

The Allen Farm: A Place Big Enough For My Imagination

Most people pass through this life never knowing that there is a place called Wapello, Idaho. A few farms, a schoolhouse, a church, and lots and lots of love exist there. For me it is the place of my maternal grandparents, the place where my mother grew up, the place where my childhood imagination lived.

Recently I had the opportunity to visit Wapello. My two uncles, Erwin and Dean, live on Grandpa's farm now; Joan and I went to chat and catch up. I really don't know my uncles, couldn't even name all of their children. My visit filled me with a longing to know more about these people who are my family — it also flooded my mind and heart with sights, sounds, smells that have long lay forgotten in some corner of my mind, hidden by layers of dust and time.

Heading out of Blackfoot I see the fairgrounds, further on is the giant sign of the lady in cowboy hat, skirt and boots. Over there is the cemetery where grandpa and grandma are buried. Good thing Joan is driving because the little store that signaled it was timed to turn off the highway to go to Grandma's is gone. If I squeeze my eyes just right I can still see a little store there, hiding deep in my memories. Joan turns right and I see the old brick building, it looks wrong, ravaged by time. Bump, bump over the railroad tracks. When I was little I used to put nickels and pennies on those tracks so the train would smash them into flat ovals.

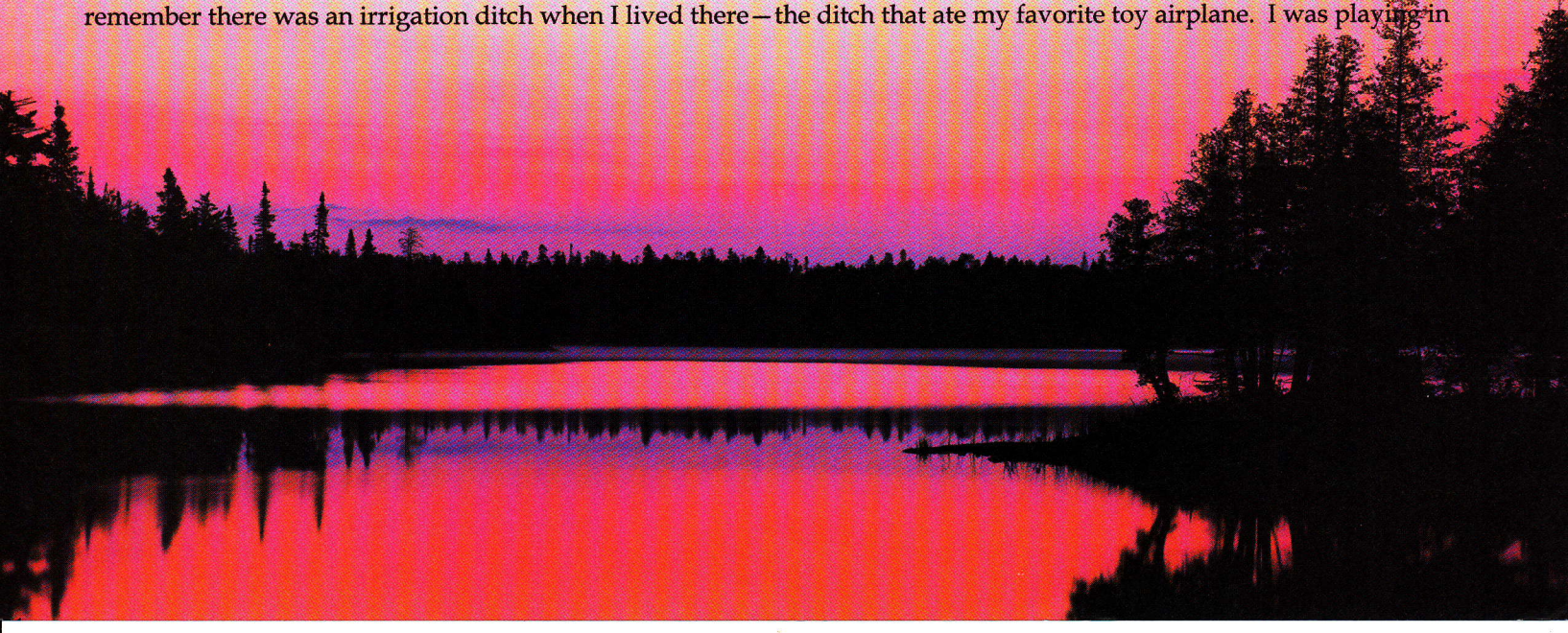
Ah my old kindergarten school. I remember how huge the playground and field were behind the school. It was a scary adventure to go to the end of the field and hear the first graders tell us ghost stories. I only had the courage to do that once or twice. Funny how small that field seems now. Wapello Warriors. I remember the red, white, and blue t-shirt I had in kindergarten. The shirt was too long so Mom hemmed it and I could slip my favorite car in the hemming. Grandma used to work in the kitchen there: it was a treat to stay after kindergarten and receive a tray of food from her.

Just behind and down the road from the school is the church. Wapello ward. I remember playing tag on the lawn, the picture of Christ in the chapel, my new "waffle stompers" that Mom bought me for church then much to her disgust she had to return because I said they were too tight, snow falling on the church, Joan shutting my hand in the car door and wondering why I was crying, Yvonne's laughter, and of course, Grandpa's and later Grandma's funeral.

We lived in Casper when Grandpa died. I still remember when Mom received the phone call, she started crying while on the phone and I began crying because she was crying. I was in Wapello with Mom when Grandma had her heart attack. Dad and someone else gave her a blessing. Then she passed away a few days or so later. She was sitting in her chair in the living room facing away from the kitchen towards the TV. I remember her rubbing her chest and complaining it hurt.

Now I can no longer see the church. Here is a house I recognize, it has a big windmill and I remember going there once with Mom and being impressed with the windmill. Joan says things sure have changed and I agree, I recognize very few of the houses on the road. Down further and the road curves to the left. Good thing Joan is driving, I did not recognize Dean and Verlene's place. So many trees!

When I was in kindergarten we lived in a trailer house where Dean's place is now except our trailer house was set so that the end faced the road rather than the front. I am happy that I had the chance to stop and see Dean and Verlene. I laugh because the first memory that exploded into my mind was of the Snoopy pillow Verlene gave me one year for my birthday. I loved that pillow. I have always thought of Verlene as the best aunt *ever* just because she gave me that pillow. Dean takes me on a tour of the place, the house, the yard, the shed (which is hot!). As we walk in the back of his yard I remember there was an irrigation ditch when I lived there — the ditch that ate my favorite toy airplane. I was playing in



the ditch and I HAD to go somewhere with Mom so I left my toy jammed in the side of the ditch. It washed away while I was gone. It was a Russian MIG, the kind that only had the large triangle front wings with no tail wings.

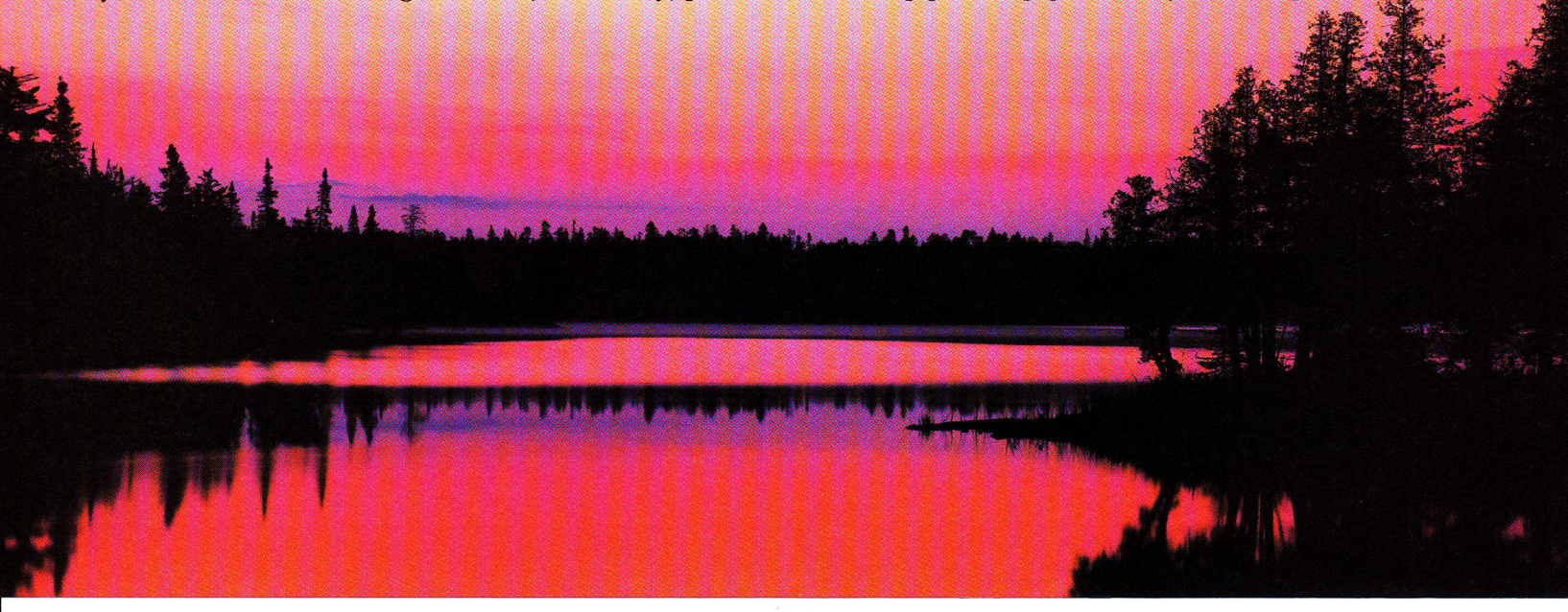
As I walk around Dean's place I keep thinking of the old trailer. I remember Dad showing me the newborn kittens in the insulation under the trailer. Deana and Verlene have some kittens that are just starting open their eyes. There was the alphabet that hung above the dining room table that Mom used to teach me to read. She taught me to pronounce them phonetically, rather than just naming them. A was either "ei" or "ah", B was "buh" and so forth to Z "zee". In the living room I would pretend to be a wrestler just like Jim. There was the bunk bed that I slept in and fell out of but the important part of that memory is I seem to recall that Mom made me clean up my toys and how grateful I was that I didn't bang my head on something when I fell off the top bunk. I remember too, listening to see if it was Mom or Dad who came down the hallway when I played instead of going to sleep. Uh oh, it's Dad and I shut my eyes tight! Those were the days of Indian bows from willow trees, long walks with Mom to collect asparagus (yum!) where we sometimes would see a bloated, dead cow (yuk!).

As Joan pulls into Erwin and Yvonne's place I see that most of the beautiful white fence is gone. There is the flag pole still. Ah that terrible cannon of Dean's—I still have the scar from when Dale was teasing me and when I tried to grab him he danced out of the way and I split my forehead on that cannon. Six or seven stitches I guess. And then I had to dress up in that dreadful frilly costume for the 24th of July. But it was exciting to see and hear the cannon go BOOM! The house looks funny now that the garage has been torn down. That is ok; I don't have any special memories of the garage.

The overwhelming feeling as Erwin and Yvonne walk with Joan and me around the old place is simply astonishment—astonishment at how small everything appears in my now adult eyes. The place was simply huge, gigantic when I was a child. Can that really be the apple tree I used to climb with Lynnette? Surely the ditches were wider than that—it was a real accomplishment to jump over them. It seemed like I had to run to go from building to building on the farm they were so far apart. There in that tree are the remains of a tree house: I was too scared to climb that high, now it seems I could almost jump up that high. The outhouse with the scary spiders is gone, so are the haystacks, but there is something that still matches my memories: the fields.

My favorite memory of the fields is my Captain America action figure. I remember playing along the barb-wire fence and Captain America would vanquish his foes. Other great memories of those fields include Grandma calling the cows, and driving tractor for Grandpa. Grandma would stand on the fence and call, "Cows" and in the cows would come. It was great fun to feed the cows with Grandpa. I would drive the tractor and Grandpa would use the pitch-fork to toss hay from the trailer to the cows. My goal was to make it all the way across the field without driving over any of the cowpies. Sometimes Grandpa had to come and straighten the tractor as my dodging usually led to some odd vector; yet he always let me drive so I guess he didn't mind too much. Another memory I have of the cows is milking time. It was exciting to watch Grandpa load the cows into their stalls then attach the auto-milking devices. The milk would then go round and round through the tubes until it drained into the collector.

That reminds me about raspberries and cream. Buying it from the store just doesn't compare to raspberries picked from Grandma's garden with cream and a bit of sugar. Oh that makes me hungry. Whenever we drove from Casper, Wyoming to Wapello we would usually arrive late and I could have whatever cereal I wanted before going to bed. Then every year for Christmas Grandma gave me a box of Cocoa Crispies. The whole box just for me! Cinnamon apples. If you haven't had Grandma's cinnamon apples, you simply haven't lived. Apples from the trees out back covered in cinnamon and cooked in the microwave. And one mustn't forget grasshopper jelly (it was green!) and bedbug jelly (it was red!). And then there was goat's food—that is what Grandpa called Hershey's chocolate syrup because he said only a goat would eat it. But Grandpa was tough because he would eat liver. YUK! But the best of all was spider-water. Out by the tool-shed and coming from the (rather scary) potato cellar was a pipe and spigot where you could get a drink of



water anytime. But you had to be careful, very careful. One day I went to get a drink and a spider crawled out—right where I wanted to put my mouth to drink. I ran screaming inside to Grandpa. Ever since that day it was called spider-water, and believe me, I always checked for spiders before getting a drink!

If that wasn't exciting enough, then how about branding bawling calves? Glad Mom bought me chaps so I would be brave enough to watch. Or maybe being stung by a bee and having Mom putting Crest toothpaste on it to stop the hurting. Then if you still are up for some adventure there was always a chicken around to behead. Put the noisy chicken down on the chopping block and whack! off comes the head. Then things get really intense. First there is the head laying on the ground gasping for air (I wonder if that is what Shiz* looked like?) and second there is the rest of the chicken running around spurting blood out of its neck. Never a dull moment at the Allen farm.

There was another reason to look forward to visiting Grandma: I often had a chance to play with the only cousin I have near my age. Walking around Grandma's place it seems I have a memory of Lynnette and myself in just about every nook and corner. Some of my favorites include playing in the haystacks and Lynnette throwing the kittens in the ditch saying that they really liked to swim.

Although it seems that my imagination never tired of roaming the farm and finding everything from the spooky to the tasty, it was inside the house that my imagination often longed to go. Every room has different memories. The kitchen is where Grandma could usually be found with some scrumptious treat. Looking out the large window in the kitchen I think of raspberries and sunsets.

In the living room Grandpa slept in his chair always waking up to catch the weather report late at night (late for little boys anyway). And if you were up early enough you would see Grandma sitting on the floor enjoying the hot heat from the heat vent. I remember playing with my cousin Erwin's video game, "Sea Battle" and sinking all of Dad's ships. In the family room crouched a black panther over the fireplace, and over in the opposite side of the room was Grandpa's angry place. Grandpa didn't like me getting into his desk.

But the best place in the whole farm was the basement. I could spend days exploring all the things down there. Grandpa always had wonderful toys, toys that flipping and whirled and went round and round. And he had *trains*. Exquisite, delightful trains. Engines painted in red, white and blue to celebrate 1776-1976, hopper cars, flat cars, freight cars, even a little crane to pick up semi-trailers and put them on the train; large trains, little trains and more trains. If that wasn't enough to keep you busy, there was the pool table. *Crack!* is the fun sound the balls make as they smash into each other. *Waaaah!* is the not so fun sound a little boy makes when the ball smashes his fingers. In one room was the furnace with coal, black coal, real coal, the kind Santa gives to bad boys and the kind that makes Mom angry cause everything you touch becomes black. In another room there were always new and interesting things to see such as Dean's medals. There was the picture of a white horse and the old record player—the kind you wind up and played Edison records on. There was even a reel-to-reel tape player. The big bed was always was the best place to sleep. I wonder if it was made of forty-'leven geese? Grandpa didn't have a hound dog but he did have pigs.

Every corner, every room, full of something to look at, play with, imagine into something else. A cornucopia of precious memories. Yet, if this still seems to be not enough for your imagination, just wait until it was night outside and the basement became dark. . . .

David Brand
Nov. 9, 2004

* See Ether 15: 31



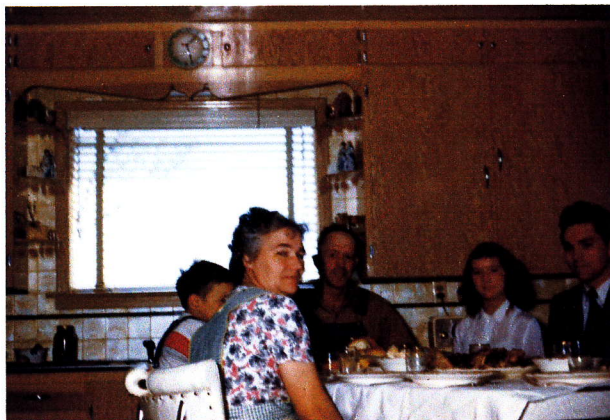


Erwin Alton and Idona Isolene Allen
August 1980
Note the black panther on the mantle.

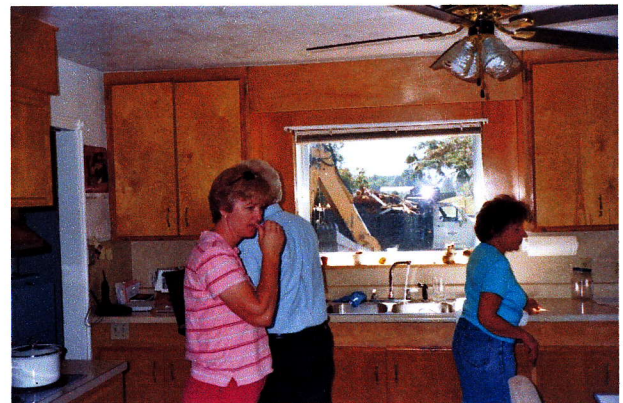
The Allen Farm



Grandma and Mom on the front sidewalk.



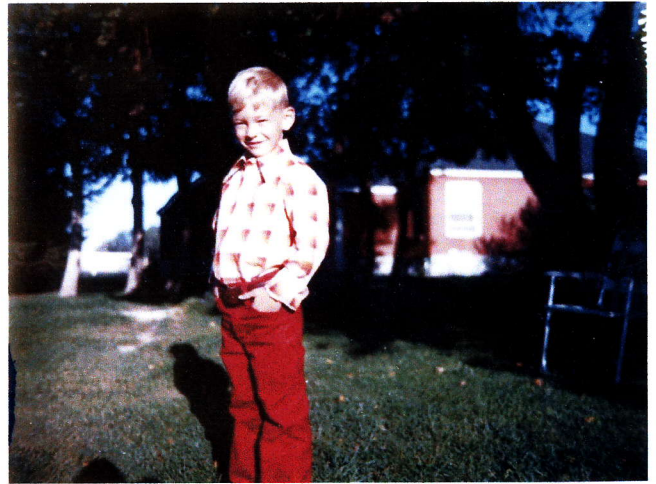
Grandma, Kenneth, Grandpa, Mom, Dean
Notice the cabinets.



Grandpa Baird built these cabinets. Later Dean raised them by several inches.
Joan, Erwin, and Yvonne September 2004



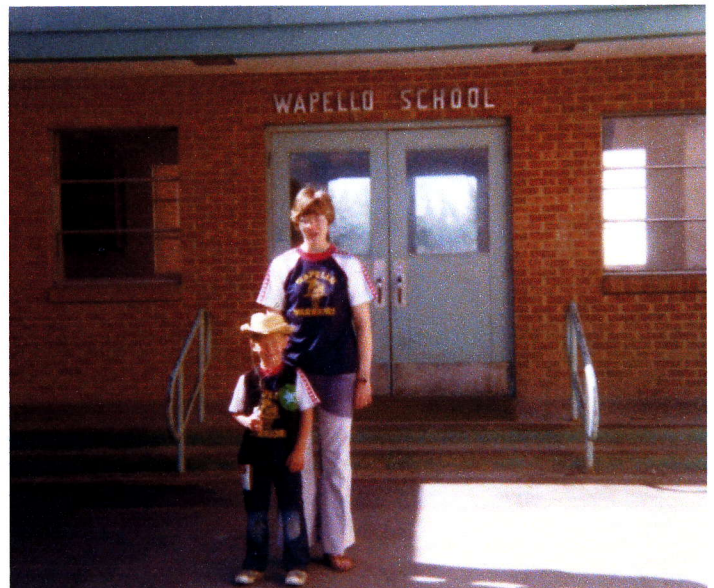
Danny, cousin Laura, and her friend Donna Scott.
July 23, 1976



Danny's 1st Day of School.
August 30, 1976



Grandma in front of the heat vent.



Danny and kindergarten teacher.
Note the Wapello Warrior shirt, sherriff badge and pistol.



Mom, Kenneth, the neighbor Earl Malm in wagon with Grandma behind them.
Notice the house is made of wood.



Danny and Grandpa's tractor.



September 2004



No more garage! September 2004