

Isibal Martian

December 31, 1932 - August 21, 2018

I was born 1932 in Graham Township near Rice, Minnesota. My parents were John Wollak and Elizabeth Trettel. My mother was 17 and my father was 24 when they married in 1912. My birth certificate says Isibal, but I hated that name, so on the first day of school I told the teacher my name was “Bette”, and I’ve been called that ever since. I was the 15th of 19 children; all single births. Six boys and thirteen girls.

We belonged to Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Royalton. The town of Royalton, 11 1/2 miles from our home. Our family was so big that we went to church in a cattle truck driven by my oldest brother. In the winter, when it was cold, we bundled in blankets in the back to keep warm. He parked the truck by the Protestant church so people we knew wouldn’t see us, but they knew.

We lived a prayerful life. We prayed before and after all meals, and said the rosary as a family after dinner every night. When mealtime came everyone was ready, and the 21 places at the table were always filled.

Our school was the District 62 schoolhouse in Benton County. It was a one room school with a wood burning stove. There were so many of us that the Wollak children filled most of the grades in the school. And we were terrible kids! One year there were nine different

teachers-they kept leaving! My brothers had a trick they pulled tossing a piece of chalk attached to a match onto the hot stove. Then there would be a snap and a flash and the teacher would run in fear.

We lived 3 1/2 miles from school and only had 30 minutes to get there after we finished our work at home. It just wasn't enough time. If we were late we hid in the woods until first recess and then joined our class. The teacher thought we'd been working at our farm until late. School would close if there was cold weather unless at least 6 kids showed up. We always showed up. We didn't ever want our father to know if we got poor grades on our report cards, so we figured out that it was easy to turn a red "F" into a red "A". Our dad was on the school board and he never knew we did this.

The boys had a bedroom with two bed for the six boys, and the girls had two beds for the thirteen of us. We covered ourselves with feather ticking. If we could move, we had to work from the age of eight. We were so tired from working on the farm each day that we didn't even wash or remove our clothes before falling asleep. In the morning, when our father woke us, he gave us only two minutes to get ready, so we wore the same clothes all week at school. I wore farmer overalls, black bloomers and brown cotton stocking that were held up with fruit jar rubber rings. On Sundays we got to stay in bed 20 minutes later than during the week.

Our home had an indoor toilet but we weren't allowed to use it except in the winter. We had a telephone and our number was 11F14. The kids could never use it, but my father used it to make calls to town when he needed parts for any machinery. He had a

thresher and all the neighbors used it, so it had to be in working order. Everybody helped each other.

We also had a radio, and I can remember all of us kinds sitting under the dining room table on Saturday nights listening to Gangbusters, The Shadow, Mr & Mrs North and Inner Sanctum. My dad didn't like us listening to some of the programs because they occasionally had descriptions of criminals making a gun. He thought it would give us kids ideas of how we could make one ourselves!

My father had a 1937 Dodge and as soon as we were old enough to see over the steering wheel, we learned to drive it. On Saturday mornings we went to Catechism classes in Royalton in the Dodge driven by one of the older kids. We never had any spending money, but we figured a way to get some. Before leaving the farm for town we'd go to the chicken house and grab a couple chickens and take them to town with us. They would fly and hop all over the inside of the car on the drive with feathers flying! We then took them to the produce company and they'd give us cash for them. We'd take the money to Kalinski's to buy candy and play with the slot machines. Sometimes we'd win some money too.

Our father owned three farms. One of them was 640 acres, another 80 acres and the third one recalled the "prairie" used to grow hay. We never had hired hands. Our family did all the work. We had cows, pigs and sheep. Chicken laid dozens of eggs each week. We had

turkeys and they were mean! We grew oats, corn, wheat and flax. During the Depression, we grew a lot of food. We only depended on the store for sugar, coffee and spices. We spent $19 dollars on groceries one year and my father was angry about it. Everything produced was used including manure and ashes for fertilizer. We canned over 1000 quarts of food a year. Not only vegetables and fruits, but meat from animals, pork and beans. Canned meat was so good! I remember putting the canning jars in our green Monarch oven and watching the juices bubbling. We also had homemade sausage. I recall picking, cleaning and cutting cabbage. It made a mess on the floor, that we turned it into 50 crocks of sauerkraut. Jellies and jams were made from her apple and plum tree harvest. My mother made as many as 19 loaves of bread in a day. We kids were short and looked underfed. But we always had a lot of food and we ate like pigs!

We also made our own soap with lye and lard. I thought it was wonderful so, but at that time I never used anything else. My mother grew beautiful flowers in her gardens. She had big circle of moss roses that were so pretty. She also had hollyhocks and other flowers.

Our clothes were either too big or too small. I felt sorry for the boys especially. I wore men's shoes. My mother stuffed rags into rubber boots for herself, but she had no shoes. She froze her feet, money was very dear. One time my mother saw that penny had fallen below a corner in the window and she spent a lot of time getting it out.

When we had our family photo taken I was one of the few girls who is not wearing a dress made from flour sack. Clothing made from flour sacks was very common in those days as they came with colors and prints on them. One of my older sisters could sew pretty clothes.

During Prohibition, my father, like many others, made his own whiskey. Apparently someone reported him to the authorities and as the cops came to our house my mother saw them coming and she sent all the kids outside to play, because she thought they would not arrest my father while we were watching, and she was right.

We had a gas washing machine with a ringer in the basement. And I once got too to close to the ringer and it started winding up my hair. I don't remember how I got out of that. My oldest sister cut everyone's hair. Sometimes we look like we'd had our hair cut around the bowl! Once, she gave me a permanent and it turned my hair all to frizz!

When I was about 10 years old, one of my neighbors hired me to take care of their kids. They had a filthy sticky floor and I wasn't raised that way. I scrubbed it and cleaned up everything. They really like that I work so hard, so I stayed very busy there and made $10 for the summer, which I had to turn over to my father.

In the summer it was common for small towns to have outdoor movie set up in an open space, like a school yard. Everyone brought blankets and we sat around and watch the movie. I remember there being a lot of them with World War II themes.

Every year, beginning December 6 St. Nicholas day, Santa Claus came to our house and

presented each of us with a small treat each evening. This always took place near dinner time right after my father said, I'm going out to take care of the cows. He would go to the barn and shortly after Santa Claus would knock on the door! The older kids understood what was going on, and eventually I caught on too, but it was fun for us all. At Christmas we were given our gifts on Christmas eve. On each plate would be an apple, and orange some nuts and dried fruit a new tablet with a pretty picture on the front and two new pencils. We love these gifts and my mother took great pleasure in our excitement of getting them.

We'd have a huge roasted Turkey with sage dressing. I never liked sage dressing and I still don't, but that was what my mother always made. She also made special sweetbread with poppy seed called “Makovnjaca”. Aunts, uncles and cousins from my mother side would come to our house to visit. There was nobody from my father side who visited. Once when I was in fifth or sixth grade, our neighbors who I felt were also poor, brought gifts for all of us kids. That was when I got my first baby doll.

Three of my brothers when into the military when the war started. The fourth one wanted to but he had bad eyes. The boys were glad to go but worried about mother. They wrote their letters to my older sister who is married and she brought them to my mother. One of my brother served in the Pacific and another was at the Battle of the Bulge.

As a child, I imagined myself as a grown-up, married, with two children, and a perfect house with new linoleum. But it was difficult for any of us to meet any other young people who we might one day marry. My older siblings figured out the best way to resolve that problem, They snuck out of the house on nights when there were dances in nearby towns. They learned how to get a horse out of the barn quietly. Later it was the car. I snuck out also aided by my siblings when I was only about 14 years old. I looked older so I had no problem getting alcohol to drink at the dances. Whenever one of us decided to marry, my father was the last to know. I don't know where he thought my older siblings met the people they chose to marry. Dad did build special shelves in the basement to put baked goods and alcohol on for the wedding receptions.

In the 1940s when my brothers were in the military and older sisters were marrying, he wasn't feeling well. So he sold the farms and the extra fields. My parents moved to a new house in Royalton. And my father brought up some farms in North Dakota and rented them out. He ended up going broke when the rents weren't paid and the land was foreclosed on.

I went to high school but didn’t finish but completed by GED in the 1970’s. I met Kenneth Gohman at one of the dances I went to an Sauk Rapids when I was 16. He was from Clear Lake. We got married on Friday, October 26, 1950. My father passed away 1949 I think he hadn't felt well for sometime. My mother had never worked, but she eventually took a job as a cook at the school in Royalton. She was asked to cook for a wedding, and then other wedding receptions and parties followed. A couple who knew people in Royalton ate some of the party food my mother cooked. They were impressed and asked her to come to Minneapolis to cook for them when they were going to host a dinner party for an important politician. She agreed to do it and the politician raved about her food! When

President Kennedy visited Minnesota my mother was asked to cook the meal that would be served at the party he would attend. President Kennedy came out to the kitchen to thank her and he said “he'd never tasted such a good piecrust”! Mom’s always came out thin and flaky.

Kenneth and I had five children, all girls after six pregnancies. There are 13 years between the youngest and oldest. Barbara Jean, Theresa Ann, Gwenne Marie, Mary Elizabeth and Kimberly Kay. Ken worked for Northern Pacific Railroad for over 30 years. We parted ways after several years of marriage.

My children will probably remember me as a very strict mother. I worked hard and was so tired all the time. When I put them to bed at night, sometimes I would just cry.

I was alone for 10 years after divorcing Ken. Someone noticed I was a very hard worker and suggested I apply for an opening at Crystal Airport. I got that job and my manager was Conrad Martian. We began to date and I married him in 1982 at St. Alphonsus Church in Brooklyn Center. We had an townhome on 65th Avenue and Humboldt, and I loved it there. We traveled to Hawaii, and visited his sister in Oregon. Other siblings lived around the state and we visited them too. Conrad became sick with bone cancer and I took care of him until he died on September 9, 1999.

I came to live at St. Theresa because I had Parkinson's and I kept falling and I no longer felt safe to live home alone, I lived here 8 years. This is my story written January 2012. I’ve made many friends and seen many go. I was given a legacy of faith and prayer and I passed on to my children and grandchildren.

I am survived by daughters, Barbara Jean Olson (Wally), Theresa Ann Sams, Gwenne Marie Gohman, Mary Elizabeth O’Donnell (Mike) and Kimberly Vergin (Scott). Their children, Joseph Miskowic, Emily Anick, Heather Sams, Joshua Vergin, Jack Vergin and great grandchildren Jacob, William and Ella Farrell, Dakota, Shantell, Olivia and Trevor.

My surviving siblings are Irene Hoeschen, Marcella (Marcie) Rosencrantz, and Delmer (Del) Wollak, many neices and nephews and lifelong friends.

The siblings that welcomed me into heaven are: Ann, Gertrude, John, Clara, Rose, Erma, Anthony, Raymond, Clarence, Lucille, Virginia, Claude, Theresa, Bernice. Ernest and Mary who died as infants.

Thank you for being apart of my life. God blessed me with you! Until we meet again, I’ll be secure in His arms waiting your arrival.

Bette