to report me to Rev. Dornfeld. It wasn’t too long before we were allowed to meet on Sunday mornings because of pressure from the parents whose children went to public school and wanted their children to go to English Sunday School in the morning. Religion was not taught in English in school, so we were confirmed in German. (*Note: the last German catechism class was in 1926*).

These were the roller skating years. In the school hallway, just about half of the coats hanging there had roller skates neatly placed beneath them. The ball-bearing skates made it possible for us to go home for noon lunch as long as the weather permitted. Since my brother and I lived a mile away, there was no time to waste. We learned the routes, avoiding uphill streets on the way home and taking the downhill streets on the way back. This was an excellent break in the day. It was exhilarating to get away for an hour, get home and see Mom, who had lunch waiting for us, and then back to school again. These were also the years for playing jacks and jump rope during recess. The boys played ball and raced around the playground and the girls played more ladylike games.

The school children sang for every funeral. The classes changed off. As far as I know, there was only one death of a school child at St. Marcus. She was Clara Henning, my cousin, aunt of Pastor Tom Henning of New Ulm. She was 12 years old and the funeral procession stopped in front of St. Marcus where all the school children lined up on the church steps and sang a song. Clara died of diphtheria, so she could not be brought into church. Even though she had this infectious disease, Rev. Dornfeld went to see her regularly, but the Health Dept. said he had to keep his hat and gloves on.

Then there was the Ladies’ Aid. They had more than 100 members and the meetings were always well-attended. Katie Jeske was president of this organization for 20 years and Millie Stabelfeldt (my Mom) vice president for 19. Even though they were a generation apart, Katie and Millie were very good friends and very compatible. The Ladies’ Aid met on the first Thursday of every month. The school children could always tell when it was Ladies’ Aid day because of the smell of coffee and bakery, which filled the whole building. If there was food left, sometimes some of us would be lucky enough to get a piece of coffee cake.

There was a cabinet on the east wall of the assembly hall, between the two doors, which contained china, glassware, silverware, and linens, which were the property of the Ladies’ Aid. Anyone who wanted to was welcome to use these items, but they needed Ladies’ Aid permission. The cabinets were locked and my mother was the keeper of the keys. I did a lot of chasing around in those days (thank goodness for roller skates) because I had to deliver the keys to the party in charge of the function that required use of the dishes. Then I had to retrieve the keys again. Everything was always in tip-top shape.

The Ladies’ Aid, choirs, and Young People’s Society had many parties in that hall and they played bingo for prizes. Members could bring guests, but the functions were not open to the public.



The Young People's Society! These were some of my happiest years. This organization had about 65-70 members. The rules were that you had to be 16 years old to be eligible for membership. I was the only exception. I got in when I was 14; at 16 I was elected secretary and my brother Milton was president. The group met every Friday; one week was Bible study and then the alternate week was either a business meeting or purely social. Both were well-attended. The YPS also reserved the bowling alleys the first Saturday of every month.

In our teens and early 20s we spent many, many evenings at St. Marcus: Sunday mornings, of course, was for church. Sunday afternoon would find many of us in the bowling alley. Monday night was men's night and the Ladies' Choir rehearsal. Tuesday was the mixed choir rehearsal. Wednesday nights were usually committee meetings of some sort; Thursday night was ladies' bowling night and men's choir rehearsal.