

Remembering Mother Remembering
Allen J. Frantzen 4-17-2015

Dorothy Birmingham was a spirited young woman. She understood that her activities mattered and ought to be recorded. She passed this idea on to her children. She kept track of movies she saw; so do I. She kept a list of books she read; I used to do that. She took a lot of pictures, and one of her sons became a photographer (see Memory Book, pp. 11-14).

When we are children, we can see that adults have history. Their past is part of who they are. They talk about how they grew up and how things used to be. For me as a child, that talk was of no interest at all. I never asked mother about her mother or father, both of whom died when I was young. Grandfather Birmingham in 1946, the year before I was born, and Grandmother Birmingham died in 1951, when I was 4. Do I dimly recall someone coming out to the clothesline where mother was to tell her that her mother had died. Would somebody have called our farm and the Carmen (b. 1935) or Mary Ann (b. 1939) answered the phone? Or do I just imagine that this happened?

Adults have history. Children have the present and the future. I see mother's scrapbook as evidence that, at eighteen, she wanted to create her own history. "Memory books" were, as Eleanore notes in her comments, standard features of young women's lives at the time. How many of our friends have their mother's memory book? I wish I knew. Even I had signed pictured of my classmates at St. William School in Alta Vista, but I didn't paste them into a book. (We took a class trip to see "My Fair Lady" in Des Moines in 1965, however; I remember that, and I have my program book from the film, and some of my classmates signed it.)

Mother collected scrapes and took pictures. She kept picture albums of our childhoods (most of this sadly lost or in hiding) and one of her albums contains clippings about Tom and me when he was in high school and I was in college. So there was a long hiatus in her record keeping, but she persisted. Mother captured a great many family events with her black box Kodak and her Brownie Instamatic. Now I've captured her book, with its scraps and images, with my Olympus Tough. This is not a professional job, but I hope it is good enough to make her collection available to all her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, if their parents are wise enough to latch onto it and keep it alive when Dorothy's children are gone.

Mother liked records and memories. Her memory book is a collection of prompts for stories and memories. We have the book; she took most of the stories and all of the memories with her when she died in August 1985. Her memory book, which unlike her picture albums escaped destruction or concealment, is now a book the whole world can see. The book is a collection of memorabilia, napkins, nut cups, newspaper clippings, postcards she took off of public bulletin boards (I find this hard to believe), music programs, and some very odd letters and notes. Each scrap comes with a story, and we can get hints and outlines of some of them, but not many and not much of any one thing.

We know from the early pages that she was a reader and a moviegoer and a music-lover and a dancer. She went out a lot. The high-school phase of the book is conventional—name cards, greetings from classmates, banquets and so forth. After page 28 things seem to change. She visited Chicago. There she is in her plaid dress with flared sleeves, holding a baby. She reports walking around what is now Chicago's West Loop, wandering into a church where commencement exercises were being held. She mocks the sermon they heard ("couldn't distinguish one word from another," she writes on the program cover, p. 29) and finds the organ music "terrorizing." So we know she was given to overstatement as well.

Diner menus, commencement programs, playbills, travel tickets piled up as high school ended and her stints at Iowa State Teachers College in Cedar Falls and then Mount St. Clare College began. She had gone well beyond Elma and Lourdes. If not exactly a woman of the world, she got around and she met some men (or "boys," want to say). One of them comes in for hard words on p. 51, one of those pages stuffed with notes and tickets, not easy to make sense of:

"To 'Frank' [typed; added in ink: "In answer to Fo (or Ed's?) note"]: You'd rather forget, then forgive me. / You left me here all alone. / You're glad that we drifted apart. / And what you call your heart / Is only a piece of stone." Signed: "Dorothy."

Ouch. This note, folded, is tucked into the envelop on p. 51, along with a very strange letter that makes a number of comments about virginity, sent to mother in January 1929. She was still in high school and it is still a high school world, but the other world is pressing in—marriage, sex, and the next phases of life are appearing in one form or another.

From about p. 55 to the end (p. 60) the items change—marriage announcements and invitations, newspaper accounts of weddings. P. 58 includes four items she wrote, including a poem and a letter (perhaps) that she must have used to practice typing, a lot of it nonsense but even so not too far from the world she lived in ("From here you may wake up in my blue heaven," for example, at a time when "My Blue Heaven" was a very popular song). She wrote parodies—of what I am not sure. She wrote some notes backwards so the notes would have to be read in a mirror. The last pages contain two images of couples kissing, one a cartoon, and two articles about women, one a scientist and the other the woman after whom the town of Elma was named, back when it was a "booming town," the article says.

I see the chaos and disorder of the memory book's last pages as symbolic of the expansion of mother's life as her high school years ended. On p. 12 she lists movies she saw in 1930, when she had long since left high school. So we know she did not compile the memory book in an orderly fashion. She had a collection of things and she fit them into the book as she could. It's not carefully planned, and that's one reason it's so hard to decipher. The bits of her writing say the most to me, even though they read like surrealist literary experiments. Mother was eager to create things, and not only to have experiences but also to record them, to make something of them.

The sides of mother remembered in her memory book are not those her children would see, any more than we saw this book while she was alive. She kept it, though; it was important to her to save this phase of her life, adventurous and young and eager for some kind of glamour and excitement.

Dorothy put this album together between 1928 and 1932, the last date she recorded. She met Jack Frantzen in 1933, it appears from the photograph album, and they were married in 1934. Their first child, Carmen, was born in November 1935, but mother's life had already changed utterly by that time and there would be, for several years to come, no time for scrapbooks and little for taking pictures.

Notes by Allen Frantzen, April 17, 2015)