

## SMALL TOWN, USA

By Terri White

Growing up as a post-World War 2 baby boomer in the 1950s and 1960s, I experienced an ideal childhood. Most mothers stayed home to raise the children in neighborhoods teeming with school age children who romped from one fenceless yard to the next. In the summer, we even wrote our own plays and performed them for our parents in a neighbor's garage. On long summer days, we swam in the lake, rode our bikes all over town, and played endless games of tag, croquet, badminton, and hide-n-seek. What a great life.

Those were the years when TV was new, radios blared the top 40, and telephones in small towns lacked a dial. That's right. No dial. To call someone, you picked up the phone and told the operator the person's name. Then she connected you. In rural areas, families even shared phone lines called party lines. You could even ease drop on your neighbor's phone conversation. Not that it was anything thrilling, but quite exhilarating espionage for a kid!

In 1954 my family moved from Minneapolis to a tiny town sandwiched by two lakes thirty miles from "the cities" (Minneapolis/St. Paul - similar to our expression "the metroplex"). With our house located at the edge of town just a stone's throw from the cemetery, we used to play hide-n-seek there until the caretaker shooed us out. But we kept returning. Ha!

Shortly after moving into our house, our elderly neighbors invited our family to Sunday dinner. A family of six, with the oldest child only eight. Those two ancient sisters had prepared a feast. The table, complete with fingertip towels, little bowls of water, fancy China, and a lacy tablecloth in a dimly lit formal dining room, was something to behold.

Although we were well-mannered children, we had no idea what to do with the fingertip towels or water bowls, so we watched the adults. Ahhh, if your fingers became greasy from the fried chicken, then you daintily dipped them in the bowl and wiped them clean with the towel. A very eye-opening experience for small children. Not sure how dainty we were, though! Alas, the sisters never repeated the invitation.

When I grew angry with my mother one day, I packed my little suitcase with all my books (no clothes, no food), snuck down the stairs while she vacuumed, and tiptoed out the front door. Then I dragged that heavy suitcase down to the cemetery and plopped down to devise a plan. Nothing came to mind, so I trudged back home, somehow managing to make it to my bedroom without my mom ever knowing I had “run away”. Books unpacked, I was ambivalent about my afternoon – glad to be safely home, but disappointed that I hadn’t experienced a grand adventure. Paris would have been nice. Sigh.

Autumn days in Minnesota brought bright blue skies, brilliant foliage, and piles of leaves scattered about. For fun, we raked those leaves into floorplans to play “house”. When we grew weary of that game, we raked them into giant heaps and jumped into them. Great fun!

Winter brought its own adventures. Living in a hilly part of the country, we tobogganed or sledged down steep hills. Bundled up in snowsuits, heavy mittens, with scarves wrapped around our faces, we strapped on our ice skates to skate on lakes, rivers, and even school the yard rinks that the fire department created for us. Each place sported a warming house complete with an old codger who stoked the pot belly stove. We stripped off our skates, warmed our feet, and then headed back to play crack the whip on the ice. Plenty of northern, rosy-cheeked memories.

But back to that black telephone without a dial. One day my mom was gone. Because I was only seven, there was probably a babysitter with us four kids, but I don’t remember her. For some reason my nine-year old brother wanted to know where our mom was, so he picked up the phone to find out. “Mildred, this is Greg Peterson. Do you know where my mom is?”

“She’s shopping downtown, Greg,” responded Mildred. How Mildred had obtained this information remains unknown to this day. But those telephone operators mysteriously knew everything.

Small town living at its best.