

Viola Wieser: 100 years old and still caring for others

(Editor's Note: In conjunction with The Review's 100th Birthday, we felt it appropriate to include this article a bit early.)

By MIMI LARSEN Staff Writer

Viola Wieser was a fixture in the teaching world for 45 years, with most of those years in the Rosholt School District. In all the years since her arrival here in 1939, Viola has cared for students, neighbors and friends. She will be 100 years old in January, and she is still living by herself, still out driving a car and still visiting shut-ins.

Growing up on a farm in Ipswich, Viola was the youngest of nine children, two of which were boys. She was born to Theodore and Emma (Theis) Behselich on January 23, 1914. She attended country school through the sixth grade before attending junior high at Holy Cross Catholic School in Ipswich. She graduated from Ipswich High School in 1932.

"I grew up during the Depression years," said Viola. "There were no crops, year after year after year, but there were plenty of dust storms, just like blizzards." Dust filled the ditches, and buried the fence lines until cattle could walk right over them.

If it wasn't dust storms that plagued farmers like the Behselichs, it was grasshoppers. "They ate everything," said Viola. "I can still remember my brother coming to the house one day and saying, 'Look at the sun.' You couldn't see the sun, because the sky was black with grasshoppers. The hardships went on for many years, but somehow, people figured out a way to add some sunshine to the dark days.

"People had to do something to save their sanity when it was nothing but sand storms," said Viola. "Neighbors would get together to play cards or dance. No one had any carpets or anything, so if people came, and someone had an accordion, they'd push back the chairs and dance. A little recreation helped get their minds off of what they were trying to forget.

"People were losing their farms one after another, but I had two industrious brothers who worked and worked so we could hold on to our farm." Their father had died in 1923 when Viola was 9 years old.

"Those were tough years, but we survived. Something like that makes a lasting impression. It makes one feel they can handle anything."

Together, Viola and one of her sisters attended what is now the campus of Northern State University in Aberdeen. Back then it was called Northern Normal and Industrial School.

"I don't know how we did it," Viola said, referring to the tight money situation. After one year, they were deemed qualified to teach at a rural school, and did so for four years. With enough money saved up, it was time to go back to college, the same college, but with a new name: Northern State Teachers College.

With an additional two years under her belt, the money ran out, and it was time for Viola to get back into the classroom to make a living.

"I had to get another school (contract) because I had run out of money," said Viola. "No one would lend you fifty cents, and that was if they had it." She filled out applications until she felt she couldn't stand it anymore.

"It seemed like every position was filled before I could get the application in," said Viola. Then one day, the depot agent in Ipswich called.

"I have a telegram here for Viola Behselich. It says 'You have been hired to teach grades 4, 5, and 6 in Rosholt.'"

"I was so tired of writing applications, I said, 'Send a telegram back saying 'I

accept.'" As soon as I sent that message, I received offers from schools in Campbell and Tracy, Minn.

A letter came from Rosholt explaining that the Board president, Mr. Emil Hostbjor was in Pierre for the legislative session, and that a contract would be sent as soon as he came back. In the meantime, the superintendents from the other two schools were calling, and both said, "If you don't have a contract, you don't have a job."

"I talked to my mother about it," said Viola, "and she said, 'You should trust those people in Rosholt,' so I did, and I've been here ever since."

Viola and her mother had to look Rosholt up on a map. They had no idea where it was, but it was closer than Minnesota. When it was time to go, Viola's brothers drove her to Rosholt, where she boarded with Lawrence and Mabel Erickson.

"They were two wonderful, lovely people," said Viola. "They made me feel so at home." The Ericksons had no children, but boarded several students during the school year. This was no new thing to Viola, because she had done the same thing from seventh grade through her senior year in high school.

"My sister and I did that. We lived eleven and a half miles from town. Heavens, you didn't make too many trips to town. Gas was too expensive, so you couldn't waste it. If you got to town once a week that was enough."

It was 1939 when Viola arrived in Rosholt to teach. Before long she was drawn into the Catholic get-togethers.

"The CLA, the Catholic Ladies Aid, held a series of Whist card parties," said Viola. "Oh, it was serious business! They kept score over the season, and at the end, prizes were given out." Viola wasn't interested in Whist; that was for the older people.

"Oh no! I never played (cards). I didn't know *how* to play; I wanted to dance! After they played cards, there was always someone to play the accordion or violin (or both if we were lucky), and we would dance. We called those 'card party dances,'" That is where she met Vic Wieser.

World War II intervened, and Vic was shipped off to the war in Europe as an infantryman. Letters went back and forth, but it was a long, stressful four years.

"He probably walked a good share of Europe," said Viola. "During that whole last winter, I got maybe a couple of letters. You know, that 'V-mail,' just a little square of paper. He couldn't tell me where he was or what he was doing. All I knew was that he was alive when he wrote it."

With three years and eight months under his belt, the war in Europe ended, but Vic wasn't done yet. Soldiers were discharged according to a point system, and Vic was a few points short. He was assigned to the Pacific, and was on his way home from Europe before his reassignment took place. Somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic, word came that the Japanese had surrendered.

"Vic said you never heard so much excitement and rejoicing as on that ship when word came," said Viola. He also said the most beautiful sight he ever saw was when they got close enough to the New York harbor to see the Statue of Liberty.

After Vic returned home from the war, the young couple decided they had waited long enough, and got married on December 27, 1945 at Holy Cross Catholic Church in Ipswich. They moved onto a farm place north of Rosholt.

One day, just before school started, the Rosholt superintendent (E.T. Johnson) came out to the farm. The war had siphoned off



some of the high school teachers, and there was a shortage.

"He said, 'You have to teach high school English. We can't get a teacher and you have to come in and help us.' I said I can't, because I'm not a high school teacher, and he said, 'You can do it!' He practically told me I *had* to do it, and I said I would until they could hire somebody.

"I taught high school English and seventh and eighth grades too. Then he came and told me I had to direct the Glee Club. Then that I had to direct the senior class play, and then that I had to supervise the school publication put out every month. Of course, those were appointed jobs after school. There was no going any place but school, but I liked working with the high school kids. I had had some of those kids in elementary school, and now they were all these grown up people.

"In some of these assignments, I probably didn't do as well as qualified people, but whatever job I had, I gave it my all."

In the meantime, Vic's dad bought an old farm house 10 miles southwest of Rosholt and had it moved to the farm east of town, where Dave and Kathy Braun now live.

"That house had been standing out in a field for years, and had no windows and no doors. We worked on the house all that summer (of 1946). It was just awful; we had to re-do everything. Vic's brother Andrew helped us, and we moved in on Veteran's Day, because I had a holiday from school. Vic was very handy, so he made it very livable."

In the midst of all that teaching, Viola managed to take summer and evening courses to accrue the credits necessary to receive her Bachelor of Arts in teaching. She graduated from Northern State Teachers College in 1961.

All the extra duties at school finally wore Viola out.

"I took a year off," she said. "I was going to quit, but they needed a teacher at a rural school, and I liked rural teaching, so I took it. I came back (to Rosholt Elementary) when there was a vacancy in the grade school.

"We went out to the 'new' school, the new elementary built in 1963. They closed all the country schools, and Mr. Finley (the superintendent) said, 'We'll take your teachers too,' so I was back here. When they opened the new elementary, they asked me to be the elementary principal, because I had taken some extra credits in administration. I also taught seventh and eighth English and other classes." She was happy to say she never had to teach math.

Vic and Viola lived in their farm house for 19 years. After Vic had had several severe heart attacks, Dr. Kass said he'd better get off the farm. The last year (1965), Vic's nephew David Braun came to help.

"We didn't know where we'd go or what

we'd do," said Viola.

Vic was looking at lots in town to build on, but his mother suggested another plan that involved a few housing swaps. Dave and Kathy Braun had been living in a trailer on the Wieser's farm. The Brauns moved into the Wieser farm house, and their trailer was moved to Vic's parents' backyard in town. Because Vic's mom was a widow, she decided she'd moved into the trailer, and had Vic and Viola moved into the house. Viola has lived there ever since.

Vic was hired as the maintenance man at the new nursing home when it opened in 1968. In 1970, he and Dr. Kass partnered to build the car wash (now LeClair Car Wash), which Vic maintained for 12 years.

"Every year before school started, Vic insisted we take a few days off," said Viola, "because there was no leaving school once the year started. We went by car somewhere." Then one year, a brother-in-law talked Vic and Viola into going on a bus trip to California for a German-Braun reunion.

"Vic really enjoyed the trip," said Viola. "He said, 'This is really nice. You don't have to worry about traffic, or what you're going to do, because it's all arranged for you.'" That was the end of their car trips, and the Wiesers enjoyed several vacation bus tours together in the U.S. and Canada.

After nine years as principal, Viola went back into the classroom fulltime, this time teaching fifth grade. Her last year, she supervised a student teacher, one of Rosholt's own students, Casey Tedin (now Wise). Altogether, Viola taught for 45 years.

"As soon as I retired, in 1981, I went and joined the Community Quilters," said Viola. "I quilt with them, and I like it." These ladies meet at Bethania Church two days a month to quilt and enjoy fun and fellowship together, as well as a pot luck dinner and lunch. Every year, they produce hundreds of warm, functional quilts to send to charitable organizations.

Anyone who knows Viola knows she keeps busy. From the day the Rosholt Care Center opened (in 1968), Viola has been a faithful visitor to all she knows there. She has also visited at Countryside Assisted Living ever since two fellow teacher-friends started living there (Hazel Schumacher and Nancy Thompson).

"She is such a caring person," said Kathy Braun. "If anyone dies, or has a wedding or anniversary, she is always one of the first to show up with food, and console or visit with the children, because she probably had them in her classroom."

Viola has been a faithful volunteer throughout the community, serving with the American Legion Auxiliary, the Threshermen, the Rosholt Museum, and anywhere needed. She has also always been active at St. John's Catholic Church, where she is a member of the Rosary Makers, and still leads the Rosary before Mass at the Care Center. In her younger days, she helped with the more physical labors like planting flowers. She's even been the church historian.

Above all, Viola has a teacher's heart.

"I was in it all my life, and I admire the teaching profession, both rural and urban," said Viola. "There's something about the rural though. Students learned to live together, study together, help one another. There was something special about that. Like a big family living together."

Since retirement, Viola has treated the entire community like one big family living together, comforting others, helping others, sharing with others. People like Viola help make a town into a caring community.