

# I never saw Darlene or Mabel again

"Have we met before?"

What a lame question! I knew we had never met. Nevertheless, it did crack (not quite break) the ice.

"No, I'm sure we haven't."

My next question was a little more sensible, "Where do you live?"

"In Lead, S.D."

Then, the question I might have asked first, "What is your name?"

"Darlene Thompson" (not her real name).

"Oh, are you related to the Thompsons who live just down the road?"

"They're my aunt and uncle. I'm visiting for the weekend."

At that point, Harry, Harry, Herb, and Sadie struck up a little country band and Billy broke into song:

"Yore cheatin' heart will make you weep. You'll cry and cry and try to sleep. But sleep won't come the whole night through. Yore cheatin' heart will tell on you."

Soon after Billy started to sing, Darlene and I assumed closed dance position and two-stepped around with a hall full of other dancers.

This activity took place at Beaver Creek Community Hall, about 10 miles from home. Local carpenters moved a one-room country school, set it on a foundation close to another one-room country school, built a kitchen/entry area to connect them, and created this great old hall.

Dances, except for an occasional, well-chaperoned one at the high school gym in Newcastle, were taboo, strictly outlawed by my parents. So why was I there? Let me start at the beginning.

We worked hard to complete fall

work, harvested wheat and oats, fenced hay and straw stacks, sawed and hauled firewood, weaned calves, transferred hayracks from wagons to sleds, and made ready for winter. The only thing left to do was ship cattle.

My dad always accompanied the cattle, riding in the caboose of the cattle train to Omaha to oversee their sale at the stockyards. That year, he decided to take mom along and have an extended vacation visiting relatives in Iowa.

My two younger sisters (6 and 8), younger brother, George, (14) and I (17) would be left alone, but wait. The evening before they left, dad and mom brought to the ranch and introduced to us Mabel Mayfield (not her real name), our baby sitter.

That's the only time in my lifetime anyone ever claimed that position.

Mabel's age was somewhere between that of my parents and grandparents. She took good care of the little girls, cooked, cleaned, did laundry, and more or less ignored my brother and me as we went to and from school and took care of outside chores.

My strongest memory of her care is cooked cereal, a mixture of Malt-O-Meal and Quaker Oats laced with salt, which I tried to dilute with more than normal amounts of cream and sugar.

Before leaving, our parents instructed us to behave, take care of



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chores, and not give Mabel any trouble. "Above all," they said, "Stay out of the car and don't drive it unless there is an emergency."

Mabel witnessed those instructions.

During school bus conversations, and at high school,

friends learned of our parents' absence. "I wish my folks would leave for two weeks." "Me too."

About midweek, someone started a notice on the grapevine, "There's a dance this Saturday night at Beaver Creek Community Hall."

Our friends showed excitement. "Boy, those dances are always fun. There will be girls from all over the neighborhood and some from town too, and Billy's gonna sing; why don't you guys come on down?"

"Our sisters will tattletale on us."

"Aw, get 'em a whole bunch of candy or somethin', they'll be quiet."

So, among a few prickles of guilt, and much anticipation, George and I made plans. We'd not tell the sisters or Mabel, act all cool, hurry through chores and supper, clean up, jump in the car, and go.

When they discovered our plan, we'd be on our way. If there were consequences of our disobedience, they'd be dealt with in due time.

All went according to plan. We sneaked out. I was pulling out of the driveway when Mabel and the girls hurried out.

Sisters informed, "We're gonna tell mamma and daddy."

Mabel asked, "Where are you boys going?"

I answered, "Oh, down the road a piece." George and I still chuckle remembering that vague answer.

Our friends, a little surprised to see us, made us welcome and we had a good time. I asked Darlene to dance several times.

She never refused, probably liked me. I liked her.

Those Saturday night dances always lasted until past midnight, so we got home in the wee hours. Moonlight blessed the night. I turned headlights off before pulling into the driveway.

No surprise, Mabel knew the exact hour and minute we went to bed.

Sunday morning we did chores early and sat down to breakfast. Inquisitive sisters learned little of our escapade.

Mabel expressed disappointment and promised to put us on report. If she did, my parents never mentioned anything about it.

I remember that night with fondness, albeit I never saw Darlene or Mabel again.

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*Center Stage is written by friends of the Senior Center for the Sheridan community. It is a collection of insights and stories related to living well at every age.*