

1/95

NOTES ON AGATHEN FAMILY LIFE AND HISTORY

(written, with no particular order, by Jean in the summer of 1994 and January of 1995, from notes taken on the reminiscences of Til and Clare at the end of May, 1994, and the additions thereto by Anthony. Marie, Til and Clare in July of 1994, as well as notes of a 1988 conversation with Anthony).

Mary Otilia von Rueden and John Charles ("J.C.") Agathen were married on October 18, 1904. Apparently it was an ideal summer kind of day. The reception was at the Von Rueden farm. J.C. was 42; Mary was 26; she was noticeably taller than he was. They could both speak German (in fact it was probably their first language), and used to speak it occasionally in later years when they didn't want their children to understand. J.C. had a 4th grade education. Mary had at least the same.

Mary and J.C. had seven children. John was born in 1906; ^{LOUISE} ~~Marie~~ in 1908; ^{MARIE} ~~Louise~~ in 1910; Otilia in 1913; Anthony or "Antne" (as Aunt Til says J.C. always pronounced the name) in 1916; Clare in 1919; Dorothy in 1922. Mary died on December 18, 1922, a few weeks after the baby was born. Dorothy died on Christmas Day, at about one month of age, of diphtheria. She was a beautiful baby with black curls. ~~Marie~~ was the only one of the other children who got diphtheria. She was quarantined for six weeks.

When Anthony was born there was an article about it in the Eagle Quill, because the Agathen family had finally had another boy after three girls. When Dorothy was born, they were all sent down to the Von Rueden farm.

Mary had only one sibling who married: her brother Tony, who got married in Minnesota. He had no children. Tony was very tall; his good friend John Machold was very short. Mary's brother Lawrence committed suicide over a broken romance. He couldn't marry the girl because she wasn't Catholic. Lawrence locked himself into a freezer at his place of employment, and froze or suffocated to death.

J.C.'s sister Theresa married Charles Jones and they had two children: Carol, who was physically and mentally retarded, and Charlie. Both Carol and

Charlie had diabetes. J.C.'s other sister married a Steinhoff. Mary Ellen Steinhoff, a first cousin once removed of the Agathens, died of diabetes.

Emily Emmer is a first cousin of Bob Peterson, whom Marie married.

Til always felt that the oldest three children in their family formed one group, and the youngest three children formed a separate group. Til's name was given to her in memory of Otilia Wittig, an aunt of her mother.

When Marie was born, she weighed only about 3 pounds, wrapped in a blanket. J.C.'s wedding ring fit over her hand.

Their mother, Mary, was jealous, and their father and she sometimes would fight at the dinner table about it. Mary claimed that he spent too much time going up to the old Agathen farm to visit another woman (Theresa Steinhoff, Paul and then Tony Steinhoff's wife).

Til remembers a few incidents involving her mother. Once, her mother made her a Red Cross kerchief so she'd have a sort of costume for a school event. Til also remembers that one year on her birthday, Mary had just baked a batch of sticky buns, and Til got the very first one, early, because it was her birthday.

Marie remembers seeing her mother do the washing, outside in big tubs. She had a metal plunger to help move the clothes around. Anthony remembers his mother feeding him bread and milk out of a bowl. Clare remembers being held by her mother, standing at the cook stove, while they talked about heaven. Later, at Mary's wake, while viewing her mother's body in the casket, Clare remembers being held by her brother John, and asking him where their mother's feet were.

Mary gave piano lessons to Eagle children on their own pianos. She'd get to their homes by horse and buggy. John and Clare learned to play piano, as did Anthony a little bit.

They used to have bed bugs on the farm, and they washed the bedframes with kerosene. Then they washed the sheets outside in a big tub, but once

they stopped washing, when Frances Agathen (a first cousin once removed of J.C.) came by, because they didn't want her to know they had the pests.

Once, when Til was 4 years old, she was helping out with the washing, using the new mechanized wringer the family had bought. She got her hand caught and badly hurt in the machine, and J.C. came and held her on his lap and said they would take her to the doctor as soon as the washing was finished, since they couldn't waste the hot water. When she was taken to the doctor, Til needed about 23 stitches to close up the tear between her index finger and the adjoining finger.

Anthony kept a flying squirrel in his bedroom for about a month as a pet. The squirrel was kept in a metal and wood cage which he made himself. He fed it acorns and nuts. Also, he used to hunt and skin rabbits and squirrels for the family to eat. He says no one liked eating them very much.

Anthony nailed some boards to the tree outside their house so they could climb up it. Also, he once put a dead mouse from the attic under the girls' bedroom door while they were in the bedroom.

Once when Clare was about 1 year old, Louise was holding her but she dropped her. Immediately Louise ran upstairs and got her rosary, and brought it back downstairs. Although Clare was screaming on the floor, Louise didn't pick her up; she continued to say her rosary.

Once when Anthony was in 2d or 3rd grade, he broke his right arm while wrestling with John Schroeder after school, when his elbow hit the pavement too hard. (It was a friendly wrestling match, though.) Anthony walked to Dr. Fitzgerald's office to see what the problem was with his arm; he knew something was wrong. J.C. didn't get mad about it, not even about the expense of the doctor visit.

J.C. didn't let any of the children work on the farm. He felt his hired hands were enough. He was a fairly prosperous farmer. He retired in about 1921, at about age 58, with about \$50,000 to his name, but he lost it all in generous and/or careless business deals. The family moved from the farm, which had about 220 acres, to the house down the road, closer to Eagle, before Dorothy was born, in about 1921. Anthony says he knows their

father must have lost all his money because they never had any. Whenever John would come home from Waukesha, where he got a job at a bank while attending Carroll College, he would often discuss finances with their father. J.C. rented out the farm after they moved off of it, for about \$40 a month. Finally the Nelsons bought it. After he retired, J.C. had a chain saw and used to go around cutting other people's firewood, for a fee. He didn't like tinker around with tools, though.

Aunt Lena (Magdalena), Mary's sister, who lived up the road at the Von Rueden farm, used to spend part of the year with them after their mother Mary died in 1922. She was extremely strict with the kids. She was also very religious, and was buried in the habit of the Third Order of St. Francis which Til and Brian went to buy for her in Milwaukee. She had a highly developed sense of duty, and having fun was never part of her agenda. She was expecting her eternal reward in heaven.

Aunt Lena was especially severe with Anthony. She was constantly picking on him and scolding him. Anthony says she used to scold him for being alive, but that she was good to them in the sense of cooking, keeping house well, and mending their clothes. She didn't get along well with Louise or Til, either. Lena was more kindly towards Clare. Many years later, she went to Clare's graduation from the College of St. Teresa in Winona, MN.

Aunt Lena never wanted them to mingle with other kids, the "town boys." She was afraid they'd get corrupted, contaminated. She allowed them to read books, including novels, from the church library, but no other books. She always checked what they were reading. She allowed Anthony 15 minutes to get home from school, and grilled him at length about the reasons for any delay.

Aunt Lena would never pronounce the word "sex"; she always said it as "sec." She did not think the marital state was proper for anyone. Once she saw Marie "downtown" in Eagle in a sleeveless dress, and gave her heck for being so indecent. She taught the Agathen children how to dress and undress without exposing themselves.

Aunt Lena continued to live at and to manage the Von Rueden farm in the summers even after she took charge of the Agathen children. She had to do lots of canning and yard work and household chores on that farm. Her brothers, Jake and Fred, did the field work. For approximately 5 to 7 years after Mary died, Aunt Lena lived with the Agathens during the non-farming months. She was a woman of tremendous energy and ability. She was a very tall woman. Even by the 8th grade she was 6 feet tall.

Aunt Lena was not invited to Anthony's wedding to Beatrice Kelley, according to Til, but Anthony thinks she was invited and didn't come.

Louise was married when she was about 20, to Elmer Anderson, a high school teacher from Eagle. They went to Hawaii, where Jerry was born in 1930, but Louise later had a nervous breakdown and she came back to Wisconsin in 1941 rather than be hospitalized in Hawaii. She flew to California, where Marie and her two young daughters met her and the three of them accompanied her to Wisconsin on the train. Elmer divorced her.

All the Agathen children went to grade school at Eagle Public School. Clare started first grade at the age of 5. Girls at the school had to take Domestic Science in 8th grade, which was mostly cooking. Boys took Manual Training in 8th grade.

Aunt Lena wanted Til to go to the same prestigious high school in Milwaukee (Holy Angels) that Louise and Marie had attended, but J.C. wouldn't allow it. Til thinks he felt that way because Louise had gone there but had run off and gotten married, so maybe he felt the religious education hadn't done any good. Anthony thinks their father just didn't want to pay the tuition. So Til went to the first two years of high school in Eagle and the second two years at a public high school in Waukesha, as John had done. Anthony went two years in Eagle and two in Whitewater. Clare went first to Eagle high school and the second two years in Mukwonago. As for higher education, John got a master's degree in English at Georgetown U., while working at a bank, in about 1932. Anthony's B.S. degree was in agronomy, from the U. of Wisconsin in Madison, in 1943. Clare's B.S. was in dietetics, from the College of St. Teresa.

Clare once got a present from their father. She got a red sweater as a birthday present. This was remarkable, as it was apparently the only present their father ever gave anyone. (Repeat: ever gave anyone.) He was not inclined to say "thank you," either. In fact no one remembers him ever saying it. He always contended that he never asked Lena to come and look after the kids, so, apparently, he didn't need to thank her for anything. He never gave Lena a penny, either. This despite the fact that he wouldn't do anything in the kitchen. He couldn't even heat himself a cup of coffee.

J.C. was never too involved with the children's upbringing. But he was almost always around the farm. He never used physical punishment on the children. He wasn't one to go off drinking or hanging out in the bar. He had a nice sense of humor and was a great imitator of all the relatives and neighbors. He also had a few songs he loved to sing, including "Mrs. Fogarty's Christmas Pie," which had a line that went "and the crust it was nailed on with glue." He also liked to sing "Bill Grogin's Goat." He used to read the Milwaukee Journal all evening, usually in the kitchen. He never read novels, though. He enjoyed playing cards, especially euchre and 500. He and the children often played on Sunday afternoons for their entertainment. Aunt Lena never played, though. He would sit by the hour talking to Joe Link about the events of 40 years earlier. He liked to tease the grandchildren, by poking at their games of jacks, or trying to trip them with his cane. Anthony thinks J.C. did not have any really good or really bad qualities, that he was "kind of neutral."

J.C. did know everyone in church. He must have been, Anthony imagines, a pallbearer at 100 funerals. He donated \$400 to construct a new church at the turn of the century. He even helped build it, with a team of horses and a slip plow. Every night before bed he got down on his knees and said prayers for about one minute.

When J.C. was a boy he had had to tend cows on the Agathen farm, and he always wished he had a knife so he could whittle to help pass the time, but his parents wouldn't buy him one. They didn't want to spend the money.
(end of family history notes)