

NEW BEGINNINGS: LIFE IN EARLY BREITUNG

By Mary (Weinert) Erickson Sundberg, 1998

Our train ride from **Manistique** had been a very exciting adventure. Shortly after daybreak we pulled into the Iron Mountain station. My mother with us seven children looked in amazement at the kids that came on ice skates to meet the train. You could tell it was just after Christmas by the brightly-colored knit caps and mittens. Their breath made little white clouds in the crisp air. Papa had left our home in Hiawatha the afternoon before on a truck piled with our belongings and had traveled all night on dangerous roads to be able to meet us here on this wintry day. It was my baby brother's second birthday, and it was **December 27, 1923**. I was six years old.

Our family crowded into a taxicab for the last lap of our journey to our new home on **400 Lawrence and Emmet Streets**. We left the city and traveled south on **Carpenter Avenue** to Breitung on unplowed roads. As we turned right on **Breitung Avenue** we saw a woman trying to retrieve her upside-down umbrella from a steamy brown creek. Papa said that was **Sewer Creek**, then turned attention to the first house on the left. "That is **Richardson's house**. They lived about five miles from us in **Hiawatha**." The house is still there on the corner of **Pinehurst Street**. Next Papa pointed to two tall, red brick chimneys that had the word "FORD" on a sign between them. "That is where I work and I get paid \$5 a day and payday is every two weeks, and Freddy can have all the syrup he wants on his pancakes!" We could hear the hum of machinery and the puffing of the engines. It was like a giant dragon, huffing and puffing...a little scary to me.

We finally turned onto **Lawrence Street**, and two blocks further we went down a hill and turned into the yard of a small house nestled in a grove of tall pine trees. We stopped by a water pump. (We would haul our water from this well until the water mains were put in.) "Is this it?" we all cried.

"No, that's not our house," Papa said, pointing to a big house down the street. Then he turned and spoke sternly to us: "These nice people have invited us to have breakfast with them, and I want you all to behave!"

Mrs. Merkle, a chubby little lady with grey hair braided up in a topknot, opened the door and welcomed us in. We could smell fresh coffee boiling on the wood cook stove. **Mr. Merkle** was also chubby, as was his nine-year-old son **Chester**. The chairs were sturdy, homemade ones with a heart cut out in the center of the back. They pulled the chairs up to the table and told us to sit.

Our house on the corner of Lawrence and Emmet was not finished, as were most of the houses in those boom days. But we settled in and made the most of things, like getting out of warm beds while it was still dark and quickly running downstairs to cluster around the warm wood heater to dress. Then off to school, my brother **Ernie** breaking trail through the deep snow, followed by my sister **Louise**, brothers **Fred** and **Carl** and then me [**Mary**]. **Ossie** would start school after his fifth birthday in January, and **Otto** was the baby. In **Hiawatha** we went to a one-room school that had outdoor toilets, but now we went to the new **West Breitung School** in the middle of the **200 block of Lyman Street** where they had flush toilets inside! Wow!

The school soon became crowded and it was necessary to have half of the students go in the mornings and the other half in the afternoons. Later, **portable wooden schools** were moved in on **Sterling Street**, the entrance, with cloakroom and chemical toilets between the north and south wings. When the new **Roosevelt School** (named after Teddy) was built we marched over to the **Hemlock Street** school, teachers leading the way and entered the beautiful, new school. Classes were from kindergarten through sixth grade.

NEW BEGINNINGS: LIFE IN EARLY BREITUNG

By Mary (Weinert) Erickson Sundberg, 1998

The spring of 1924 was so beautiful! So much to discover! Everything grew in such abundance. One morning in May we awoke to find our yard abloom with snowy, white trilliums. They lasted a little over a week, then turned a delicate pink. Purple violets grew in profusion by the river, and my brothers **Fred** and **Carl** picked some to bring to school. The teachers were so impressed that they asked to have them pick bouquets to give to friends and paid them 75 cents for each bunch. That was a lot of money in those days, and they spent much of it on marbles, the earliest game in the spring. They bought “commies” and “glassies,” big beauties with colored swirls inside.

The first crop of the season was leeks, a wild onion that tasted delicious but left the breath smelling foul for days after eating them. This upset the teachers, who asked us not to eat them. When they gave the ultimatum – “Please go home and don’t come back until you smell better!” – it brought out the Huck Finn in the boys, so they could get out of going to school.

The **Von Platen-Fox Lumber Mill in Iron Mountain** supplied wood for heating and cooking. When the team of horses were heard coming to deliver a load, my brothers followed and asked for the job of unloading. This meant piling the big stuff and making a well about six feet in diameter into which they threw the small, irregular pieces.

They were hard-working boys and also did most of the work in the garden. Vegetable gardens were very important in those days, and neighbors vied to be the first to have radishes, lettuce and onions to vary the winter diet of dried foods: beans, peas, prunes, apples and root vegetables.

Papa rented a lot to plant potatoes and the boys found it refreshing to take a dip in the river before coming home to supper. With the help of some friends, they cleared a path to the “big” island. They taught

themselves to swim, put ropes in the trees Tarzan-style from which to swing and drive into the cool water. Then they built a diving platform and a spring board. They made it plain that this was a BA beach – no girls allowed – as none of the boys had bathing suits.

One day, as my sister **Louise** and I and some friends were walking along the road near the island, we found some nice, lacy, embroidered teddies (underwear) smeared with feces. That was to teach the girls that their sanctity would not be violated! A few years later the **Boy Scouts cleared a swimming hole down from Riverview Drive** which was open to the public, and we girls could also enjoy swimming. When the boys came to this swimming hole, we girls did not object...rather we enjoyed the company of the boys. (In 1960 and 1961, my son, **Tom Erickson**, was lifeguard here.)

Troop 10 (now 510) Boy Scouts used a building in the **500 block of Lawrence Street** that had originally been built to house the overflow of kindergarteners. **Carl** and **Fred** became Life Scouts and **Forest Bennett** was the only one to become an Eagle Scout. The **Case boys, Carrol** and **Keith, Orland Zinn** and many others I can’t remember were also very active in Boy Scouts.

The narrow two-rut road continued up the river from the island and through a clearing where we often had picnics. The river was shallow here on the Michigan side and an ideal place to skip flat stones and gather clams. The road continued on past a spring, where we enjoyed refreshing drinks, then on to the **pump-house**. This was a **small, cement block structure** in a beautiful clearing **to supply industrial water to the Ford Plant**. The caretaker had a big collie dog that welcomed everyone with a happy yelp. To pass the time the caretaker also tended the beautiful flower gardens in this lovely, landscaped

NEW BEGINNINGS: LIFE IN EARLY BREITUNG

By Mary (Weinert) Erickson Sundberg, 1998

oasis. There was a path going up the steep hillside with wooden steps going up the incline which we called **The 48 Steps**, a favorite place to take visitors. To the west of the **Aurora Bridge** (where the sewage disposal plant is now located) was a beautiful, natural park and in the early years Breitung business people sponsored Fourth of July picnics there.

One day on my way home from school I had a few pennies burning a hole in my hand, so I stopped at **Rhodes** (pronounced Rho-dees) **Grocery Store on Sterling Street** to buy some candy. My brother **Ernie** worked there part-time and I knew he could help me get the most for my money. Happily, I ran home.

As I came in the door, Mama was just saying good-bye to **Mrs. Rhode**, who had come over to see our house. They were laughing and joking when suddenly there was a terrible BOOM! The house shook and something big landed on our roof. They both ran upstairs to see what had happened. There was a gaping hole in the ceiling over one of the beds which had a huge pine stump on it. Ants were already spreading over the beds and the floor. Half a block away land clearing was going on and they dynamited a huge pine stump that defied digging out with shovels.

Mrs. Rhode hastily departed out the front door as my sister **Louise** came in the back door. She found my little brother **Otto** standing in the middle of the kitchen with a terrible look on his face, but unable to cry. He was holding something white in his hand, and some of it was on his lips. With the hem of her wool skirt she wiped the stuff from his mouth. It burned big holes in it! She soon had holes almost all around the hem. Mama came in and gave Otto some milk she had in a pan, but he could not swallow. Tears were streaming down his face, but he did not make a sound! Papa came home from day shift at the Ford Plant. Two tragic events at the same time

and there was bedlam. The dynamiting crew came in to survey the damage and Louise and Mama were doing what they could to help our baby brother.

Mama later said that a friend had given her a package of lye to get the grease off Papa's overalls. She had put it high above the kitchen window out of reach. The blast had shook the house so violently that the package fell on the wash bench beneath the window. Otto was at the age when kids put everything in their mouth. He probably thought it was powdered sugar.

Medeo Bacco was in charge of the blasting crew, and he and Papa had loud words outside by the door. **Dr. O'Neil**, the **Ford doctor** at the time, said Louise and Mama had done the right thing. Milk was the antidote. Otto was put to bed with a fever. Supper was late that night, but nobody had an appetite. Lots of work had to be done. Ants were crawling into everything. The bedding was hung on the line while the upstairs had to be swept and scrubbed and a temporary cover placed over the six-foot hole in the roof.

Mama was so proud of how well Otto talked at one-year-old and said he would be another Caruso because he sang so well. Now he could not speak at all. He was 29 months old. He recovered slowly, and was not able to speak for a long time. This made him a loner with very few playmates. He loved his **kindergarten teacher, Miss Anderson**, whom he called Miss Annakener. One day in my classroom upstairs I heard Otto crying loudly. I raised my hand, not waiting for permission, and raced downstairs to the kindergarten room. Miss Anderson was very understanding and allowed me to comfort him.

Another time on our way home for lunch the school bully poked fun at **Otto** and punched him and called him rude names. We were on a short-cut through his yard and there were about twenty kids. This made me so mad that I tackled the bully

NEW BEGINNINGS: LIFE IN EARLY BREITUNG

By Mary (Weinert) Erickson Sundberg, 1998

and beat the heck out of him while his mother watched from the window. But she did not come out to stop the fight. I still don't know how I did it. He was about my size, but with a lot more experience in fighting.

Years later his mother told me that was the best lesson he ever had and it made a big change in him. Funny thing is that in high school we were the best of friends. I was too exhausted to eat lunch and afraid to go back to school for fear that someone would tattle on me, but no one did. In fact, nobody ever mentioned it. But I sure got respect!

Schools did not have speech therapy in those days. Otto did learn to speak, but not as clearly as before. In spite of this handicap, he was accepted into the Army in World War II and served in the European Theater.

Roosevelt School went through the sixth graded, so when our class passed into the seventh grade we had to go to the **Garden Village School**. This was on the east side of **Carpenter Avenue**, and we could cross at either **Breen or Breitung Avenue**. **Sagola Avenue** ended at **Parkway Street**, above **Sewer Creek**, where it bubbled and steamed below a steep bank. Posts with heavy cables prevented drivers from going over the edge. Barriers are meant to be overcome, right? So, a few daring kids climbed over the cables and slid down the embankment to the creek. Hopping from one slippery rock to another the most daring took this shortcut to school. Unfortunately, some slipped and fell in. Getting wet would have been bad enough, but the smell was overpowering! Of course, they had to go home and clean up and change clothes and be late for school. Some of the kids from **East Kingsford (Skidmore - ?)**, who had no need to cross the creek, tried it just for the fun of it! Of course, this upset the teachers. The problem was solved when a

wooden bridge and steps were built. This served until **Sagola Avenue was extended to join Carpenter Avenue**. The site of this bridge is where the **Franks Chiropractic Care Center** is now.

When we went to **Kingsford High School**, we still had problems with the creek as we walked along the Ford fence. The corner at **East Boulevard** came perilously close to the creek. Here the path slanted down toward the water and on icy days became very slippery and there were some accidents. Our woolen gloves stuck to the damp wire of the fence, so we had to take off our gloves and cling to the wire while still hanging on to our books. The creek steamed its way past Kingsford High School and when the wind was from the east all windows had to be closed. North of **Hamilton Avenue** the creek had been covered. A WPA project (1933 or 1934) finally put an end to the problem when the stream was piped to about a block from where it entered the **Menominee River** near the **Aurora Bridge**.

Our family of seven children grew to eleven – all born at home in Kingsford. Doctors made house calls and were assisted by midwives. My sister **Evelyn** arrived in 1925, brother **Wagner** in 1927, **Clarence** in 1929 and **Dorothy Ann** in 1931. I was fortunate to be the “middle child,” as the older ones were there for me when I was little and I learned to care for the little ones when they came along. This gave me a lot of experience in caring for children, and I was in much demand for “baby-sitting,” although that term was not used at that time. I learned to manage my money very well and bought most of my clothes and Christmas gifts with my earnings. I spent some of it on “jacks,” a very popular game of skill and dexterity, and I was really good at it.

The Business District of the Village of Kingsford (West Breitung)

NEW BEGINNINGS: LIFE IN EARLY BREITUNG

By Mary (Weinert) Erickson Sundberg, 1998

Breen Avenue was a very busy street and had everything! At the far west end between **Lawrence and Sterling Streets** was the beautiful **Terrace Park** with its lovely flower gardens and walks, swings and merry-go-rounds for the children. It also was a romantic setting for teenagers to meet and lovers to stroll.

Ted Marcellini's Gas Station was a meticulously kept up business, and he sold ice cream too. It was also the bus stop, as public transportation took us to **Iron Mountain**. (In recent years it was a beauty shop, and now it is a sign shop.)

The **Fair Store** on **Balsam Street** was a **grocery** run by **Pecore's**, and later became a **tavern** run by a **Mr. Ames**. When it changed ownership, it became **LeGault's Tavern**, then **Tommy John's Tavern**.

Directly across the street was the **Log Cabin**, used as a **dance hall and meeting place** for such clubs as the **Royal Neighbors**. Next to **Tommy John's** was **Larmie's Tailor Shop**, then on the **Beech Street** corner was a **dry cleaners**.

Across the street was the **A & P. Store**, a **barber shop** and the **Abe Cohodes & Sons dry goods store**. It was a special treat to select material from the many bolts of cotton and silk to make a new dress. Their windows featured fine clothing and shoes in their neatly-decorated windows. Later they also sold **groceries and furniture**.

Lyons Gas Station was to the east and **Mitchell's Hardware Store** that is now a **pasty shop**. Across the street was **Olin's General Store** which also housed the **United States Post Office**. Then it became **Munn's Hardware**, then **Elloit's**, and now the **Coast-to-Coast**.

Next was **Jay Cook's Drug Store** with a **soda fountain!** Then the **Big Jo Bakery**, owned by the **Wittocks**. It became a **tavern** after the repeal of Prohibition and is

now the **Central Super Market**, owned by the **Machus** family.

The **Sweet Shop**, owned by **Lloyd Randall**, was on the **Maple Street** corner. Lloyd later moved a building onto the kitty-corner lot where he also sold **sporting goods** and had a **rental library**. The corner is vacant now.

The big, red brick building on the **corner of Breen Avenue and Hemlock Street** was the **Kotlar Dry Goods Store**, and in the 1940's became the **Breen Avenue Community Center**. It is now occupied by the **Controls Supply Company**, owned by **Robert Miller**.

The **American Legion** moved the **portable schools** from **Sterling Street** kitty-corner from the **Kotlar** building, and it served as a **meeting hall** for other organizations as well.

The **Capitol Theater** on the corner of **Roseland Street** was built in about 1925, and **Erv Witt** had a **barber shop** in the front part. The theater closed and on **December 25, 1937**, **Fr. Seifert** held the first services for the **American Martyrs Church** there. In **1939** **Fr. Hughes** became its full-time pastor. They used the building until **1940**, when the new **American Martyrs Church on Sagola Avenue** was dedicated.

Next to the theater was the **Capitol Grocery**, operated by **Clyde Neldberg** and **Pearl Weed**, which closed in the late **1940's**. It is no longer there.

The theater building was used by **Freival's Furniture** for storage purposes. There was a **pool hall** across the street and it was also torn down.

Dettman's Grocery Store was on the **corner of Breen Avenue and Doraland Street**. It is no longer there, nor is the **pool hall** that was next to it.

The **Breen Avenue Service (Phillips 66)** was next, and was built by my father-in-law, **John S. Erickson**, and he also had a

NEW BEGINNINGS: LIFE IN EARLY BREITUNG

By Mary (Weinert) Erickson Sundberg, 1998

big machine shop and **Breen Avenue Electric** next to it on **Hooper Street**.

In **1936** he converted the machine shop into a theater which he called **The Rex**. His son **Bud** was the projectionist until he went into the service and then his sister **Odetta** became the projectionist. Then, after her husband, **Gordon Sorensen**, was killed in action over England in World War II, she enlisted in the WAC's. I had helped with ticket sales and now it was just Dad and me. Dad was an orphan and had a soft spot for any kid that did not have the money for admission, so he accepted used tires and junk for admission. **Bud Erickson** ran the gas station almost until his dying day, and will be sadly missed by all the little kids that always got a lollipop from him.

Further up on **Breen Avenue** was **Berro's Garage** with living quarters upstairs. Nobody could fix a car as good as **Harry Barro**.

There were many **neighborhood grocery stores in Breitung**. My uncle, **Elmer Johnson**, built his store on the **corner of Lyman and Emmet**, but when Ford had seasonal (or change-over) shut-downs, he extended credit to too many customers. After the 1929 Wall Street crash, he found he could no longer remain in business and returned to the family farm. **William Paupore, Sr.**, took over the failing store, then moved it to a building one block away on **Hoadley**. Many small grocers fed their customers, but finally had to give up.

When **Francis Monette** returned from the service, he took over the small grocery store on **Riverview Drive (Wilbur's)**, then built a small grocery store on **Sagola and Hooper Street**, living in the basement until he could afford to build his house on **Dorland Street**. Happy to say, it flourished, and he built a **large store next to the Kingsford Drug Store on Woodward Avenue**. It is still in business, now run by his son **Alan**.