

Recollections about Mom, Joyce (DeMars) Barthel.

Recollections. The following story and all my stories are from my recollections. No doubt there are factual errors. I do not strive for historical accuracy. Neither do I intentionally embellish these stories.

I write that because I know from experience that my recollections can be much different from the recollections of my siblings. Not just in dates and facts but in emotional memory. My point is that I enjoyed my parents and my childhood immensely. My sense is that some of my siblings recall it as a challenging life. Perhaps it was for them.

Mom was an athlete. In her days a girl or young woman who did athletic things was called a Tomboy. There are numerous definitions of Tomboy. The one that fits her best is, “a girl who acts or dresses in a boyish way, likes rough outdoor activities”.

This story is about Mom in a softball-throwing contest.

This took place in midsummer, maybe around 1954. I was about eight. Mom was about 32. We were at the public park on Howard Lake in Wright County. In those days, groups often got together on Sunday afternoon for picnics. Sunday afternoon because that was the only time dads were not working. The group might be members of a farm co-op, families from a 4-H club, families whose fathers played on a town ball team, etc.

Each family brought its own food and set up on a picnic table. Some families combined two or more to a table. Especially if the families were related. Food was carried in picnic baskets or pans wrapped in towels to keep the contents hot or cold. Convenient things like rolling plastic coolers with wheels did not exist. Plastic containers were expensive and rare. Mom would bring cool aide in glass canning jars with lids turned tight and wrapped in towels. Brown beans were common. Sometimes with hot dogs cut into chunks dropped in the beans. There would often be a big roaster of chicken. Most folks raised and butchered their own chickens. There might be a few cases of beer somewhere, possibly even a keg if it were the right group. Homemade potato salad in a big crock wrapped in towels. Foods were homemade. No store bought cookies. Potato chips were a special treat, sometimes. The choices were Old Dutch Potato Chips in a large can with a lid or Old Dutch Potato Chips in a small can with a lid. The cans made good toy drums when empty. That was if no mom claimed it for a storage container. There might be some pop around. Soft drinks were rare however, and you might need to share two or three to a bottle. Gail told me a list of foods that her family ate at picnics but I do not know much about that. They were Lutherans. Protestants ate different foods. We were Catholic.

If the weather was good, kids would play in the water but the adults did not. Somebody might have brought a wooden rowboat. If the beach was a well-organized one, rowboats might be rented for \$0.25 an hour.

People brought equipment for games then as now. Men and kids played games before and after eating time. Moms prepared food and fed us. There would be a ball game even if there were only enough men and boys for small teams. Otherwise two or three man “catch” was fun as were game variations that rotated everyone through a chance to bat. Often someone would bring a horseshoe set. Frisbee had not been invented and volleyball was unknown.

If the group was well organized there might be scored games with prizes. This is where my mom comes in.

To the outside world, she fit in as a nice normal mother of the times. She seldom if ever wore masculine clothes. Masculine in those days would have been pants (as opposed to a full skirt), a man’s shirt, boots or a cap. She was not competitive. When the picnic organizers started lining up woman to do a “soft ball toss for distance”, I

don't think Mom was even paying attention. I watched the contest and saw the other women make their tosses. A person who is not trained in throwing a ball has a peculiar way of swinging the arm over the head in an ineffective manner. We used to tease guys by saying that they "pitched like a girl". Every boy knew what that looked like.

Most of the moms made a good effort and threw the softball similar distances. Perhaps twenty to thirty yards. Each contestant's impact spot was measured and marked with a makeshift flag. My impression is that somebody realized that Joyce should be in the game, so she was brought over in a rush. For no particular reason, she was wearing a baseball cap. I assume some kid or dad had dropped it and she came across the hat. That was unusual because I had never seen a ball cap on her head before or after. Just odd timing.

She walked up to the throwing location took the ball and with a smooth and simple motion she threw it like a man. It traveled more than twice the distance of the next longest throw. The contest was over.

The folks around me didn't know Mom. Someone said, "Look at her in that ball cap. She must play ball all the time". I had never before seen Mom throw a ball. I didn't know she could. For the next sixty years I continued to learn things, which I did not know she could do.