

# A PLACE TO GROW

REMEMBERING AN IOWA CHILDHOOD



**CAROLYN SWARTZ BUCKSBAUM**





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*A Place to Grow* is dedicated to our grandchildren,  
Orly, Natalie, Max, and Eli, who, growing up in cities,  
might find it hard to imagine coming of age  
in a place like Iowa, the Iowa I loved.

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## PREFACE

**M**Y MOTHER, BORN IN 1896 in Des Moines, Iowa, lived in a time of great growth and change in the United States. She had a happy and fulfilling life, full of unusual experiences and rewarding personal associations. People who knew her as a vibrant personality suggested to me that I should encourage her to record stories of her young life that she had often shared with us. She tried to do so, but on paper, her stories lost their sparkle. Other people suggested videos in her own voice to capture such memories. By this time she was in her nineties. We started to video. The video camera broke down. In the time it took to be repaired, Mother's ability to recall the same bright stories had fled.

As I watched our grandchildren grow in the city environments of Chicago and the Washington, D.C., area, I thought they might enjoy reading of my growing-up years—*where* I grew up *when* I grew up. This is my attempt to capture *my* Iowa memories before they flee.

The state adopted an official slogan, "Iowa, A Place to Grow," in 1970. Donald Kaul, a popular *Des Moines Register* columnist, featured an informal contest to come up with an appropriate slogan to use on auto license plates and in other ways. Ann Bucksbaum (to become Friedman in just a few years) suggested, tongue firmly in cheek, "Iowa, where McDonald's is fine dining." Well, hers was good for a chuckle, but "A Place to Grow" has seemed to be absolutely perfect to me as the years have unrolled.

If someone should ever wonder, "How did that lady come to be that way?" there are some answers here. I have heard it said that when we lose our stories, we lose ourselves. I hope that this recounting will inspire others to keep their stories alive for those who follow them.

usually beef standing rib or rolled rib roasts. We enjoyed many fresh fruits and vegetables as they came into season. Commercially canned vegetables were served more often than fresh in winter, however, and commercial white bread was the daily offering.



I certainly wouldn't welcome another Great Depression. But the situation that made us depend upon our own resources for entertainment fostered a genuine-ness in our relationships and allowed us satisfaction in life with less in material goods than is generally the rule today in the United States, giving me a happy and healthy life for which I am grateful.



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## GOING PLACES

**P**UBLIC TRANSPORTATION during my growing-up days fostered independence. A streetcar line ran within one door of my family's house. Trolley and bus service crisscrossed the city. We were taught in school that our city had more space per capita than any other in the country and that no resident was more than a quarter-mile from public transportation (what the statistics didn't tell was that some of the buses ran only once an hour and stopped running in the evening). Adult carfare was only ten cents, children under twelve, five cents, and school bus tickets at two-and-a-half cents each were available in tear-out book form.

My father waited for the streetcar every morning to take him downtown to work, but he was so well known in Des Moines that on most days someone appeared who was driving to work and would offer him a ride downtown. Like clockwork, he came home, getting off the streetcar at two minutes until six, entering the house, taking

off his coat, and washing his hands. By 6:00, Mother would have dinner on the table. My brother and I loved to go to the corner and greet Dad as he got off the streetcar. This arrangement allowed my mother everyday use of the less than new, but trusty, Chevy.

Hubbell Elementary School was one mile from our house. Having a car available to my mother, however, did not mean that we children had a ride to school. Sometimes we carpooled with our next-door neighbors, the Pattersons, and with neighbors who lived across the street, the Robinsons. But Sally Robinson was habitually tardy, and Jack Patterson started to go to another school three years before I was ready for it, so for the most part, it was walk, walk, walk. We had about an hour-and-a-half for lunch—grade schools did not serve lunches then—so we walked a mile home, a mile back, and another mile after school. We usually walked regardless of the weather—snow, cold, or rain—and I don't remember that I minded doing it. After I turned eleven, I rode my bike to school, which I did into eighth grade. My parents did not allow me to ride it in the street. At times I obeyed that rule. . . .

I also rode my bike for fun. My friends and I would go exploring the west side of the city on our bikes. I would ride on Saturdays to the Waveland branch of the public library, to the Uptown and Roosevelt shopping centers, to the streets of big houses south of Grand Avenue, to Greenwood Park, to friends' houses.

#### ADVENTURES BY TRAIN

For trips of any length, our family's preferred mode of travel was the train. To go to Colorado, we caught the Union Pacific train in Ames, Iowa, about thirty miles north of Des Moines. The years that I was six and eleven years old, my brother and I went with my mother

to Grand Junction, Colorado, to visit her sister's family. My father drove us to Ames. Once he spent so long on the train wishing us goodbye that the train pulled out of the station with him still on it.



The Grinnell train depot was a busy place at Christmas vacation, here in 1950, when students waited for the Rock Island Rocket to take them East or West.

*Grinnell College Archives*

He had to ride to the next train stop. I never learned how he got back to his car in Ames. We had Pullman accommodations. Sleeping on the train was a great treat; eating in the dining car even more of one. We especially loved going to the club car after we transferred to the Denver, Rio Grande, and Western Railroad, which wound through tunnels and steep mountainsides on the way to Grand Junction. That was when my enduring love affair with mountains began. It was especially exciting to get the view of the engine in front as we rounded curves on the serpentine route. We never knew if the darkness in a tunnel was going to be long or short. My brother and I greeted “the light at the end of the tunnel” with glee every time we emerged.

That summer of 1935 in Colorado was full of wondrous experiences, so unlike Iowa. We visited a cave with stalactites and stalagmites. We went to a castle moved stone by stone and board by board from England to the little mining town of Redstone. We chugged up Grand Mesa by car, I watching fearfully for bears all the way (I never saw any).

When I was fourteen, I stayed in Grand Junction the whole summer with my Aunt Seck. As I had a permit to learn to drive

(granted in Iowa then at that age), I had a deal with my aunt. On Saturdays she would not let me go to the swimming pool—too crowded because it was a free admission day. So, if I cooled off by washing her big Buick, she would allow me to drive her around town. She taught me to gauge the correct distance for parallel parking by starting to turn the steering wheel when my front wheels were even with the front wheels of the car parked in front of me. To this day I think of Aunt Seck when I parallel park. And many other times too—we always had great fun together.

#### BY AIRPLANE

I boarded a plane for the first time after I started college. My first ride was memorable, courtesy of a friend who lived in my Grinnell College dormitory. Strict rules at Grinnell prohibited students, other than war veterans, from having cars at school. But they hadn't thought of rules against airplanes. Little Bette Cooke from Chillicothe, Missouri, flew herself to school and kept her plane at Grinnell's small airport. She said that at one time she was the youngest licensed pilot in the United States. She often took friends for joyrides over the spring-planted Iowa countryside late in the afternoon.

My mother commented more than once on the train ride home from Colorado, "Oh, how wonderful to see that good, black Iowa dirt again." How could she make such a comment, I wondered, "I think that's nuts!" On that flight I appreciated for the first time the great beauty of Iowa's rolling hills, its patchwork of fields made even more distinct by the raking late afternoon sun and shadows. The beauty of that afternoon over Iowa is a picture that has remained vivid in my mind to this day.

My first destination travel by plane was to attend a wedding on the East Coast after my college freshman year. Nothing was particularly

memorable about it, except that it was an inexpensive “red-eye” flight that demanded that I stay awake all night.

#### BY OCEAN LINER

A true transportation adventure was my first ocean crossing by ship. As a 1951 college graduation present, my parents gave me the opportunity to travel to Europe, provided I could find a trip that was no more expensive than my college tuition had been. I unexpectedly had been able to pay my own tuition my senior year from my earnings as editor of the college newspaper. Offered by the Student International Travel Association (SITA), the trip I found was largely by bike. My parents were willing to extend their gift offer by the \$200 more than my tuition earnings that it cost.

We crossed the Atlantic on a Cunard line ship, the S.S. *Georgic*, that had been recently reconverted from wartime to civilian use. It was not grand like the other Cunard “Queens,” *Elizabeth* and *Mary*, that we had often seen pictured in the popular *Life* and *Look* magazines, but it was large. It had a dining salon and decks for sitting and strolling, and it took only one more day to cross the ocean, five I think, than the faster Queens. It was a one-class ship. Most of the passengers were students. A few were adults crossing on the cheap.

One of the better pranks I’d ever been involved in occurred shortly after the voyage got underway. Once aboard, our SITA group of travelers quickly became friends. As together we explored the passageways, the various decks, and the sleeping and eating areas, one of our group noticed that the signs that protruded overhead into the passageways designating the restrooms had removable panels inside reading “Men” on one side, “Ladies” on the other. The appropriate sides were turned to face out on each. Our

group systematically covered the ship, reversing one of the panels on each, so that on this initial part of the voyage when all of the passengers were trying to learn their way about shipboard, each of the restroom signs would read “Ladies” coming and “Men” going. Consternation reigned. In stentorian tones came an announcement over the public address system (yes, there was a speaker system even then), “Attention! Attention! This is your purser speaking. I request that the person or persons meddling with the ship’s signage system cease and desist.”

I shared a little cabin on the next-to-bottom-deck with four other members of our group, I think. We slept stacked in bunks just inches above one another, the noise of the engine room lulling (?) us to sleep nightly. Although the *Georgic* definitely wasn’t luxurious, certain of the old-time amenities from Cunard’s glory days remained—bouillon served midmorning and late at night, buffets that seemed copious to students, and white tablecloth and waiter service at meals in the dining salon. Voyaging home three months later, we spent three days passing through a hurricane. A majority of passengers became seasick. I, though a bit queasy, did not. I think the frequent bouillons saved me.

#### BY BIKE

Upon arrival in England another form of transportation awaited us. Identical three-speed bicycles were ready for each of the twenty-eight SITA travelers. However, during our first few days in London we walked rather than biked. We learned to use the Underground and to read city maps well. After leaving London to ride to several towns on the Salisbury Plain, we were each on our own between breakfast and the evening’s destination, depending largely on our maps

to help us arrive where we were expected.

Our first day of bike travel was unforgettable. Leaving London, armed with our maps, we were to ride to Oxford. The heavens opened up, spilling a cloudburst on us part way into the ride. Each of us had been provided with identical satchels

which we mounted over our back fenders, along with a smaller satchel for personal belongings, which we attached to our handlebars. We were issued blue-gray waterproof ponchos that covered our handlebars and our heads, and spread to cover the satchels on the back fenders. At that point, with 700 miles still ahead of us, Sheila Boyer, the Grinnell College friend with whom I was making the trip, and I doubted that we would ever be able to withstand the remaining hundreds of miles of the trip. We found a train station, and for very little money, we bought tickets, hauled our bikes onto the baggage car, and thankfully rode dry to our first biking destination.

After that first horrendous day, we grew to truly enjoy traveling by bike. The road to Oxford, now England's busiest, then carried very little auto traffic. It was five years after World War II ended, and war's effects were still noticeable in England. In London, piles of rubble from the bombings remained in the streets; food rationing remained in effect.



Mont-Saint-Michel was one of the stops on my 1951 bike tour of Europe. These are my companions (from left) Sheila Boyer, Fairlawn, New Jersey; Sydney Brown, Rhinelander, Wisconsin; and Joan Levin, Chappaqua, New York.



Paths crossing. On that European bike trip I ran into the Patterson family in Amsterdam. From left: Elizabeth Wingert; her mom, Clara Patterson; Jack's wife, Nonie; and Jack, who was stationed in Germany.

England lived up to its reputation of providing the worst cuisine in Europe. As kids we had used a certain glue, called Casco, I believe, for building model airplanes. We

used detailed plans to glue together the balsa wood structure of the plane models, and then glued tissue to the structure. (Faithfully modeled after World War II planes, we learned to identify many silhouettes from news reports.) The Casco glue had an especially disagreeable smell. Our first youth hostel lunch in England tasted remarkably like Casco glue smelled.

We brought along our own bed linen to be used inside the blankets provided by the hostels. Before leaving for the trip we had received instructions on how to fold a sheet in half and sew it up three quarters of the way on one side, leaving a top opening that we could slip into as we slid into a sleeping bag. We carried these sheet-bags in our satchels. The satchels also held all the clothing we wore for nearly three months, any souvenir gifts we purchased along the way, a change of shoes, soap, toilet tissue, and more.

We bicycled along the Loire River in France, from Normandy to Marseilles. For the next three weeks after bicycling through France, we used motor coach transportation on the French and Italian Rivas and to Italy's interior cities, then on into Switzerland. After hiking around Lucerne, we arrived in Germany's Black Forest for

rock climbing and more hiking. That was the first, and maybe the only, time I hiked twenty miles in a day. Our bikes awaited us there. We biked most of the length of the Rhine River, the bicycling broken by a Rhine cruise of a few days. When we got to the Netherlands, we gave up our bikes. My parents told me not to bring mine home, so I sold it at that point. The trip concluded with a stop in Belgium and an optional stay of ten days in Paris elected by most of us. We got around Paris mostly on foot and by subway.

Many of the other SITA travelers were surprised during the trip at how many times I encountered friends from Des Moines on our travels. One was Kathleen Kelly, a high school friend. While our group averaged thirty to thirty-five miles a day, hers covered sixty. I think physically we could have managed that too, but I am grateful for the free time our lesser mileage allowed, to roam where our interests took us. The Patterson family, our next-door neighbors in Des Moines, crossed paths with us in Amsterdam, and there were a few other unanticipated encounters with Iowans. We lived in a more isolating part of the country than others on the trip. Iowans, I think, looking back to my parents' and grandparents' travels, were especially aware of the need for travel to avoid insular lives.



My attitudes about public transportation showed the influence of my mother all my life. She valued the greater efficiency of bus over car use in good times as well as in bad, in times of plentiful, cheap gasoline, and in times of scarcity. When we lived in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, our children John and Ann were toddlers. Rather than driving with them to Des Moines to visit my parents, we took a bus from a small

country crossing for an easier, hands-free trip. I do remember John on that trip, his busy little legs pounding a rhythmic beat on the base of the seat in front of us. The somewhat disreputable-looking passenger in that seat, between nips from his flask, growled, "Lady, can't you control that kid of yours?" John's cute looks melted most people who saw him. Unfortunately, this gentleman bus-rider never turned around.

When the town of Aspen, Colorado, our vacation home, instituted tax-supported free bus service, my mother said, "That is what I've always believed should be a responsibility of city government." At one time I mentioned to an Aspen friend something about being on the bus, and in his surprise he said, "I'll never tell!" I told him, to the contrary, bus riding is doing the right thing, and he should tell it to one and all who might listen. That's second, of course, to my lifelong love affairs with my bicycles.



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## WORLD WAR II

**W**ORLD WAR II defined many moments, even for those of us who were children and for those of us who did not suffer personal losses. I remember being sick in bed the Sunday of December 7, 1941. My desk, near the bed, had three open shelves and on one of them sat a small radio. While the family was having Sunday dinner in the dining room, traditional in our household after Sunday morning Jewish temple services and before the maid left for her free afternoon and evening, the news came of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I yelled downstairs, “We’re at war! We’re at war!” How as an eleven-year-old the import of that news so definitely struck me I cannot now remember. Our lives changed in many ways from that time forward, although I regret that a number of the changes, such as conservation of raw materials, such as unabashed patriotism, veered back to “normalcy” after the war’s end.