

Bede's Book

I recently received a phone call from Pat Jordan, of Juda, who wanted me to see the copy of "Bede's Book" that she had recently received from a cousin. I remembered her aunt, Bede Houser, as a teacher at Monroe High School in the sixties, so I was anxious to see it. Bede Penn was born in Monroe in 1904; I was impressed with how many family photos were in the book from her childhood.

The book, compiled by Bede's three daughters, Becky, Diana, and Nancy, is an autobiography told to Diana in the last five years of Bede's life. With a quick glance at the organization and all that is contained in it, one can tell that it took an immense number of hours to put it together. The family was obviously a group of savers as there are many letters included in the 563-page book. In addition, there are copies of many other images including obituaries, school souvenirs, report cards, graduation programs, and much more.

When Bede was born, her father was the superintendent of Green County schools. The family lived in a brick home, which no longer exists, on the southwest corner of 17th Avenue and 8th Street. While living at this home, she had one older sister and then a younger sister and brother were born. She attended kindergarten for two years with Dorothy Dietz (later Kundert) at North (Churchill) School. She wrote, "I remember nothing of first grade except how frightened I was of Miss Van, the principal upstairs."

She also remembered that, "Bananas were new then. They could be purchased down on the bank corner at Paul Ruf's little shoeshine stand. Mama was uncertain about this rare fruit and cautioned us to take small bites and chew well."

Since Bede's father was the superintendent of schools from 1899 to 1911, he had an office on the second floor of the courthouse "in the southeast bulge." Near closing time, she and Margaret were allowed to walk the two blocks there to walk their dad home. They would play on the big stone porch on the east side of the building. Sometimes they played in the courtroom, which adjoined "Papa's inner office by a hidden door. We were cautioned not to touch anything or make any noise and not to run. What fun it was to chase each other up and down the aisle's of the spectators' gallery and through the swinging gates into the actual court area on a fast walk. On the way home Papa often bought Yucatan gum at Vogt's. Since it was a saloon, we waited outside while he made the purchase."

As part of Penn's job, he had to visit each of the 120 rural schools in the county during the course of a year. To do this he had a pair of thoroughbreds, named Bancourt and Brundage. "When he visited in the northern part of the county he was gone two or three nights, staying at the homes of friends. One time he took me with him. We stayed with the Kildows who were his cousins and had a little boy just my age named Forrest. I can still see the little grip that held our night things."

The family moved to the Penn homestead a mile and a half east of Twin Grove on May 3, 1911. The farm had been in the family since Bede's grandfather, Civil War veteran William Penn, brought his bride, Louisa Chadwick, there. "Mama and 'the girl' had gone ahead with Baby Helen in the single buggy. Papa and the three older children were bringing up the rear in the lumber wagon containing the final effects from the Little White Brick House. It was a long ten miles to the farm and I suspect Papa's nerves were ragged from the traumas of moving. We children chattered excitedly, especially William."

Bede and her older sister, Margaret, attended the last two weeks of the school year at Pleasant Grove school. That was quite a change from North School, but they enjoyed the experiences they had there until they left the farm in 1917 to move back to Monroe so her older sister, Margaret, could attend high school. Bede described many experiences at the rural school with details. She also described farm experiences like chores, hired help, storms, their neighbors, and much more.

Bede graduated as salutatorian from Monroe High School in 1922, the largest graduating class at that time. Her grade average was 93.53. One of her classmates, Coyla Krueger (later Cox), graduated with an average of more than 90 and also taught many years in the Monroe schools. Margaret taught one year at the Babler School in Mount Pleasant township. The two sisters then went to University of Wisconsin in Madison where they lived in Chadbourne Hall. They graduated in 1926. Bede was then offered and accepted a job teaching in Stevens Point for an annual salary with an annual salary of \$1,300.

She returned home for the summer; that is where she met her husband, Cromer Houser, of Lena. The book includes the letter that Cromer sent to Mr. Penn asking for permission to marry his daughter and the letter that Mr. Penn sent back. It was announced that the wedding took place on June 10, 1927.

However, the book revealed that the wedding had been held a week earlier; female teachers were not allowed to teach after they were married.

There is much more about Bede's life, including her time as a widow in her gorgeous home at 1620 20th Avenue. The second part of the book contains information about other members of the family, including information about Bede's second great grandparents, Jehu and Polly Scudder Chadwick, who settled in Green County in 1837.

If you want to know the rest of the story, or just want to see how beautifully this book was organized and executed, call the library to see if you can get on the waiting list to check it out.



Bede Houser and family purchased the former Higley house on its double lot at 1620 20th Avenue in April 1951 and owned it for 38 years. The house was built by brick maker, Walter Higley, in 1886 and was on the Monroe Arts and Activities Center Tour of Homes on September 25, 1983. Grace Byers remembered Indians looking on during construction.