

Margot L (Lane) Lettington Recollections:

Written by Margot Louise (Lane) Lettington about a year before she passed away:

When I find myself looking back to my beginnings, some of the descriptive words that come to my mind are poverty – moving – farm – pigs – dirt – and other terms that seem derogatory to me. However, these things quickly fade away, replaced by music, laughter, happiness, and most of all, LOVE. Among the many family values we were taught, there was always love. Our parents loved each other so much and made no attempt to hide their affection from anyone. That is some legacy to have handed down to their eight children!

The earliest recollection that I have is one that even I could not believe and after I was grown, I finally made myself ask Mom if it could really be a memory. She verified the few facts as I recited them to her. I was sitting in the kitchen floor in a red and white checked dress when a young girl came to the door and Mom called her by name, Louise. Mom said this girl Louise, brought them a paper every day when I was less than a year old and she always asked to come in to see “the Baby”. This was in Spring Hill, Iowa. Earl was born while we lived there. Dad worked in the coal mines.

I don't remember anything after that until we had moved to Lucas. I was about 3 and Earl was just a baby. I recall that we were very happy to be living near Uncle Bert and Aunt Mary and Grandma and Grandpa Lane. We lived in two different places in Lucas – the green house and the white house. The green house was real close to Uncle Bert's and other than that I remember only two “important” things about it. I got a little play broom for Christmas and was so proud to be able to help Mom sweep the floors. A stray dog came in the yard and for some reason Dad didn't want it there. He grabbed my little broom and chased the dog, whacking at it all the way. You guessed it – my broom was broken. I cried and Dad cried. Mom consoled us both! Our nearest neighbor was an old lady named Mrs. Knotts. She must have been a widow and she had two middle aged daughters. Hillis was sickly and puny and talked funny. LaDema was big and loud. Both girls were very homely and most people shunned them. Of course, our Mom befriended the three of them. They never came to our house, but were delighted when Mom and Earl and I called on them occasionally. The white house was a nice little bungalow right next door to Grandpa and Grandma Lane. Dad worked in the mines and every evening at four o'clock Mom and I would go out in the yard to listen for the mine whistle that let everyone know if there would be work tomorrow. It was many years later, after Dad had left the coal mines, that I heard of the terrible fear miner's wives lived with, listening for the whistle that told of disaster.

An epidemic of small pox hit Lucas and Grandma Lane was very ill. Mom, Earl and I went in with them and were quarantined for 30 days. I can still picture that yellow “quarantine” sign on the house and Dad coming to the front gate every night to bring groceries and check on us. None of us was sick except Grandma, and Mom took good care of her until she was well. As I recall, it wasn't so bad, except for missing Dad.

After Sunday School at the Methodist Church, Grandma and I would go across the street from the church to see relatives. Aunt Sade was Grandma's sister and Uncle Henry was Grandpa's brother, so we had double cousins in their family. George Lane

lived there in Lucas, Maude Lane (Lovell) lived away somewhere, Jim Lane lived in Chariton and Maily and Ethel Lane, two old maid cousins who lived with and took care of their parents. I loved going to church with Grandma because we were all dressed up and she would tell me how pretty I looked and I thought she was the prettiest lady I'd ever seen.

I guess we were a mutual admiration society in many ways and we never changed, as long as she lived! I must say I feel very fortunate to have grown up knowing and loving both sets of my Grandparents. My recollections of Mom's parents, Grandma and Grandpa Kennedy, are very sparse in these early years when we were living in Lucas County, Iowa. They lived in Des Moines and we did not travel that distance.

I don't know of the circumstances, but when I was five, Dad left the coal mines and went to work as a farm hand for Whitt Clure who had a large cattle feeding operation near Norwood, about seven miles north of Lucas. We had a Model T Ford touring car so could go back and forth to Lucas often. The car was kept in a garage made of corn stalks.

Often, when he "cranked" the car, Dad would have me sit under the steering wheel and adjust the gas and spark levers as he instructed. Seems he had to work very hard at starting that car and sometimes he swore!

We had a big garden and at canning time, Grandma and Grandpa Lane would come and stay a few days to help. Earl and I were always glad when we knew they were coming. Grandpa would tell or read stories for hours but when he was through, he was through, no coaxing for more. "Not today" and we knew he meant it. He was a quiet, gentle, patient man who never raised his voice.

I was very secure in my family circle, but just the opposite when it came time for me to start to school. Mom always liked to tell the story about putting a dime up on the clock shelf and promising that the first day I could truthfully say I didn't cry at school, the dime was mine. After four weeks, that day came and I didn't wait for the bus to bring me home, I ran the entire half mile to claim my dime. My parents and I always credited that teacher, Mrs. Mattson with giving me the confidence I needed to be a good student all the way through school. There were no hot lunches in those days so parents would volunteer to bring hot food on wintry days. I recall Dad coming in the room one day with a large bucket of vegetable soup and some crackers.

Matthew Glen was born in this Norwood house and Earl and I were so excited to have a baby brother. My only "Glen" story at this early time was when I was sitting in my little rocking chair holding him while Mom fixed dinner. I complained that the baby was hurting me. She laughed, but came to investigate and found that he had made a big hickey on my neck.

Mr. Clure would go away somewhere to buy cattle which were carried by train to Lucas then driven in a big herd all the way to his farm. It was a Norwood event when the cattle drive passed by and folks came out in their front yards to watch. A very special treat for kids like us.

As on most farms, there were lots of cats and it seems we had more than our share on that farm. Earl loved them, Dad said they kept the rats and mice away but Mom and I would rather they went away! One time a Mama cat had kittens in our attic and they fell

down between the walls. Dad worked hard to get them out but not before the noise and odor about caused us to leave. Whew!

The evening routine was that dinner would be waiting when Dad got in . After he bathed and shaved he would come strutting out telling us how handsome he was and kiss both Mom and me. Dad had never worn a mustache, but one evening he left it on – as a joke, I guess. Well, it scared me to death and I refused to kiss him. He immediately went back and shaved it off and often told about that incident but, to my knowledge, never grew a mustache.

School teachers were not permitted to be married then and they usually boarded with local families. The Home Economics teacher at my school chose me as the model for her sewing class and they made dresses for me. Somehow I got a pretty red velvet hat to match one of my lovely dresses. The kids on the school bus teased me about always looking so pretty and dared a little boy to kiss me. Now remember, I'm only six years old! I ducked and his kiss landed on my hat. I never wanted to wear it again and have often wished I could remember how Mom – diplomat that she was – talked me out of that one.

When Calvin Coolidge, the 30th President of United States, was elected in 1923, Mr. Clure invited Dad to come to their house to listen to the inaugural address on the radio. What a thrill that was when Dad took me along to hear the radio for the first time ever! There were several people there because very few homes had a radio.

Maude (Dad's cousin) and Elmer Lovell lived in the Norwood area and we often got together with them to play cards. They had a whole bunch of kids, mostly boys and when they came to our house, Mom fixed a fancy meal and they ate like pigs. I, for one, dreaded going to their house and usually had to be scolded for being so snooty. They always had a big pan of cornbread on the table along with crocks of milk. Bowls, cups, tin cans and all sorts of things served as eating utensils. That was dinner! One time while the adults were playing cards, one of the bigger boys was smoking tobacco in the dog house and set it afire. The doghouse burned down and though no one was hurt in the fire, I always surmised someone's rear end got hurt after we went home.

Again, I don't think I ever knew why Dad changed jobs but when I was in second grade and Earl was ready to start to school, we moved out south of Lucas to work on another farm. Todd and Nellie Mauk and my parents were long-time friends and members of Odd Fellows Lodge. The Mauk farm was heavily wooded, poor land and often flooded . Our house was not too bad as I recall but it was located on mud roads that were often impassable. Earl and I had to walk over two miles in all kinds of weather to attend a one room country school . The teacher got sick during the first semester and a young neighborhood girl took over for her. We made valentines all year! The 8th grade boys were always causing problems so us little kids didn't have a chance. The Mauk's had a boy my age and a girl Earl's age. We became very good friends and had lots of fun together. One of the things I remember doing was gathering cockle burs after a big summer rain and making beautiful baskets out of them. Sometimes a cow or two would become lost in the bottom land and, living on top of the hill, we would take turns using the "spy glass" and try to spot the lost cattle.

Grandma and Grandpa Lane visited us often and Mom's youngest sister, Elizabeth would come from Des Moines to Lucas on the train and stay with us for a week or two

in the summer. By this time Glen was a toddler and most of the time I was in charge of keeping him out of trouble, which cramped my style a lot 'cause Glen was never one to stay out of trouble! One day we were all playing in a pasture when a bull jumped out of his pen and came roaring right toward us. The Mauk kids and Earl took off for the house, but there was a fence to climb and I was responsible for getting Glen as well as myself over it. I was a very tiny little girl then and I guess the good Lord helped me do it , for I still can't imagine how I could have managed it alone. Shortly after we cleared the fence the bull took our place and just stood there kicking dirt up over his head. Thank you, Lord!.

On February 20, 1925, we were walking home from school in mud up to our knees when we were met by a young man, I can't remember who he was, who told us not to go home but to go to the Mauk's house. We were tempted to go home anyway because we were curious but we followed instructions. We soon learned that we had a new baby brother whose name was to be Carl Edwin Lane.

That summer Dad took a trip to Runnells, Iowa in Polk County about 18 miles from Des Moines. As far as I knew, it was to visit his Brother, Elmer Lane. Details are not clear, however we were soon in the process of moving to Runnells. Dad had taken a job for a farmer named Thomp Erskin. He was probably the wealthiest farmer around there and also owned shares in other interests including the Diamond Jo coal mine which was only a stone's throw from the house we lived in. The trip from Lucas county in our old Ford was a rough one. The car broke down at least twice but Dad managed to fix it and get us on our way. This was August so it was most unbearably hot in Iowa. When we finally arrived at our destination, for some reason we could not get into the house right away. Mom, Earl, Glen, Carl and I sat under an old apple tree for what seemed like hours, just waiting. Carl was only about six months old so he cried a lot (Of course, Carl always cried a lot when he was little, maybe that trip started it all!).

Our new house, once we got moved in was quite nice, probably the nicest farm house we ever had. Mr. Erskin was a friendly, handsome older man whose wife was terribly crippled with rheumatism. She could (or would) walk only a little bit, just sat in a rocking chair and yelled to, at, and for everybody. Her trips from that chair to the bed were with the help of a cane and she never left the house. They had a son, Harold who was in college and helped on the farm in the summer time. I was in awe of him and hated him calling me "skeeziX".

Their teenage daughter, Ruth, was a wild one and over the years we lived there, she spent lots of time at our house. I think it was one way of staying out of earshot of her Mother. Ruth and all of her wild friends came to Mom with their problems of the heart and called her "Priscilla Wayne" who was a newspaper advice columnist – the Ann Landers of those times.

We were no sooner settled in our new home, when it was time for school to start. It was a large consolidated school with all twelve grades, only about a quarter of a mile from our house. Mom was tied down with two little kids and Dad was busy on the farm so it was up to me to take Earl by the hand and enroll ourselves in our new school. I believe it was then that I realized , just vaguely, the responsibility I was facing as the oldest child in the family and I was quite old for my years. Our home was in easy

walking distance from town, so here I am, about 8 years old shopping for the groceries, going to the Post Office to buy money orders and mail them off to pay the bills or send catalog orders off for clothing and things.

We always spent a lot of evenings , as a family, sitting around singing. A child was taught to sing as soon as he could talk at all. When my thoughts go back to those song-fests to this day, I hear my Mother's clear voice leading the way and Dad joining in with his great tenor on harmony. Dad had two or three songs that were just his, and anytime we asked him, he would lean back in his rocking chair, look toward the ceiling and do his solo act for us. One time Mom and I were harmonizing on "Bonnie Little Bernie" while we were fixing lunch when Dad walked in on us. I remember his exact words -"I heard you singing when I walked down the path. That was the most beautiful sound a man ever heard"

By this time, more people had cars and traveled farther to visit, so we had lots of company. Dad's Brother, Elmer lived nearby, the Lovell's had also moved into that area, and it was near enough to Des Moines that Grandma and Grandpa Kennedy and Mom's Brothers and Sisters could come. We had company for dinner every Sunday.

Earl had pneumonia one winter and we had a "trained nurse" come in and live with us for a whole week. Earl almost died but Dr. Bufkin and this nurse pulled him through.

One day we came home from school and found that yet another baby brother had come to our family. This was on January 12, 1928 and his name was Charles Russell Lane.

He was a darling , good natured little boy and we all loved him a lot, but about that time I decided that we had enough kids. Besides, Ruth Erskin had filled me in on how babies come about and I didn't like that idea either.

Switzer's Drug Store was located on the corner of main street in Runnells and they made and sold delicious ice cream there. Sometimes on pay day or some other special occasion, Dad would give me money ( it seems like it was sixty cents but that's probably too much) to go and get a quart of vanilla for a family treat. Mr. Switzer was my friend and he packed the ice cream good and solid and wrapped it in lots of paper so it wouldn't melt. He would say " Now, my little lady, you don't need to run all the way home, it will keep till you get there." And it did!

Two of Dad's Sister Eva's teenage daughters - Nina and Billie Bengé - came to stay with us for a couple of weeks one summer. I thought they were really hot stuff, and they would let me watch them put on their make-up. Well, I was too little to use make up but I knew about it so I was shocked when they used a piece of red crayola to color their cheeks and lips. I told Mom and she explained that Aunt Eva and Uncle Perry were even poorer than we were and had a big family so they had no money for rouge and lipstick. That was the first of many times Mom prefaced an explanation of this kind with the old " you know, poor people have poor ways". Nina got a mad crush on one of the Runnells town drunks Claude Warren, and when she suggested that she would like to extend her visit , those girls were ushered out in hurry and were never invited back.

Over the years we lived there we heard rumors that Mr. Erskin was somewhat a ladies man . Dave Joplin was Mr. Erskin's partner in the Diamond Jo coal mine and the gossip was that Dave's wife and Mr. Erskin were a bit more than friends. They often went to Des Moines together. One time Mr. Erskin went on one of his frequent trips and didn't return that night as expected. I was told very few details but one morning Ruth came to our house and I remember her words - "They found my Daddy in a hotel and he's dead". I don't think I ever knew what happened but Mom and Dad just told us that he got sick and died.

Very soon after that, we moved to another farm about two miles north of Runnells and Dad worked for Diff Freel. It was a big farm and they raised purebred hogs. Mrs. Freel, Fannie, suffered from asthma and we saw very little of her. They had three Daughters, the youngest, Grace was about a year older than I and we became very good friends. There was also a little boy about Russell's age. Our house had been moved from somewhere else and the foundation was never completed. When it rained, water would stand under there. This was about the time Mom started having asthma attacks and even got pneumonia.

We had to ride the bus to school. At first it was a horse-drawn bus and one of the high school boys drove it. That was terrible in the winter . Later, men with cars contracted to haul kids to school, sometimes making two or three trips. I had to miss a lot of school when Mom was sick because there were little kids to care for as well. I started getting bad colds and usually had abscessed throat - they called it "quinsy" then. Dad wasn't making very good wages even for farm labor, the depression was beginning then there were doctor bills for Mom and me.

One day when I was cleaning the house, I came across a big roll of white outing flannel. Oh, dear, does this mean we're getting another baby? Sure enough, on May 3, 1930, Dr. Reinertson, a lady doctor from Prairie City came and delivered Ralph Dean Lane. I was home from school, sick with quinsy so I sat out in the Doctor's car during the birth. I don't know where Russell was, maybe with me but I can't remember it. After the Doctor left, I went back in and resumed my household duties. Ralph was a cute little baby but kind of sickly. They had a hard time finding food that would agree with him. Finally they tried a formula called Mellon's food. It was a powder that came in a can and I had to boil water then mix it up and stir and stir until all the lumps were out. He had to be fed often because he was so small and couldn't take much at a time. This supplement was very expensive, at least by our standards, and we had to special order it. Once he got on the right food he was fine and healthy and look at him today!

I think Mr. Freel was not the best boss Dad ever had, he didn't provide for his help very well but there are a few fun memories of the days when we lived there. He always showed his hogs in competition at the state fair and their family went and camped at the fair for the whole ten days. I guess, because Grace and I were such good friends, I was once invited to go with them for a few days. What a fun experience that was! Dad gave me a quarter when I went and it was plenty of money to see the fair the way I saw it.

At that time there was a dance at Brown's Hall on main street in Runnells every Saturday night. Several times Mr. Freel took Grace and I and taught us both to Waltz

and Two-Step and Polka. I was never very good at the polka and not the best at waltzing but could I ever two-step around that hall! That was great fun.

By this time our old Model T had said it's last farewell and Dad never owned a car after that. He and I would walk the two miles to town on Saturday night sometimes and carry groceries home. Once in a while Earl and I would go through the week but we were so little we couldn't carry much. Of course we had our own milk and baked our own bread and had our vegetables canned from the garden in summer. The boss gave us a little bit of meat when he butchered in the winter time but we had no way to keep it in summer so the only meat we had was chicken. I have pleasant memories of those trips to town with Dad even though looking back, that must have been hard for him after working in the fields all day. We had some wonderful conversations, just the two of us. Once in a while some farmer would come along and give us a ride and we were surely grateful for that.

The next move we made was to a farm out east of Runnells . Frank Santi was a dapper, Italian man who spoke very broken English and his wife spoke none at all. They had two small children, Wanda and Dante who interpreted for them . It was while we lived here that we acquired Grandma and Grandpa Kennedy's piano. We were all glad because Mom could play and it made our sing-a-longs easier and more fun. Mom especially enjoyed the piano and was never happier than when she could gather a group around and play and sing. I think it was about this time that she coined that memorable phrase "If you can't sing pretty, sing loud!"

By this time Grandma and Grandpa Lane were really old , Grandma had suffered a stroke and could not walk. They had closed their home and lived with us a while then with Uncle Elmer and Aunt May for a while. When the Santi farm was sold and Dad was forced to take a job on a farm over in the next county,they went back to Uncle Elmer's. Since I was ready for tenth grade and there was no high school where they were moving, Mom and Dad made a deal with friends, George and Rosie Penman, for me to stay with them and go to school at least for that term. I don't remember the terms of that deal , however I'm sure there was no money involved because we had none - seems Dad was to butcher a hog and give them meat. Anyway, no one, including me wanted me to drop out of school so the plan was accepted. The boys went to a country school near their home in Marion County.

It is difficult for me to try to recall events of this time. Everyone was unhappy - Dad's boss was a drunk and not good to him or the family . It was not a good time for a girl like me to be separated from her family and be thrown into such a drastically different environment. As I recall the story, Grandma Lane had another stroke and Dad was called to Des Moines. The boss gave him one day and it became necessary for him to take a little more so he was fired. He rented a little house in Runnells , not half big enough for our family but we all crowded in and made do until he could get a job . He did day work on farms and in the coal mine for six months or so until he hired out to a big time farmer near Runnells . He stayed with Doc Sheeler through good times and bad, I always felt it was only because it kept a roof over our heads. The country was in a deep depression so with plenty to eat and a house to live in, we really didn't think about how poor we were. Everyone we knew was poor!

Earl and Glen dropped out of school (their own choice), but I hung in there and with Grandma Kennedy and Aunt Elizabeth and Aunt Margaret giving me clothes, I graduated in May 1935.

I worked in the Lewis restaurant during that summer serving threshers and railroad men but they didn't need me in the winter when business was slow. Then I worked for families in the area who had sickness and or were having babies. I was working for Mabel and Ralph Freel in Des Moines when I got a letter from Mom asking if I would arrange to come home about mid April because she was having a baby and needed me. I was earning \$3.50 a week plus room and board and after buying coats and overshoes for all the boys, had managed to save a few bucks. I took that money and bought baby clothes and, I recall, a hot water bottle. About the time I was ready to tell Mable I would have to quit, she informed me that they would have to let me go because she was feeling better and the baby was all right now so they could not afford to keep me on.

I went home, and on May 7, 1936 my only Sister, Mary Ellen, was born. This tale would not be complete if I didn't repeat the first remarks when I saw her. She weighed in at over eleven pounds and had a difficult time getting here. Mom said "We didn't need her but we love her anyway, don't we". I've been told I said "She looks like a bull dog". It took no more than a couple of days for all that swelling to go away and Mary Ellen became a beautiful child. She inherited a sweet, loving disposition from our parents and is like that to this day. For a long time, because of our age difference, we really didn't seem like Sisters, but about the time she graduated from high school we definitely realized we were Sisters. We've shared good times and bad, happy times and sad, but always remembering our roots, we are not only Sisters, but best friends.