

Chapter Six: Goodbye North Dakota; Hello Iowa

Nearly everyone is leaving town

Passenger train, Great Northern Railroad from Devils Lake, North Dakota to Minneapolis, Minnesota on the way to Fort Madison, Iowa, January 18, 1942

Devils Lake Journal, June 20, 1941.

“Lakers at Grain School in Lakota”

“Paul E.R. Abrahamson, Ramsey County Agent, Phil Sopak and Evangeline Bechtel, personnel in charge of the Commodity Loan program in Ramsey County, were in Lakota Thursday to attend the Grain School. About 35 elevator managers, extension workers, and members of the AAA program from six counties attended the meeting.”

Devils Lake Journal, October 8, 1941.

“Employees of the local AAA office give Miss Evangeline Bechtel a farewell party.”

Even though I’m not headed west, the direction that I always hoped to go, this train trip is just the most exciting thing I’ve ever done. Before this day is over Veronica and Jim and little Jean will meet me in Fort Madison and I will start my new life. I always thought that I would



Train depot, Devils Lake N.D.

travel west on one of the trains headed to California out of Devils Lake. But moving south and getting a new job seems like the best thing right now. The people at Sheaffer’s Pen liked my resume. Their invitation to

interview for a job this week seems like just a formality. It’s hard to imagine what working at a big company will be like. Every place I’ve worked has always been small with only a few people.

While they are famous for making fountain pens, I’ve read that Sheaffer’s is turning out small parts for the military too. If I can do something at work that helps bring Joe, Gerry, Roman,

Noel and the other boys back home from war duty faster I'll be doing good like when I was helping the poor farmers get loans to rebuild their lives.

Walking between the train cars, close to the dining car, smells delicious and makes me really hungry. Back at my seat the lunchbox that Mother made for me to take along, so I wouldn't have to pay for food on the train, has sandwiches and fruit and cookies. I'll be okay until I get to Fort Madison. Gosh I am going to miss Mother's chocolate chip cookies! I'll bet I've helped her make them a hundred times and I *still* can't get mine to turn out this good! Maybe Veronica and Jim will take me out to dinner after I arrive. Oh, probably not! Jim hasn't been working in Fort Madison long: moving from Keokuk and opening the new office has probably stretched their budget. I suppose we'll just go home and eat. That would be swell too. It will be wonderful to see them again. I'm so excited I can't even think of eating more food. Listen to me; I sound like a darned school girl. Ah well. Might as well just sit back and enjoy the ride.

Fort Madison IA, March 1942

My life took on new dimensions after I left the AAA position in Devils Lake. But gee just about everyone else's has too. The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 and America entered World War II. That was the day that Jim and Veronica and little daughter Jean moved

Evangeline Bechtel's pens and pencil from 1941-42: Sheaffer's pencil and fountain pen set (L + R) with & Sheaffer's fountain pen with EMB band engraving



from Keokuk Iowa to Fort Madison so Jim could open and man a new office for a Keokuk-based loan company.

Noel left Devils Lake in February of 1941 and Roman was recalled to active duty in January 1942. When I headed for this new job in the offices of the headquarters of W. A. Sheaffer's Pen Company in Fort Madison Jim and Veronica gladly added me to their household. So I help take care of Jean and find myself in another loving home with family.



Although fountain pen sales declined as war came Sheaffer's stayed at full production by fulfilling military orders for manufactured parts. I'm taking advantage of the social scene at the busy complex. I'm part of the Stenographic Department and I've attended many dinner meetings and farewell parties for men and women leaving the plant to enter the service. I'm an active member of the Fort Madison chapter of the *Business Professional Woman's Society*. Mother has long been a dedicated leader of the Devils Lake chapter. She was even President one year. I was also a member there and I helped her organize many events when she was an officer. I joined the Fort Madison group as soon as I got this job at Sheaffer's. I've also gotten involved in Beta Sigma Phi. Although our BSP activities were mostly philanthropic and don't have a connection to any university or school, belonging seems like being in a college sorority. I really enjoy the meetings and social events.

*Evangeline
Marie
Bechtel, Fort
Madison,
Iowa, circa
1942*

Fort Madison Evening Democrat, February 5, 1943, p. 8.

“Beta Sigma Phi's meet Wednesday”

“After the business meeting . . . Miss Evangeline Bechtel read a paper titled ‘Etiquette of Travel.’ Evangeline was elected and served as the group's corresponding secretary and

achieved the second rung along its progressive degrees of membership: the ritual of jewels.”

The O'Briens moved back to Keokuk after just one year in Fort Madison. Jim returned to the Keokuk branch of the loan company. Veronica took a job at Thomas Truck and Caster but she left that job pretty quickly: she's expecting their second child. I wanted to move with them, but since I don't have a car or a dependable way to commute between Keokuk and Fort Madison, I've rented an apartment near work in Fort Madison. I often catch a ride back and forth to Keokuk over weekends to visit them.

Since my arrival in Fort Madison my, long-time friend Bunny Antony has spent many nights and way too much money calling me long-distance from Devils Lake. Bunny's trying to talk me into a plan that I want to clear with the folks. I'm old enough to decide for myself but I always prefer their blessing rather than upsetting them. I'll speak with them during a two-week vacation and family visit in March. After I moved from Devils Lake, Gerry graduated from high school and joined the Navy and got shipped to the war. Joe sends us postcards and pictures from his Army duty in Europe under General Patton. Jack failed his physical so he stayed in Wisconsin with his young family.

350 5th St. NE (The Grand Building) Devils Lake North Dakota, March, 1943

“Mother and Father please sit down. There's something I want to talk with you about.

Bunny wants me go to California.”

“For a visit? I didn't know Bunny was in California”

“No Father to live and work. Bunny is still here but she has an offer for a good paying office job with an insurance company and has a lead on a safe place to live. She says that

the war industry factories are hiring every able pair of hands they can find. She's saved enough money to buy a used car so she can drive us there and get us around when we need to go places. I've got education, training and job experience. She says I

won't have any trouble finding a job. We'll live together and share expenses so we won't spend much. I like my job at Sheaffer's just fine but if I go to California I can make a lot more money and

maybe even help end the war faster. Sheaffer's makes small parts for the military but in California they make airplanes, ships and guns. Lord knows I'd love to do something that might help get Joe, Gerry, Roman and Noel back from the war safe and sound sooner rather than later."

"Can Veronica and Jim afford to have you leave, with new baby Maureen there now? You know that Veronica has her hands full with two little girls and her full-time job."

"Well since they moved back to Keokuk I can't help from Fort Madison much anyway except on the weekends. Besides I can come back and help after I've worked in

California a few years Mother. You know that I can use a little more money and I will be able to send some extra to you guys too! And I would just love to see California.



Evangeline Marie Bechtel, April 1943 on a quick round trip from Fort Madison IA to Devils Lake ND to visit the folks, not long before heading to Los Angeles, by car, with friend/roommate Bunny Antony in July, 1943



Joe Bechtel serving under Patton in Africa and Sicily in 1943-44 and later under Clark in Italy, circa 1945, near Rome

Seems like that with an almost guaranteed job I shouldn't pass up this chance.”

“You don't have to send us any money. Your dad is full time on the police force now and the beauty shop is doing just fine. You save whatever money you can. You are probably right child; this sounds like it might be a really good opportunity for you. It's just that I am going to miss having you close enough for a quick visit. Doggone it, you raised Dickie and Donnie almost by yourself. They miss you now but they'll miss you more if go so far away.”

“Oh yeah they'll miss me like a sore thumb. You know those boys don't need their older sister visiting home and trying to keep them in line while they are teenagers. I promise I'll write every week and I'll send money every time I get paid. If you don't need it for expenses then spend it on my little brothers. They can always use a little extra something; they've been through lots of hard times”

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