

REMEMBERING 8TH GRADE, 1953-54, ROSS, NORTH DAKOTA Dick Bernard, May 30, 2024

In my first 18 years we lived in 8 different tiny North Dakota towns. One of these towns, for only a single year, was 1953-54 in Ross, North Dakota, during the beginning of the first North Dakota oil boom in 1951. "Booms" are never easy, since they stress whatever the local "normal" was before. In our case, a family of seven, with five children from age 13 (me) to 5 (my youngest brother), housing was a major issue.

The photo leading this post shows my school, and the remnants of the home of my parents and ourselves from 1953-54 (the school/house photo was taken in the 1980s, thirty years after we lived there.) We seven lived in essentially two rooms, with a lean-to kitchen. We had no TV. I don't recall radio. Telephone was in the school. I slept by the furnace in the partial basement. Bathroom facilities like shower were in the school, to my recollection. Perhaps there was a toilet.

The Grade 7-8 classroom was in upper left front corner of the school. My mother was the teacher of those grades; maybe there were 15 of us in all. My youngest brother, John, was then kindergarten age, but there was no kindergarten, and he spent the year in the classroom. My Dad was the Superintendent. All their contracts were for one year only. Essentially, we were a family of migrant workers.

I remember nothing specific about my mom as teacher. This is because I lived with her, Dad and four siblings literally 24 hours a day in the school yard. She was an elementary school teacher for over 30 years, in many places.

A couple of eighth grade boys were older than we were. They were good, nice kids. I imagine they had dropped out of school earlier and came back. I don't know if they continued in high school, but I wouldn't be surprised if they did.

I was a good basketball player; the gym was in the school basement. It was truly my luxury.

All seven of us who lived in that tiny house ultimately earned at minimum college bachelor's Degrees. Two of us are retired Air Force officers; I served two years in Army. Both sisters did two-year tours in Peace Corps, one home economist, the other Nurse Practitioner.

Because we moved often – 12 houses, 8 towns in 18 years – I have specific memories for each place. We all were successful. All siblings are still alive.

I stay in touch with one friend from the 8th grade year. He retired after more than 50 years as aeronautical engineer and scientist for a major aerospace company. I knew him by his middle name. His given name was Mohamed, and he was part of a vibrant Muslim community in that area. He once told me that the hidden given name was a deliberate choice by his mom – reflecting the reality of the time.

We were Catholics, maybe the only ones in town. Muslims almost certainly outnumbered us. This Muslim community originated from the border area of Syria and Lebanon, in or near the Bakaa Valley, maybe 30 miles or so from today's Israel, earlier

called Palestine. They apparently left the middle east to escape conscription by the Ottoman Turks who controlled the area in the early 1900s. I have zero unusual recollections of the Muslim population – they were just people like us.

ADDED COMMENTS

Other things I remember about 8th grade: I think I got a coveted three-speed bike for my 14th birthday. I don't think it endeared me to my siblings.

We went to church in Stanley, seven miles east. It was a very small church. Catholics were a small minority out there. What religion you were made a difference, then.

There was no Ross Public Library. I remember reading an Ernie Pyle book about WWII, and Ernest Thompson Seton's 1898 book, *Wild Animals I Have Known*. There wasn't much variety, or number of books. Maybe that's why basketball was so much my thing. In 7th grade in Karlsruhe, another tiny town. I'd broke my leg in crack-the-whip on Dad's ice skates, right after basketball started, so my career had to wait until 8th grade.

Between 7th and 8th grade I remember a day in Minot ND where we saw President Eisenhower in motorcade and saw then-Air Force One as it approached Minot from the southeast. I think Ike was there in connection with the planned new Minot Air Force Base and Missile emplacements. I specifically remember seeing him close-up in an open convertible near a big movie theatre.

For some reason I remember a ping-pong table in the school, and the coach who was once a boxer and was very strong. He or someone else might have had a college class in music, or been in band somewhere, and I remember learning a little about clarinet. I know Ross had a tiny marching band, and there is a picture of them in a parade in Williston in 1954. But such extra-curriculars were extremely unusual and sporadic at best.

Maybe a quarter mile from our house and school were endless, immense trains going east and west on the Great Northern Railroad main line. A few years ago, I was in Ross to visit, and someone said that the trains run constantly near 24 hours a day, with only short breaks for rail maintenance. I will never forget the trains. There was nothing between our house and the train tracks.

The train was the lifeblood of most small towns back then. I remember elevators, mail pickup and delivery from trains that did not stop. Etc. Routine things then are incomprehensible to today's youngsters; as youngsters then could not imagine today's technology....

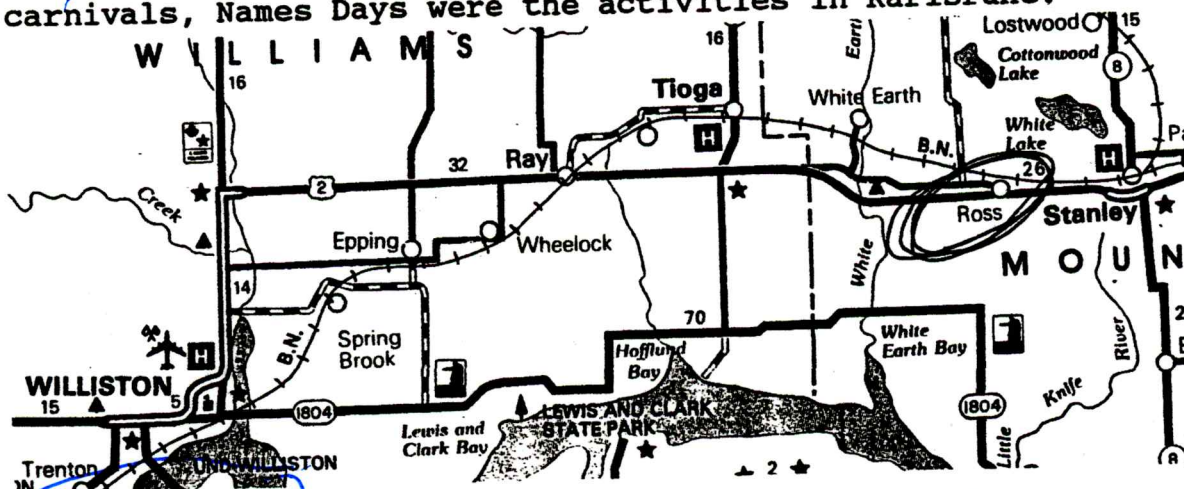
I could go on. Enough from this end. Memories are what we have left.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Duck Stewart". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

From Bernard Family History (1991)

school. We high school teachers drove the seniors to Duluth for an outing that first year.

The second year was about the same as the first. Mother did not teach and we had a home whose basement was almost full of water. There was little out of routine except the fact that Richard broke a bone in his leg and Florence had a tonsillectomy. Housing for the teachers was no concern of others. We had to make do. The second year we took the seniors to Winnipeg and Mother went with us. Don't remember who took care of you five. That is a blank to me. Basketball, iceskating [how Richard broke his leg!], carnivals, Names Days were the activities in Karlsruhe."



Ross 1953-54. In 1953 we moved again due to lack of adequate housing in Karlsruhe. This time the move was to Ross, North Dakota, a tiny town between Minot and Williston, ND. This was the oil boom time in the famous Williston Basin.

From a child's perspective, Ross was a treasure trove of experiences, belied by its small size.

Our home was alongside US Highway #2 - a transcontinental major highway; a half mile or less to the north was the main line of the Great Northern railroad, and we could watch immense trains pulled by huge steam engines going east and west. Nearby was the fledgling Williston basin, showing great promise as an oil field. Gas flares on the prairies were commonplace. Memories of the oil fields came to mind while watching the sabotaged oil fields of Kuwait burn in 1991 after the Iraq War. Ross was a bridge in time: the old ice house by the railroad tracks; a real live blacksmith plying his trade "the old time way" on the main street. It was a lesson in bi-culturalism: The North Dakota we knew was largely ethnic German and Scandinavian, and we were from French and German roots, but at Ross there was a community of several families of Moslems who originated from Syria and had names like Omar and Juma. My best friend in eighth grade was Muhammad Emmett Omar. It was the first town in

which a teacher who knew music tried to make us into a functioning band. All in all it was a rich place to live, though we put up with more than a little privation.

Ross was a mistake, Henry now says. There was no "scouting trip" beforehand. Because of the oil boom there was an acute housing shortage, and seven Bernards, including five children ages 5-13, ended up cramped in a very tiny teacherage with three rooms and basement. In addition, Henry never felt accepted as Superintendent. It was at Ross that Esther returned to teaching after raising pre-school age kids for 13 years; it was also in Ross that John began his school years - he sat in Esther's classroom even though he was not yet of school age. Richard, in eighth grade, was his "classmate".

The decision was made to leave Ross after one year. Later it was learned that the school board may have wanted the folks to return, but the housing situation was even worse - even the teacherage would not be available.

After the year in Ross we made a rare family trip. The trip was to Chicago to visit Art Busch, and presumably to meet his fiancée Eileen. Henry recalls that the trip back was 30 hours straight driving - both the folks fiscal conservatism and lack of available motels made for a very long and tiring trip. Fights were constant for "window front", "window back" and what have you.

Dad provided some additional memories of Ross on March 11 and 28, 1990: March 11: "We started out with a less than good move into the town of Ross near Stanley during the oil boom in that area. The conditions were not good. The poor teacherage was not really big enough for us. Richard had a setup in the basement and the indoor plumbing was nonexistent. We managed the one year there. I got in "dutch" the first day of school. We had insufficient typewriters for the class so we had to eliminate some students. The cry went up to the school board to get enough typewriters even though they were rebuilt and gave us problems. Then another booboo when I said we would have no annual because there were not enough students to get the production going. Then, at tournament time, I told the basketball team that they had to return from Williston for the overnight because of the damage that had been caused the year before. Then in the spring we had the band go to Williston and I cancelled the trip to Minot. To top it all they invited the previous superintendent to give the commencement address and also hired him to replace me."

March 28: "[While on the trip to Winnipeg with the Karlsruhe seniors in 1953] we signed our teaching contracts for Ross in the postoffice in Winnipeg. This was not a good move but we managed."