

Remembering Erling Rognli (1929-2013)

Eulogy written and read by his daughter, Judy (Rognli) Hoyt

Erling Reuben Rognli, was born May 19, 1929, in Menomonie, Wisconsin, the youngest son of Norwegian immigrant parents, Oskarda Maria Olson and Peder Rognli. He had 3 older siblings, sister Gena, almost 20 years older, a brother Olaf, and a sister Anna.



Erling Rognli as a young man

The family moved from Wisconsin to Kentucky where Erling's father Peder, helped build highways. Erling spoke of the stark differences between the north he knew and the south he moved to in the mid 1930s Oskarda, his mom, wanted dad confirmed as a Lutheran, so lucky for dad, not many Lutheran churches existed in Kentucky at the time. Somehow, and none of us are really sure how this came to be but dad moved back to Wisconsin without his parents and lived with a Mormon pharmacist and his family in Menomonie. He babysat for their children (a male nanny ahead of his time), attended high school, and was eventually confirmed as a Lutheran per his mother's wishes. This is most certainly true. After couple years, pharmacist was killed in a tragic plane crash, his widow and her family moved back to Utah and dad was without a place to stay to finish high school in Menomonie.

He found a room for rent above a café and worked in the cafe flipping burgers, and continued with his high school education. His 1947 senior year book noted him as "best dressed", so dad's dapper style with hats started at a young age.

So imagine a 14 year old adolescent boy, leaving his parents boarding with an unrelated family, becoming essentially homeless due to circumstances beyond his control, finding his own job/lodging, completing his education all without the benefit of family support. Without a doubt, Erling was resilient, motivated and definitely a determined young man.

After high school graduation, Erling moved to Washington State to live with his two sisters while their husbands completed their military service during WWII. He babysat his nieces, worked part time for Safeway Stores in Everett Washington and attended Everett Junior College graduating in 1949 with an Associate's Degree.

He moved to North Dakota as his oldest sister had moved there with her family. He attended NDSU in Fargo, there he met the love of his life, Iris. They were on a double blind date, but neither was the other's blind date that night. However, phone numbers were exchanged with probably I would hope a couple of flirtatious glances, and my parents were off on their romance and partnership that lasted 62 years. No car, no money, but mom was a telephone operator in Fargo, with access to a telephone at work In case you remember a call you made in the Fargo/Moorhead area back in the spring of 1949 was not connected immediately, well, our family apologizes and thanks you for your patience as my parents were courting via phone which eventually led to us.

Erling Ruben Rognli and Iris Mae Bowers were married in Moorhead on December 20, 1950. There was some concern among Iris' neighbors in Lake Park that this marriage would never last as Erling was from the big city, Fargo, and mom was a country girl, I guess it was considered a mixed marriage at the time.

Erling graduated in 1952 from NDSU with a Bachelors of Science in Agriculture. Packing up his wife and first born son Duane, they moved to Ulen, Minnesota for dad's first job as an agriculture/mechanics teacher. Dad was quite a dancer, he was known to cut a rug or two. In Ulen, a baby sitter were arranged for baby Duane, and mom and dad went to a dance. Next morning, dad was called to the principal's office, was told that teachers are not to be seen dancing in public, and I believe that was the day dad and mom decided to check into other options in Minnesota. This led to a job in LeCenter for four more years, and two more children, Roger and Ann.

Teaching was tough enough, but as in all jobs, we like the support of our supervisors, same with Erling. After attending a conference of Ag instructors, he was told of a superintendent in Silver Lake, Mr. Howard Smith, who treated teachers fairly. He applied, got the job of Mechanic-VoAg instructor. Iris, Duane, Roger, Ann, and a Judy on the way moved to Silver Lake in the summer of 1958, where Erling and Iris have lived the last 55 years. It was in Silver Lake that Erling and Iris met Lester and Loretta Williams, the new teachers in Silver Lake. Uncle Les and Auntie Lori as we kids came to know them, were my parents lifelong friends, babysitting each other's children, fishing, traveling, camping, garage-saleing together. There was no project these two couples couldn't tackle and accomplish together with much joy, laughter, and know how. We should all be so lucky in life to have such a caring friendship as did mom and dad with Les and Lori.

In Silver Lake, from 1958 to 1985 Erling was the agriculture teacher/industrial arts teacher/FFA advisor. This meant he taught electrical controls, ventilations and insulation; hydraulics and horticulture; small engines, agri-business and farm management oxy-acetylene and arc welding, electric motors, building construction, shop safety, electricity, animal science, general shop, woodworking and drafting.

As the FFA advisor, he mentored FFA members in cattle judging, dairy judging, crop judging and whatever other judging was to be done. In the early years, dad would load up our red station wagon with FFA boys, travel to Lamberton or St. Paul or Brookings, South Dakota for judging contests. And in those days, there were no signed parent permission slips or travel reimbursement forms for gas/mileage. He did it because, well—just because he was dad, and it was just another way to impart knowledge. He was very proud of the many young men and women who participated in FFA, many who were on Agriculture/Mechanics teams, who placed 1st or 2nd in competitions in district and usually would end up in the top 10 in Minnesota state FFA chapters in raising pheasants for release as part of Pheasants Forever program.

Teaching roughly 20 students in each class for 5 days a week for 36 weeks a year for over 25 years, give or take, he was the teacher of about 4,000 students. That in turn amounts to 40,000 fingers and thumbs. In all the years of safety in the shop lectures prior to all those students using band saws, rotating saws, drill presses, jigsaws and lathes, only one student ever experienced a serious injury. A safety record any corporation these days would be proud of. Ah, and those wood shop projects, remember the fish trivet or the ducks with the movable wings or the little chairs or sawhorses. Dad's legacy lives on in these projects we all have in our houses today.

Dad was practical with his teaching techniques, allowing his students to learn hands on, trying to impart how learning something today was translated to everyday life. From using welders to soldering guns to lathes and jigsaws, most of us would pale with having 20-30 impulsive adolescents in a room with dangerous equipment and fire. To Erling, the learning needed to be practical for the students, working on their cars or tractors, constructing a building at the fairgrounds in Hutchinson and even raising a pig in the school shop. He had quite a time naming that pig, so as not to offend a student, teacher or school employees. Luckily there were no Sallys at Silver Lake Public School in 1970's and so Sally the pig it was.

Dad was an integral part of the FFA Children's Barnyard at the Minnesota State Fair. He built the incubator that hatched the chicks, made the Ferris wheel the newly hatched chicks hopped on, and again loaded FFA members in the red station wagon, drove them to St. Paul to participate in the great Minnesota get together. Mom did kindly remind us this week that it was she who got volunteered by dad to clean that same incubator after 12 days of hatching chicks--my mother, the good sport, who my dad volunteered on many occasions.

The FFA smelt fry was a community event and I bet many of you never knew that my dad volunteered my mom to bake 50 dozen frosted molasses cookies, that's 600 cookies, for dessert over many years. Dad would somehow convince teachers and neighbors to drive to Duluth, fill milk cans full of smelt, then round up FFA kids and his children to sit in the school shop and clean smelt. This was all done to raise money to send students to FFA camp, pay for trips to judging contests and hopefully fill that red station wagon with gas.

Dad believed in community involvement and did so as a member of the Silver Lake Lions Club, helping with the Fly-in Pancake breakfast at the airport, assisting with funding and constructing the tennis courts. When we were little, he would flood a skating rink near the softball fields and because he was who he was and had the knowhow, he wired our stereo speaker to the light poles so we could listen to music while we skated.

I marvel that this man, who supported himself without much family around, yet still knew and valued the importance of family time. And so started the era of family camping. Erling got a deal on canvas, that old heavy non-water proof green stuff and decided this would make a great tent. So Iris and Lori set up sewing machines, and sewed what must have been the heaviest tent of all times, without windows, not at all waterproof with heavy iron poles cut and welded for tent supports. This was the first tent which we used for many years on our camping trips. A little ingenuity and imagination from Erling, voila, camping was born in the Rognli family. Summer vacations involved camping close to wherever dad was taking a class to keep his teaching license current. We traveled to Washington state to see relatives in our old red station wagon, no portable video screens that popped down from the ceiling, no electronic video games, no air conditioners, no drive through fast food, no Quik Trips or Holiday gas stations. Our only snack was winter green Lifesaver mints. They were cheap, no mess, you could savor the same one for miles. Anyone who has known my dad, knows that there was a minty smell that permeated his being, that's because he always kept winter green lifesavers in his pockets.

His ability to fix anything, rig something up, make something work better was amazing. Electrical tape and duct tape were his friends. Dad was a good artist too, mostly of farm animals. The consummate teacher, he would draw a diagram to explain any concept. However, the diagrams were always the same, the workings of the cow's stomach or the life cycle of a piglet and how those related to whatever we were talking about.

Dad and mom were able to take a trip to his parent's homeland, Norway, land of the midnight sun. Erling still spoke some Norwegian so was able to communicate with his many great aunts, uncles and his cousin Gunaar. He was honored to host Gunnar and his family and many other Norwegian relatives who visited mom and dad in Silver Lake throughout the years. Anyone who knew my dad was aware of his pride in his Norwegian heritage.

Dad was fortunate again, to retire from teaching at age 55. He and mom thoroughly enjoyed retirement, traveling from Mission, Texas from October to April each year for 20 years, where they thrived in another community with new friends. Then they would spend April to October visiting those friends throughout the upper Midwest.

A few of Dad's favorites: anything lemon flavored, a good joke, even better if it was an Ole and Lena joke, spending time with good friends, maple nut candy from Menards, the color purple, polka music, helping/being of service, hats or his "hudras" as he called them, roses, napping, Norway, his daughter Judy –er I mean all his children, dancing with mom, fly fishing for salmon, being a grandpa and a great grandpa, winter green lifesavers, teaching and mama.

A true romantic, we grew up knowing dad loved mom or "mama" as he always fondly called her. Every night before he went to sleep, he told her "I love you mama". About a week ago when dad was in hospice at Birchwood House, he was alert enough to realize Valentine's Day was soon. He asked Bev, one of the hospice home health aides to buy some flowers for mama. So on the day before he died, mama received flowers from dad.

Erling was a man of faith, though he never expounded verbally on his theology. He was a man of action in his faith by attending church with his family, being involved in his church community, and being kind to his fellow human beings. Like his mother Oskarda, he ensured that his children were confirmed in the Lutheran church. So it was he who often drove us to Lester Prairie Bethel Lutheran Church Saturday mornings for confirmation class. While we were learning "what was most certainly true in Luther's catechism", dad was at the bakery picking up some yummy pastries, usually long johns with maple frosting, that we'd share on the car ride home.

The past few years, as dad's Parkinson's progressed, we were grateful for the community of friends, neighbors, and relatives who helped care for dad and mom as well. You know who you are. You were the ones who called to check in with mom, sent cards and letters, brought apples or zucchini to the house, pulled off the highway to stop by and say hi, stopped in for coffee or to play cards, offered to accompany mom and dad on a quick trip to the casino and basically, kept mom and dad in the loop.

Norwegians aren't the most demonstrative of people, hugging, showing emotion is not their strong suit. Yet dad showed his love in many ways. After a visit to Silver Lake, when we were all grown, that long Minnesota goodbye we are all famous for in this state, would get a little longer as he insisted on checking our car oil before we left. So with us tapping our foot, dad's head under the hood, our goodbyes were a little longer, his ultimate ploy to keep us there longer, with a true concern for our safety. In the past couple of years, he must have trusted us more with our own oil, but then came the Windex bottle and paper towels as he cleaned our headlights, windshield, and side view mirrors, again a stalling method to be sure, but another sign of his love and the sadness of saying goodbye again.

So dad, thank you for all the memories, we loved you or as they say in Norway – ‘Ik likke deg’. We will miss you and all you have done for us. And you can be sure we will take care of mama and make sure she has flowers on Valentine’s day.

So goodbye dad, rest in peace.

And in Erling’s honor, the family requests that sometime soon, you check your oil. Uff da!

Mluvíte Rognli? Do You Speak ‘Erling Rognli’?

Thanks to Mr. Rognli, I still remember that Jersey and Brown Swiss cows produce more butterfat than the average Holstein. And here were some of the phrases that he would utter:

“Shay, we are not making stuff to throw out on the back manure pile!” (is what Erling said when your effort or work product was not good);

“AHH, KAH, RAHHT!” (i.e. ‘Accurate’—said when he checked your work and it was right on)

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