

The Farms of Central Minnesota

As I think back over my 40 years of regular visits out-of-town to central Minnesota, memories still drift through of my experiences among the people who populate this quiet rural area. Even now, years after I retired from those three or four trips a year north out of the city, I still value thinking of my casual acquaintances who I interacted with such friendly familiarity.

An elderly woman who lived in her own small house just a few yards from her son's much newer and larger place on a field near the highway, once was talking with me, explaining how life was for her now that her husband had to move to the nursing home in town. "It's so quiet now." She was able to visit him often, but her home was empty without him. She also often had trouble with her memory. She was talking to me about how important her church choir was to her these days. And suddenly she couldn't think of her choir director's name, someone she had worked with for three decades. She looked at me with embarrassment and frustration. "Isn't that terrible! I *know* who she is!" Finally she thought to take out the church directory and look up her name. "Of course! Sarah! She's a dear friend." The next time I came to the area, it turned out that she herself had joined her husband at the nursing home. I never tuned that old spinet piano again. On the following visit to the area, I learned that she sadly had died from an infection of some kind. She departed this world ahead of her husband who clearly was in worse health.

One time, another central Minnesota 80-year-old widow was home alone when I arrived to tune her piano. Part way through the tuning she asked me in passing if I liked coffee (naturally the most popular non-alcoholic drink in the area). I told her I that I was decaffeinated. I should have paid more attention to her reasons. Possibly fifteen minutes later, about half-way through the tuning, she got my attention again. I had not noticed (focusing on the job at hand) that she had set up a sweet table nearby with coffee and cookies for the two of us.

"Would you like to take a break?" she offered, gesturing to the delightful tray and homemade treats. Of course I should have realized that this home of cordiality would have featured a social time for me. She was a Swedish lady who must have treated all visitors this way automatically. She was following a timeless tradition that people in the cities, with their hurried attitude about getting through their day, never observe. I was pleased to set down my tuning hammer and join her at this modest but splendid table. For maybe twenty minutes we sat together quietly and chatted a little about our lives, while sipping decaf and munching on the most delicious freshly-made chocolate chip cookies you can image. I realized that I needed that sort of kind gesture during my long day, and she was completely happy to accommodate me. I knew as well that I was serving an important role for her. I wanted to give her some comfortable company, which she probably was short on, living alone in her sunset years. I felt humbled and filled with gratitude for that moment of pause.

The setting was beautiful—a woodsy meadow out on her farm in the countryside. Nothing was planted on the land anymore, just the wild grasses and shrubs and amazingly varied wild flowers arrayed around the field in front of the adjacent forest in the distance. Not at all the scene out the window of any of my ordinary city customers. It was tranquil and peaceful.

About three years later, I put out a standard mailing to my regular customers in the area to learn who wanted to have their pianos tuned once again, and the envelope I had mailed her was returned with a forwarding address in a northern Twin City suburb. This was the era before the computer and the internet, and I did a brief search through the available directories and 411, and learned that this new

address was a seniors living complex with about 150 apartments. I found that she had a new phone number of her own listed in directory assistance for her apartment. I gave her a call. She was home.

She remembered me well and appreciated the call. She explained that she needed to move because her grown son lived in St. Paul, and he and his wife, and a couple of grandkids, wanted her to be closer to them so they could help take care of things for her more easily. If I recall, her piano could not fit easily in her new, much smaller apartment, so it ended up at her son's home where the whole family could make use of it.

I asked her how she was doing with her move to the city. She told me her life had changed completely, as of six months ago, not entirely happily. We talked for quite a while. I was a familiar voice with connections to her past life, and she spoke freely about how her new place was so confining and unfamiliar. And yes, there were a few trees in the window view she had, but it was nothing like looking out her big window at the farm. "I used to see herds of deer pretty much every day out that window. The wind used to blow the reeds around in waves...And the birds!" or words to that effect. Furthermore, she was not very happy with the decision to leave the old place at all, only to be suddenly surrounded too closely by strangers on her floor who often were grumpy. She did not like her new pattern of getting served meals in the big dining room instead of cooking her own meals for herself. She was assigned a table with other retirees, without being able to choose her friends. I gather that she was permitted to do her own meal prep if she wanted, but she had to admit that things got complicated when she was unable to get to the grocery store without the help of others. Occasionally she would take the group bus to the store, but that too was a lot of trouble. Most of the time her son and his wife would bring her to the supermarket.

She clearly was grateful for everyone's help, and she recognized that she was no longer able to do well on her own. But it was a difficult, jarring transition that did not sit well with her. She even got a little tearful with me; I tried to smooth things out for her as best I could. I hoped I was a friendly and consoling presence, something she needed. We parted ways with good wishes and thanks. And best of luck in the future. We never talked again.

Another farm nearby, when I visited for the next routine tuning in the late spring, was vibrantly green everywhere. It was really fresh and lovely with the trees swaying and the cows lowing. But wait! Those cows were not lowing but bellowing like crazy. The pasture beyond the barn looked really enticing and inviting even to me. But the cows were not out there as they usually were. They seemed to be confined to a corral by the barn, complaining bitterly. "*We don't want to be here! Let us out!*" was their obvious message. The seasoned farmer woman, when I asked what's up with the herd of cows, chuckled and explained, "They're not at all happy right now. They have to wait for the vet to get here for their regular vaccinations. They'll be set free in an hour or so." At least someone was keeping track of their health, and as milk cows, they need to be protected. A real touch of country life.