

HERMAN AND EMMA OEHLKE MEMORIAL ENDOWMENT

In the early 1900s, most of North Dakota's population lived on farms and ranches and in rural agriculture-based communities. Many North Dakotans were new immigrants taking advantage of homesteading or entrepreneurial opportunities. Such was Herman and Emma Oehlke's experience.



Herman's parents were German immigrants who settled in Enderlin, North Dakota, in the late 1800s; and Emma's parents arrived from Norway about the same time to settle near Grace City, North Dakota. Both Emma and Herman delighted in recounting childhood adventures in one-room schoolhouses and hair-raising sleigh rides behind runaway horses. Herman, with a mischievous grin, loved to tell of childhood pranks aimed at Enderlin's lone police officer.

After high school, Emma's family encouraged her to follow her passion. She enrolled in Saint Luke's School of Nursing in Fargo and became a registered nurse. She accepted a nursing position at the hospital in Carrington, North Dakota. Herman, with a natural head for



business, found work as a farm manager for Northwest Mortgage Company. This was during a time of trial for Midwestern farmers, often referred to as the "dirty thirties" due to persistent drought and poor financial outcomes.

Herman's work brought him to Carrington periodically. Good fortune allowed him to meet Emma and fall in love. They married and in 1940 moved to Jamestown, North Dakota, a more central location for Herman's work. All the while, Herman longed to own his own business.

In 1947, the family, which now included a young son, William (Bill), moved to Devils Lake, North Dakota, to take ownership of The Mayer Hotel, a three-story, fifty-room hotel with five apartments, a tavern, and a restaurant. Operating the various units of The Mayer was very time-consuming. When their second son, David, was born, Emma gave up her nursing career to focus on family and on helping the business succeed. Emma was primarily responsible for housekeeping and guest accommodations, while Herman managed the tavern, restaurant, and general business operations.

Despite their hectic schedules, Emma and Herman managed to volunteer for the many things that keep communities running—den mother, driving the team to games, etc.

Their son Dave reported, “I’m pretty sure Mom was the first secretary/treasurer of the local Business and Professional Women’s (BPW) group in town, and, I still have a certificate for a share in the Devils Lake Community Development Corporation, probably one of the first, knowing Dad.”

In 1949, following the birth of their son, Dave, the Oehlke family purchased a cabin at Wood Lake. “A hotel is no place to raise a family,” Emma declared, and the family spent many adventure-filled summers at the cottage fifteen miles from town.

Herman died too soon, in 1963, which changed life considerably for the family. Suddenly thrust into responsibility for all aspects of the

hotel/restaurant/tavern operation, Emma took the new challenge in stride. Their son, Bill, picked up many responsibilities, and together they “ran a good ship” until the property was sold in 1976. The sale made it possible for Emma, now age seventy-one, to retire and enjoy her favorite pastimes—baking, raking, gardening, and tracking the progress of her grandchildren. Emma died in 1998.

Son, Dave, remembered his parents as a pair of no-nonsense, fun-loving,

active people who really cared for others and the people they served. Dave was thirteen when Herman died but recalled receiving a special bit of fatherly wisdom: “David, just remember, right is right and what is wrong is horse-feathers!”

“I was probably only ten when he gave me this lecture, but he was right on!” Dave declared. And, from his mother, Dave remembered, “She made the best orange rolls ever... the BEST!!”

And, finally, from the Oehlke family to scholarship recipients, a request: “If you are receiving this scholarship, it’s because someone believes in you. Now,

believe in yourself, and go out there and care about what you do and those you serve.” The Herman and Emma Oehlke Memorial Scholarship assists Lake Region State College students pursuing careers in nursing, medicine, fire-fighting, or business.



Bill and Mary Oehlke



Dave and Vicki Oehlke