



**James Edward Hansen (my grandfather) and his bride Catherine (Kate) Von Tersch in 1902**

## **Chapter 2. Grandparents**

**Pioneer Ingvert died young, at age 52 in 1889**, leaving James Hansen, my grandfather, not yet 16 years old, as the man of the house. Ingvert's two older sons had already married and established their own farms, with Ingvert's assistance.

Jim Hansen inherited a big responsibility. Three younger siblings, two older unmarried sisters, his mother, and himself composed the household of seven people. Maybe the responsibility of running the farm and supporting a large family was too much for him? No, that was not it. Ably assisted by his younger brother George, Jim kept the farm functioning in a difficult time.

Ingvert's widow, Karen, inherited the farm. Four years after Ingvert's death, Karen sold part of the farm to allow purchase of three acres of land in nearby Woodbine. Jim used a horse and wagon to haul lumber from Council Bluffs to the three acres in Woodbine, where he built a house for Karen and a barn, where Karen kept her horse and a cow.

It was a remarkable accomplishment for a 20-year-old. Karen moved to this house with the two youngest children, so they could attend the town school and obtain a secondary education.

Jim continued to farm the Hansen property, paying rent to his mother. In 1902, at age 29, he married Catherine (Kate) Von Tersch, age 19. Kate, one of 13 children, bore seven children in the first 10 years of their marriage. The second child was my father, James Ivan Hansen.

When Karen Hansen, the pioneer, died in 1915, the farm was auctioned for the benefit of all of Ingvert and Karen's children. Jim tried to purchase part of the farm, but was outbid.

**Failure to acquire the homestead** was a tragedy for Jim. He had spent his entire life there, more than 40 years. He had been farming the property for 26 years, since Ingvert died.

After losing the homestead and acquiring a smaller farm on credit, Jim Hansen took to drinking in Dunlap on Saturday evenings. He was a powerful man. When disputes flared up, they were often settled with fists. The shape of Jim's nose testified that he took blows, as well as delivered them. My father and his brothers suffered blows when Jim came home after drinking. They learned to disperse, hiding in the cornfield, when he came home in that condition.



**James Ivan Hansen (age 42), James Edward Hansen (5), and James Edward Hansen (73) in 1946.**

Jim was able to terminate use of alcohol during the Great Depression, but bad weather, poor crops and depressed prices led to the loss of all but a sliver of his farmland. Jim and Kate were living in a two-room shack, without siding on the outside or drywall on the inside, when we visited them in the late 1930s and the 1940s.

Yet even the Depression did not prevent happy family get-togethers on holidays. My older sisters remember how Kate ran out joyfully, with her apron on, to greet our family when we arrived.

**T**he final tragedy to befall Jim Hansen, from which he never recovered, was the early death of his wife Kate, from a stroke at age 59 in 1943. Grandfather Hansen continued to live several years in the shack. When we visited him, he would sit by his desk, where he had a copy of the Bible and the Book of Mormon. When he spoke everyone was quiet. He quoted from the Bible or Book of Mormon or read from them. I don't remember what he said.

He had a tin of candies on his desk. He would take the lid off and hold out the tin to offer the candies. His hands were very large and strong, but they were quivering so much that the candies were all jostling against each other and against the side of the can. The candies were mints.

Family pictures were taken in Sunday-best clothes. The photo above was taken in Defiance, Iowa, where several members of the Hansen family lived at that time. The building in the background is the school. This was the time in my grandfather's life when I remember him.

Two generations – of pioneers Ingvert and Karen and my grandparents Jim and Kate – span the change of western Iowa from tall-grass prairie with groves of trees, shared by a handful of pioneers with Native Americans, to a nearly modern landscape of agricultural fields divided by roads and highways with fast-moving automobiles. How consistent are the experiences of those two generations with the myth of American westward expansion by white pioneer farmers?

***Little House on the Prairie*** by Laura Ingalls Wilder has spawned generation after generation of 'bonnetheads,' readers entranced by her stories about life in the prairie, chronicling the broader story of westward settlement by white American farmers. *Little House* is fiction, but

Wilder, when asked by readers whether the stories were ‘true’ generally answered that they were in the main truth as she knew it.

Caroline Fraser, in *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder*,<sup>1</sup> confronts the fact that truth is malleable. Fraser asserts that by sanitizing the story of westward settlement, Wilder contributed to myth-making, which flourishes in American history and politics.

*Little House* was written for children and young teens. It was among the books devoured by my sisters as they were growing, encouraging them to read more. Wilder’s stories present youth with a picture focused on positive values, such as hard work, perseverance and devotion to family. She describes successful struggles to overcome great pioneer hardships.

*Little House* and similar books are fine for young people – my own children and grandchildren were raised on them. However, at a reasonably early time they need to be told about major omissions. I already mentioned the cruelty of forced Native American removal, an injustice that, at least to some small degree, might still be addressed.

A second issue about the expansion of farming into the prairie concerns the wisdom of replacing rain-limited prairie by small-scale family farms. The government encouraged this expansion by practically giving away the land parcels. One of the consequences has been a loss of soil carbon and topsoil, as deep-rooted tallgrass prairie is replaced by shallow-rooted crops and the soil is plowed repeatedly. Appropriate agricultural practices can alleviate this problem, and such changes are needed as part of a program to stabilize climate.

**Ingvert’s generation was closest to the picture of frontier life** presented in *Little House*. Following generations suffered a predictable problem: fragmentation of property because of large family sizes. Hardships for small farms increased as the industrial revolution allowed mechanization of farming and altered the scale of the most efficient farms.

Even great hardships can be overcome. Hard work and strength of character help. A new generation can bring new dedication. Love, including love of the farming life, provides a fuel, energy, that can overcome even the most daunting challenges, perhaps.



**Gladys Helen Ray, a determined, indomitable woman, at age 19.**

## **Chapter 3. Parents on Five Farms**

**M**y father, **James Ivan Hansen**, known as Ivan, attended a one-room country school. His formal education ended with eighth grade, an adequate education by local custom. Reading, writing and arithmetic were learned well; handwriting was practiced until nearly perfect. Young men were strong enough by eighth grade to work on the farm. They helped at home and hired out for work on other farms.

My mother, Gladys Helen Ray, was raised on a farm several miles from Hansens' farm. Rays had larger, more productive property, but their health did not match that of the Hansens. Gladys was two years old when her mother was discovered to have breast cancer. Six years later her father died in the 1919 Spanish influenza epidemic. After years in pain, her mother died when Gladys was 12. Meanwhile, her grandparents had died. Between the ages of 8 and 12, surely a crucial period, she witnessed terrible illnesses of both parents and lost all the adults in her life.

Gladys was early an excellent cook, learning Pennsylvania Dutch cooking from her grandmother and mother. When her mother was dying, she asked Gladys to prepare her meals. Even when my mother was old, she could still remember the contents of her mother's final meals. The last meal was eggs, which her mother asked her to prepare the way only the two of them could.

Gladys and her older brother were taken in by a distant relative, second cousin Jack Hunter and his wife Daisy. Her brother ran away immediately and was henceforth on his own. Hunters had four children, ranging from newborn to six years old. Orphan Gladys became domestic help for the Hunters, interrupting her schooling to work fulltime for them. After a year she was able to return to school, while continuing her domestic help for Hunters. She walked more than two miles from the farm to the Dunlap school, but when she was older she was sometimes allowed to ride a horse to school. At age 19, in 1930, she graduated from Dunlap High School.

**G**ladys fell in love with **Ivan Hansen**, seven years her senior, who likely worked for Hunters at times. The Hunters did not approve of their marriage, because Hansen had neither land nor money. Within days after her graduation, Gladys and Ivan eloped and married on 15 June 1930.

It was not a propitious time. The Great Depression was beginning. Farms were being consolidated and mechanized, while Ivan's experience was with a horse and plow. Rundown farms were available for sharecropping or rent, but leases were temporary.

Against these odds, my mother made a wonderful home. Her cooking was unrivaled. On each farm she planted a huge garden. Without electricity or running water, she canned and preserved hundreds of jars of tomatoes, corn, beans, and peas. Potatoes, beets, cabbage, onions and carrots were stored in a dirt cellar. She milked cows that our collie, Pal, brought home in the evening. She separated cream, to be sold, from milk, and washed the separator daily. She gathered eggs, and butchered and cleaned chickens. This was part of her 'housework.' Her energy seemed inexhaustible. In frequent pregnancies, she worked up until the day of delivery.

Her first four children were girls. She made dresses for the girls from colored cotton feedbags. Donna, the oldest, became my mother's helper. Remembrances of the farm life tend to be joyful. Wildflowers and wild roses bloomed all summer along the dirt country roads. These were peaceful times, probably the best years of my mother's life. She sang as she worked in the garden. We were, then, a growing family, isolated, but together.

We lived on five farms in the period 1930-1945. In some sense, life on the successive farms proved to be a downward spiral. Donna, born in May 1931, has memories of all five farms that our family occupied. My description of those years is based on writings already mentioned of my two oldest sisters and recent exchanges with all four older sisters.

**Keairnes farm.** The first farm was our parents' best situation. For a moderate fee, they rented 40 acres of farmland from my father's uncle Mindred Keairnes and his wife Laura Hansen Keairnes. The 40 acres included a small house located across the road from Keairnes' home.

Early years of our parent's marriage were happy times. My mother's small inheritance sufficed to purchase an automobile and contributed to purchase of a few farm implements. My father plowed the field using two horses. He used a two-horse hitch on his farm machinery, including the plow, manure spreader, corn planter and hayrack.

Corn, oats and hay were the primary crops. Corn was picked by hand and oats were shucked by hand. Threshing was a cooperative effort with neighboring farmers. During a threshing session my mother prepared huge meals for the hungry workers. There were no vacations. Chores had to be done every day. Animals raised were chickens, pigs and a few cows for milk.

Horses were special. While living on the Keairnes farm, we acquired Babe, a big, strong, black workhorse. Babe was our parents' favorite horse, because she worked hard and was so reliable. When my father came in from the field he sometimes put one of my sisters on Babe's back for the ride to the barn. We still had Babe on the last farm. She is the only horse that I remember.

Donna remembers watching Dad plow the field. He planted corn in straight rows diminishing like railroad tracks all the way to the far fence line. He was unhurried and tenacious, working for hours without talking. It was hard, hard work, back breaking and slow. Ominously, tractors planting many rows simultaneously were taking over on bigger farms

Sundays were the time to wear "Sunday best" and attend a nearby church. When we lived on the Keairnes farm, we attended the Manteno Methodist Church, where many parishioners were RLDS members.

When relatives visited, the food that my mother made usually included fried chicken, mashed potatoes with chicken gravy, homemade bread and rolls, and pies. Everyone agreed that nobody



**Great Aunt Laurie (daughter of Ingvert) with author and sisters Eleanor, Karen, Lois and Donna.**

made better fried chicken than my mother. All food was made from scratch – there were no ready-made mixes – and she amazed people by not using written recipes. She worked fast and had either memorized recipes or just had a feel for how much of each ingredient was needed. Smell from baking bread was itself delicious. When the loaves of bread and individual rolls came from the oven, with lightly browned tops and soft white insides, the taste matched the smell. The day usually finished with freshly cranked ice cream made with real cream.

**Great Aunt Laura Keairnes** had a profound effect on my sisters. Keairnes' house had a porch with a rocking chair, where Aunt Laurie read to my oldest sister, Donna, and later to Donna and Eleanor, the next sister. Aunt Laurie also saw a need for at-home Bible school. Each week she arrived at our house, usually in a crisply starched gingham dress and sunbonnet, to read the church magazine, *Zion's Hope*. She taught Donna the big words and Eleanor the small ones.

Aunt Laura and Frank Crandall, Donna's first teacher in a one-room schoolhouse, instilled a love of books and provided access to books. Grades 1, 2 and 3 were combined; Donna finished that class in two years. Mr. Crandall visited our home many times and allowed Eleanor to sometimes accompany Donna to school, even though Eleanor was not yet school age.

Aunt Laura and Frank Crandall had initiated a consummate preschool education program. The reading infection spread to younger sisters via our mother's method of child care: she instructed them to "play school" while she did her many chores. Each girl tried to catch up with the older one. In the evening the girls read from the light of a kerosene lamp on the kitchen table – none of our farms had electricity or running water. A few years later, when Karen, sister #4, was tested for reading she was placed in first grade, but when the teachers saw how small she was, two years younger than classmates, they put her in kindergarten.

This life and farming method could not endure. Mindred Keairnes' death hastened change. A succession of moves from one rundown small farm to another began in 1936.

**Dunlap farms.** Lois and Karen, sisters #3 and #4, were born on the next two farms, near Dunlap, each farm occupied for two years. It was a difficult time to scratch out a living. Some years, with drought and dust storms, there was hardly any crop. With no money for gas, the car



**Farm #3 (Ryan farm) near Dunlap and farm #4 near Charter Oak.**

was put on blocks in the barn. Horse and wagon would do. Our father worked one year for the WPA (President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration) on a road and bridge near Dunlap. The family subsisted to a substantial degree on vegetables from the garden, which were stored in a dirt cellar and canned and preserved each summer for year-round consumption. There was also milk and eggs, and sometimes chicken, but, these were also our primary income source when crops failed, so they were consumed judiciously.

The second of these two farms, called the Ryan farm, was 80 acres just half a mile from Dunlap. The house was on a hill overlooking the 80 acres. The land in front of the house sloped down to the Boyer River flood plain. Before the river there was the railroad track. It was the railroad built in 1866, which brought forth the town of Dunlap, the Respectable Place Saloon, and the demise of Yellow Smoke, as well as commerce that helped build the state.

The railroad, and the Great Depression, brought hobos. My mother called them tramps. She was afraid of them. When Donna left to school in the morning, walking, our mother said "I hope the tramps don't get her!" Eleanor, understood "traps" and thought of a giant mousetrap. She feared that her sister would be slammed in a giant trap and not return home from school.

When our mother saw a hobo coming up the path, she pulled down the shades and locked the doors. If knocking persisted, she would say "We don't have much. You have to eat what we do." Then she would fry an egg, put it between two slices of her homemade bread, hand it out a hole in the screen door, and lock the door again. The hobos never caused any harm.

**Charter Oak farm.** We had to leave the second Dunlap farm in March 1940. My father found an available farm 15 miles away, near Charter Oak. The day after we arrived in Charter Oak our beloved dog, Pal, disappeared. Pal was obtained as a puppy in 1931, a gift from, Martha Bloom, the midwife at Donna's birth. Pal was indispensable, herding the cows, protecting the children, and being our best friend. When she sensed danger, she barked loudly until our parents arrived. She was a beautiful collie, with long golden hair. Some of the golden hair was tipped with dark auburn, and there was a white ring around her neck. She looked much like Lassie in the movies.

Eleanor tells how our sad-faced mother came to the girls bedroom that evening and had the three oldest girls (Karen was still a baby) kneel by the bed and pray for Pal. This was repeated each day at bedtime. My mother spent some of our scarce money on a lost-dog newspaper ad. After

several days a message was received: Pal was seen “sulking” at the old farm. Somehow Pal had made it 15 miles from the new farm to the old one, ready to perform her chores. Pal jumped all over the girls and our parents when they arrived at the old farm to pick her up.

Another of Eleanor’s stories concerned the Easter Rabbit in 1941. On the evening of 28 March all four girls were hustled off to the Kelm’s house, the closest neighbor, where they got to sleep for the first time in a bed with thick goose down blankets. In the morning Mr. Kelm told them that the Easter Rabbit had brought them a baby brother. He proceeded to make various offers in exchange for their brother, but with every offer they vigorously shook their heads. Anniek claims that my sisters spoiled me ever since then. In any case, I was lucky that our long-time trusted country doctor, Edward James Liska, arrived in time for the birth, as I was born breech with the umbilical cord around my neck, and Dr. Liska, had to deliver CPR. My mother thought of naming me Edward James for the doctor, but my father’s name choice prevailed.

Economic conditions improved in the 1940s. Income from chickens, eggs, cream, and crops increased as the world came out of the depression. We took our cream to the Charter Oak Creamery on Saturday evenings, where we were paid in silver dollars. On one trip to Charter Oak there was a sale on girl’s dresses. My mother bought one dress for each girl, 19 cents each. It was their first ‘boughten’ (store bought) dresses.

On some of these Saturday trips our parents gave a buffalo nickel to each of my sisters. A nickel was good for one double-dip ice cream cone. The movie theater was just becoming popular, but a nickel was not enough for admittance. No matter. My sisters made their own entertainment. Eleanor was a natural story-teller, making up stories out of whole cloth. To escape chores she would agree to make up a play with parts for each sister. After they had a chance to ‘edit’ their pieces, they would act out the play. Sometimes a barn kitten or farm animals were included in the plays, and once there was a marriage of young calves. The only songs they knew were Christmas carols and hymns, which did not always fit. They probably received no Oscars.

A country schoolteacher usually boarded at one of the nearby farms for the school week. In our last year in Charter Oak, my sisters bitterly lament, we drew the short straw and had to board the teacher. One evening my mother saw the teacher and my father exchange a note, which my mother demanded to see. My father tossed it in the fire, whereupon my mother announced that she was leaving and drove away in the car. I was too young to be aware, but my sisters went to bed in fear. Our mother was present for breakfast, but a tension that would grow was in the air.

The Charter Oak farm was owned by an insurance company, which told us that we had to leave in early 1944. We had not found another farm by the usual 1 March moving day. Fortunately, the teacher came back from the weekend with scarlet fever and I caught it. It gave Dr. Liska a reason to quarantine us for three weeks, and it gave my father time to search further.

**Denison farm.** My father found a farm, 40 acres, on the outskirts of Denison, the first farm on the left on what is now named Donna Reed Road, just off Highway 30. Just up the road was the Denison golf course and Country Club. We lived on this farm only for a year.

I had a medical emergency. I persisted in crying, with a stomach ache, so my mother delivered her standard remedy: an enema. If my appendix had not already burst, it did then. As my wails increased, my mother gathered me up and we headed off to Dr. Liska. Six-year-old Karen went with us. I cried the entire 20-mile trip to Ute. Dr. Liska sent us straight back to Denison, to a



hospital and surgeon. I now have a 5-inch scar marking the doctor's work. I promptly developed pneumonia. According to Donna, who would become an accomplished nurse and hospital administrator, I survived only because penicillin had become available.

Most of my mother's remedies, for people and animals, were good and skillful. Queen, the latest companion workhorse to Babe, limped into the farmyard with blood pouring from one leg. She had tangled with a barbed wire fence. Our mother quickly lowered the leg into a cream can filled with flour and made a tourniquet with a dish towel. The veterinary praised her work. Another time our cows broke a fence and got into a field of fresh alfalfa, gorging themselves to the point of severe bloating. The life of one was in danger. Our mother shaved an area on the cow's belly and inserted a sterilized knife. The bloat was relieved and the cow lived.

During the night of 18/19 August 1944, while all five of us children were sleeping upstairs, my mother began making so much noise downstairs that two of my sisters woke up. They huddled, trying to figure out what was happening downstairs. It was my mother moaning in childbirth with a midwife present. Then male voices, as my father arrived with Dr. Liska. The next morning we found our mother in bed with baby Patty, my fifth sister. Lois remembers the pail of bloody water and gunk. It was our last home delivery.

The farm was not as productive as my mother. The Boyer River flooded, ruining the crops. Fortunately my father got a part-time job as a bartender at the country club across the road.

Both parents had lived their entire lives on farms and loved outdoor life. The thought of leaving the farm was heartbreaking. But my father's physical strength was declining and he had chronic back pain. Farming that year had been money-losing, with little prospect for improvement. My father was offered a bar-tending job in Denison. Moving to town was the only path forward.

Our mother did not seem normal on the day of the auction; she seemed worried. She asked Eleanor to help introduce people to each other when they came up the driveway to the barn. They seemed to be mostly neighbors or relatives. We did not have much farm equipment, but they were things that my father and mother had scrimped and saved for all their married life.

The auctioneer's chanting became too much for my mother. She went to the house and watched from a window. As a buyer led Babe down the lane, tears streamed down my mother's face.

Opportunities grew when we moved to town, but so did anxieties as life became more complex. Change would not all prove to be for the good.

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<sup>1</sup> *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder*, Caroline Fraser, Henry Holt & Co, 641 pp., 2017.