

THE STORY OF MY DAD'S CAMPER SOLUTION

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Before Christmas, 1929, my mother, Mae Dahlby Johnson Tweeten , was diagnosed with tuberculosis. She had a 9-month-old son, a 4-year-old son and a 5 ½-year-old daughter; she also had a 14-year-old son and 2 step children.

As I tell this story I want it to be a story about my dad, Gilbert Tweeten. He had lost his first wife on the recovery table following surgery at the University of Minnesota Hospital for a brain tumor. Ten years and 3 children later his second wife is diagnosed with a life threatening illness.

Mae Tweeten had also known great grief. As a bride of three years on a homestead in Canada, her life was shattered by the accidental death of her young husband, leaving her with a year old son. Dr. Russ had 2 patients from the North Iowa area at a Sanatorium Recovery Hospital in the high elevation of Las Vegas, New Mexico. When he recommended this site for treatment, my mother said she couldn't bear the grief of further separation from her family.

As a 5 year old, I wasn't aware of the trauma for my father- and my mother. By January 1, this dairy farmer from North Iowa had a new 1930 teal-green Chevrolet 4 door sedan, packed his wife, 3 small children and a hired girl and headed for Las Vegas, New Mexico to live as a family.

As they headed south' from Des Moines in 1930, the US Highway 65 roadway had one lane paved. The traffic all used the concrete until they met a car and gave right of way. The baby was given Carnation Evaporated milk formula heated on a Sterno unit.

At Las Vegas they rented a comfortable house at 212 9th St S. My father was the care giver for the children which was a natural for him. The hired girl from Iowa, Gena Almelien, was the cook and care giver for my resting mother and the housekeeper.

I had been attending a one room country school in the first grade. The 1st grade teacher in New Mexico refused to admit a 5 year old, so my dad had to pay tuition for me to attend the kindergarden class nearby at the New Mexico State Normal School, now Highland University.

Meanwhile, at home in Iowa a young couple took over the farm, cows, pigs, calves, crops, home and all the work on a share arrangement. The two Tweeten children, Olive and Alvin, stayed with their maternal grandparents, the Myres, at rural Forest City and went to Waldorf Lutheran Academy in Forest City. Komer Johnson, Mae's son stayed in Lake Mills with his maternal grandparents. At the time of the departure of his mother that January, Komer over heard two of his aunts commenting on her tuberculosis diagnosis. "We'll never see her back in Iowa alive" . This was a heavy thought for a 14 year old to carry.



Road Construction Camp site (front) Ruth, Stanley, Jim's
Mae + Herbert

I couldn't know the prescription the doctor gave my mother and dad for her recovery: REST, REST, fresh air, good care. So, those winter months my dad was planning how he would make a trailer, a sleeping trailer where he and my mother would sleep all summer in the high-altitude air. Being an innovative farmer he could put his ideas to work. He would use the rear end of a

Model T Ford vehicle. He would use the springs and add a hitch to the Chevrolet. He designed the hold a bed spring and mattress with a tilt-up top. Maybe he used the style of a touring car folding top or a homemade patent to raise the canvas canopy for the sleeping trailer. It was quite satisfactory for it served the Tweetens for 2 long summers.



Gilbert + Stanley, Mae,
Tim and Ruthie
Beechy, Saskatchewan, Canada - Bothners

When school dismissed in May, 1930. and the snow was gone from the Raton Pass, this family headed north, with a destination of traveling to relatives in Canada and North Dakota. I remember very well camping in a goat pasture at Colorado Springs where my brother had goat milk for formula. The camper was parked and the family drove up to Pike's Peak. At a check point my dad was asked if he had tire chains, "Yes" he did, so he could go higher. Alas, the chains were in the camper, so he had to make a scary turn around and descend later on.

The photograph is taken at the home of my aunt Alpha Bothner on the Canada prairie where my mother still owned the homestead. We camped at the homestead, snared gophers, picked Saskatoon berries and enjoyed our older cousins who worked hard, enjoyed music and survived the privations of life on the prairie.

By August it was time to start threshing at Uncle John Tweeten's in the Washburn, North Dakota area. My dad was very qualified to be in charge of the threshing machine. Someone else was the steam engine person. By this time, the hired girl had taken the train back to Iowa and my mother was considered strong enough to care for the children at our little farmhouse,

When it was time to start school, the threshing was still in full swing, so my folks started me in a one room school with my cousin Kenneth. I remember being scolded for sliding down the fresh straw stacks by our dads.

Soon the threshing was passed and we were back at Las Vegas living in a Mexican neighborhood. My mother found this an uncomfortable time, and my little 1 ½-year-old brother was a novelty as he was a "cotton top" (platinum blonde). I was in first grade and my brother Jim was in kindergarten at the NMS Normal School in New Mexico. One day I picked up a red pepper from the sidewalk and thought it looked good to eat. I flew home to my mother to cool down my mouth.

Christmas and family friendships at a little white frame Missouri Synod church were the best parts of the 2 plus years away from Iowa. The minister, Rev. Wolfram, was from Ventura, 30 miles from our Iowa home, so his presence was a part of the healing process for her.

During the winter my dad took a job demonstrating an Iowa-made washing machine to homemakers. It was a Maytag. By March he took a job for a road construction company managed by Sanders. This was on U.S. Highway 66 through the mountains to Santa Fe. He was gone during the week so more and more my mother was managing her family.

When school was out, the camper sleeper was taken to the construction camp site as well as a 12-foot tent for living and the children's sleeping. Another full summer of sleeping in the camper for my mother was continuing her care and recovery. For the children there were burros, camp kids and rattlesnakes. My mother was paranoid about any snakes so she spent an anxious summer.

We children did not know about the prospect of a new baby in December. It was no doubt, a disappointment to her doctor and a problem in the days before birth control.

By school time we were in another rental house, this time near the tracks at 912 Prince St. The income from the farm in Iowa dwindled and the approaching depression were hurting this little family. The baby, Luther Gilbert, was born on Dec. 4, 1931 and even had to have a bed bug experience in his baby basket in this rental house.

By March the letter to my mother's sister in Canada told the families that Mae and Gilbert were going back to Iowa to try life on the farm. If it set her health back, the family would live permanently in Las Vegas, N.M.

This is the end of the trailer story because it was left in New Mexico.

The end of the story is that my mother's health improved. Life was difficult for this big family with the Depression; a mother who rested a lot and step-children problems. There was another baby boy by Christmas 1932.

That April we were invited into the home of our neighbors to view the casket of an un-married woman who had died from untreated tuberculosis.

BUT, my mother lived to be 93 years old, older than any of her siblings, parents or in-laws. My dad made a success of his farming operations and lived to be 83.

Written with love by Ruth Holtan, January, 1994