

Legends of Freeborn County

Touching history closer to home

by Bev Jackson

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In November, 2001, Betty Thompson and I touched history in a neighborhood of Amish farms in northeastern Iowa. In the past ten years, Betty has made this trip several times, sometimes alone but often with her husband or other family members or friends, so she has become a familiar and welcome guest in the community.

As we headed southeast, I had a zillion questions for her. "Can you tell me about their families, how will they respond to a stranger, what do I say, can we visit a school?" Betty took each question and answered it in her friendly, knowledgeable manner, but the answers usually ended with, "We'll see when we get there."

As we approached the first farm, we were surprised to find no clothes hanging on the line. After all, it was Monday, wash day, a beautiful, sunshiny day, and everyone was expected to be home. We drove into the yard, and Ida did not come out of the house to greet us. There was no one in sight. A puzzle.

As we continued on down the gravel road, we passed a man out husking corn, his team of horses and wooden wagon, with its high bangboard rising up over the dried stalks, reminded me of the dozens of stories I've heard from people since I started my "Show and Tell" programs with the husking hook.

At the next farm, Lizzie's bright eyed daughter greeted us and then ran to the house. I only saw her once again, and that was when she peaked out through a curtained window. I later learned that, while she knows Betty very well and will visit with her, she didn't know how to respond to me, a stranger. Her mother was fine with Katie's shyness. We were lucky to be visiting at the beginning of the candy making season. The porch was blooming with bags of chocolates with pecans or coconut or peanut butter or cream centers flavored with maple or mint or cherry. "What kind would you like? Maybe peanut brittle. This pan has cooled enough for it to be broken. would you like to buy a package? We'll wrap it for you." A peek into the kitchen showed me a shiny wooden floor and a table of hand rolled coconut balls waiting to be dipped in the stainless steel bowl of melted chocolate on the wood stove. The fresh baked brown sugar cookie Lizzie gave us to nibble on was delicious. Her dress and aprons were subdued browns and blues and her hair was covered with a delicate white cap tied under her chin, but her eyes and her smile were warm and friendly, and she chatted with Betty asking about her health and her home.

Later we unhitched the barbed wire gate to drive into the school yard. I had hoped for a glimpse of the children and was rewarded with the view of their straw hats and dark jackets (for the boys) and bonnets and capes (for the girls) that were hanging on the hooks in the enclosed porch. Miss Miller closed the door behind her as she approached our car. She greeted Betty with a warm smile, and was so happy with the bag of used-on-one-side paper that I brought from the museum, and the pencils and crayons that I had purchased for the visit. When she saw the boxes of crayons, she smiled and her eyes glistened as she said "The children's eyes will light up when they see these." Betty gave her a color book of drawings by an Amish artist and she planned to copy them so all of her students could enjoy coloring them. When Betty teased her a little about disciplining the children, Miss Miller said, "They know what they are supposed to do when I give them "the look."

Throughout the rest of the day we made several other stops, buying homemade bread,

apple pies, cookies, and jam from Mary (she had been up since 4 a.m. baking in preparation for our visit), and meeting a twinkly eyed, gray haired gentleman who loves spending time in his wood working shop making doll cradles and spoons and porch swings.

As we visited with these delightful women and waved at the men who were finishing up the fall fieldwork, I couldn't help but notice how contented they seemed. It as as if they have bypassed the pressures of our "24-7" lives. I was reminded of the smells and sights of the farms we visited when I was very young - the chickens running around in the yard, a different wooden building for each aspect of the diversified farm life, and even watching where I stepped so as not to carry any manure on my shoes.

As we headed toward home, Betty said, "Well, it's time to get back to real life."