

Perhaps God is a Spider - A Memoir

Larry Cowan

We lived just a block off the Mississippi River on the north edge of Minneapolis at 5230 North 3rd Street. The house isn't there anymore -- Neither is the street. It's part of the interstate highway system and now hundreds of cars and trucks pass through that place each hour



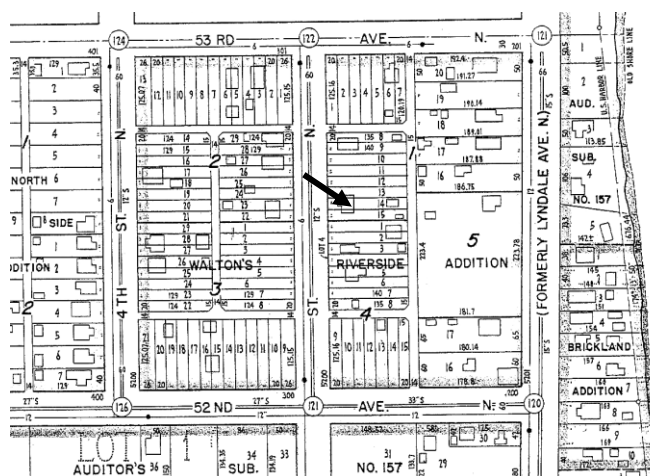
Junior (Walt) Cowan dressed for church
A Sunday in the summer of 1943
Notice the WWII Victory and Red Cross
Stickers in the window

busy with their own concerns and schedules. But back then the street was unpaved and quiet. Our house was on lot 14 and parts of 13 and 15 at the center of the plat map you see below. Back in 1940 when we moved in (and the year I was born) we had just seven neighbors on the street and the rest was just vacant fields. To the right of our house and across a vacant lot was the home of Mr. and Mrs. Erick Rudd (5240) and on the left of us was Peter and Katherine Sandbeck (5226);

then Mr. and Mrs. William Sward (5222); then Mr. Peter Eggert and his wife Lula (5218). Across the street was the home of Harry Thompson (5229); then to the north was a vacant shack (5233); then Chester ____ (5237); then Mrs. Martha J. Linsal and her daughter and two grandchildren (5241). At the end of the block to the south facing 52nd was the shack of old Mr. Ing. I'd like to tell the stories of what I remember about these families here but I must tell it somewhere else. This is a story of my family and my growing up.

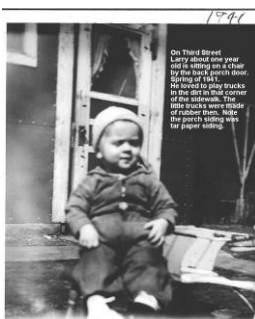
The neighbors visited with friendly concern and children played and ran about in the yards. Bed sheets and towels on the clotheslines flapped in the breeze and an occasional dog barked and chased after the children. In our back yard, there was a wild plum tree, a grape arbor with two swings, lots of irises, a rickety old screen house and a doghouse. Lilac bushes ran along both sides of the yard. The Lilacs on the south side were kept neatly trimmed and the ones on the north were let to grow tall. A large Box Elder tree shaded the porch in the front and, in the back; a dirt alley ran behind the old garage.

It was the middle of July and the sun was warm in the still noon air and small white clouds drifted



across the bright sky. In the back yard, the Morning Glories bloomed under the kitchen window and the grass was a little dry because it hadn't rained for a while. Mom was hanging out the clothes on the line and, by the door to the back porch; I played in the dirt along the corner of the sidewalk. I had a few little rubber trucks and a farm tractor. With my fingers, I made little roads in the dirt. The year was 1944 and I had just turned four years old in May. With a child's imagination, I could go just about anywhere then.

First there was me and then there was my brother Billy. He was a year older than me and we would play in the dirt and ride our trikes and run around the neighborhood and have fun. Billy was my leader in playing with friends in the neighborhood and I followed along. Billy was skinny and I was kind of chubby, I thought. Then there was my mom and dad. It seems mom was always washing clothes in the basement or making dinner in the kitchen. I remember that dad was always working or busy with something. He'd work on the car in the garage or trim the hedges in the yard or tend his vegetables in the garden or talk to the neighbors. I remember relatives and my cousins would come over a lot and he would talk and there was a lot of laughter. Mom laughed too and I liked that. I had a lot of fun when my cousins came over. Mom was thirty-four and dad was thirty-seven then. Dad was a waiter at the Jolly Miller and he took the streetcar to go to work. I thought that my sister Mary Ann was a lot older than me and almost grown-up at that time - - I guess she was ten. My brother Junior was thirteen and, it seems, he was away most of the time with his friends.



On third street
Larry about one year
old sitting on a porch
by the back porch door.
Spring of 1944.
He loved to play trucks
in the dirt in that corner
of the sidewalk. The
little trucks were made
of rubber then. Note
the porch siding was
not paper siding.



He went down to the river a lot.

It may have been that same summer that I remember riding my tricycle along the sidewalk by the south side of the house. There were peonies planted next to the house and the buds were fun with ants crawling all around sucking up its nectar. I liked to pick off the buds and watch them roll on the ground like marbles. Mom would say, "Now, don't pick those buds!" Earlier in the spring, Box Elder bugs by the hundreds, or maybe thousands, crawled around the siding of the house and basked in the warmth of the sidewalk.

I remember mom canning beans and peaches and baking bread. I remember the "dough gobs" that she would fry up on the stove and roll in sugar from the left-over dough. We would run in from our playing and run out with these wonderful warm treats. Out in the back yard, the sidewalk ran out to the garage and, just to the right, the grape arbor grew up on two sturdy posts and across an arch. Two well used wooden swings hung from the arch on strong ropes. Mom made grape jelly from the grapes of that vine if she could get to the ripe grapes before the birds would eat them - - which was often the case. And next to the grape arbor was the wild plum tree. Mom made plum Jelly, too. And under the plum tree, our dog Pal sprawled out to



Walter holding Larry
Spring of 1944

rest in the shade. His doghouse was in the Iris patches just up from the plum tree along the Lilac hedge.



One summer afternoon I took a nap in the doghouse. It may have been that same year or possibly a year earlier in 1943. I guess mother was frantic. Everyone in the neighborhood was out and the police were looking for me, too - - I guess I was lost. Mom found me, though. As she walked past the doghouse she thought, "He can't be in there," but looked in anyway. There I was - - sleeping. I remember how comfortable it was there in the doghouse. It had a screened back window that allowed some circulation and had warm straw on the floor. With little spiders with their spider webs in the corners, I remember that it was a nice place.

I remember a rather large book of children's rhymes that I liked to read. It had a hard cover (I think all books then had hard covers) and black ink drawings about the rhymes. I remember that that if there wasn't a rhyme it wasn't as fun. The use. Anyway, there was Black-Sambo, Ring Around The Rosies however was Hey Diddle Diddle

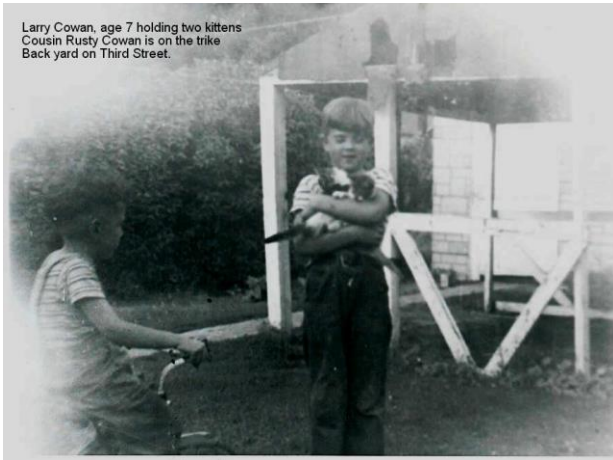


little picture to go with the book was in rags from much birds in a Pie, Little Black and so many more. My favorite, because of the fun pictures.

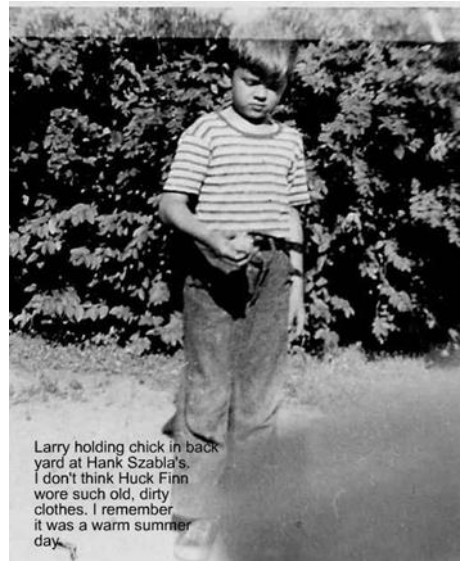
*Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon.
The little dog laughed to see such sport
And the dish ran away with the spoon!*

I was just three or perhaps four years old when for Easter mom got Billy and I sailor outfits to wear (America was in the middle of World War II then). I remember it was warm that Easter and we had a lot of fun in our sailor clothes. To this day I remember a particular clear glass rabbit that Billy and I each got from mom's aunt Emma. You could open the bottom and it was filled with small many colored jelly beans.





Larry Cowan, age 7 holding two kittens
Cousin Rusty Cowan is on the trike
Back yard on Third Street.

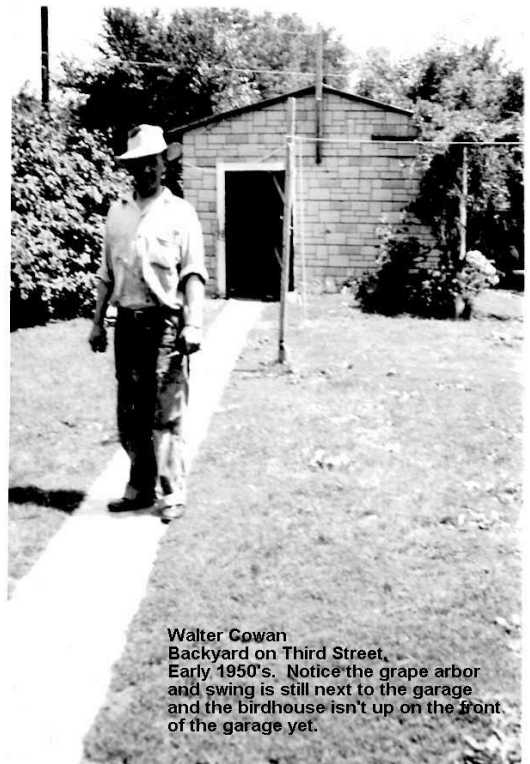


Larry holding chick in back
yard at Hank Szabla's.
I don't think Huck Finn
wore such old, dirty
clothes. I remember
it was a warm summer
day.

In the fall of 1946 I was in the first grade at Jenny Lind School but I don't remember much about that. I do remember the first grade in Sunday School at Hope Church on Emerson Avenue. Mrs. May was my Sunday School teacher and mom also taught Sunday School for one of the little grades. I remember that we had our little classes right in the pews of the church - - There weren't any classrooms - - and the teachers used felt storyboards with colorful felt people, trees and houses to tell the stories like Joseph in Egypt and of Jesus going into Jerusalem. We also belonged to the Junior Missionary Society and a lady would come and talk to us about being missionaries and doctors in Africa and we would sing songs about apes swinging to and fro in the trees. I remember the apes were mysterious and scary.

Speaking of animals - - My sister Mary Ann really loved Pal - - He was her dog. Dad loved him, too, and he wasn't scary. But across the alley, Jimmy Brunz was growing up and got into motorcycles. He and his friends would go up and down the alley and Pal would chase them barking like crazy. Well, because Pal became such a nuisance in the neighborhood, dad finally had to get rid of him. So that Mary Ann wouldn't feel too badly, dad said he took him to a farm and let him go. Mary Ann was very sad and, I'm told, cried and cried.

Well, not too long later, mom and dad went out to eat at the Band Box, a triangular little hamburger shop in Camden where



Walter Cowan
Backyard on Third Street,
Early 1950's. Notice the grape arbor
and swing is still next to the garage
and the birdhouse isn't up on the front
of the garage yet.

Washington and Lyndale avenues meet. It was a cold and wet evening in about 1950 and as they were leaving to get into the car they noticed a wet and dirty spotted dog covered with paint cowering and shivering next to the building. Dad felt sorry for him but he drove away. They didn't go far, though. Dad drove around the block and came back, picked him up and brought him home. Dad cut off the paint as best he could and cleaned him up. This became our dog Teddy who was our best friend and playmate for a number of years.



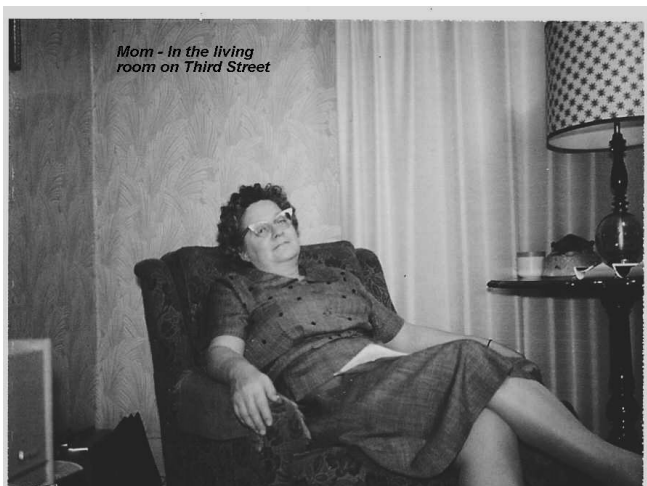
We always had animals around the house and dad liked to take care of them. Once a large Angora tomcat came to the door all bloody and had an ear almost tore off. It had been in a fight. Dad cleaned him up and washed his wounds and fed him. For a long while, every morning the cat would show up at the door and dad would feed him milk. After a while the cat stopped coming by. At one time we also had rabbits - - sixteen of them, I think. At first there were just a few, but later there were a lot. We built a cage for them up on stilts next to the garage. I remember we had the rabbits even over the winter.



My brother, Billy and I also had our little pets then - - frogs and turtles, snakes and salamanders, a bat one time and little puppies. One little puppy - - His name was Spot - - died. We had to have a funeral for him so we got a pan from the garage to put him in and dug a hole next to the Lilacs on the north side of the garage. So we buried him and we kids from the neighborhood had our little service. I would guess I was about eight years old then. It wasn't too much later that mom asked where her best roasting pan was. Well, dad said he had it out in the garage to change oil in the car. . . Mom wasn't interested in digging up the body so that was the end of that!

The one thing I didn't like about childhood was the teasing by the other kids. Perhaps I was overly sensitive but it seems they would do it for sport. I would respond by getting mad and fighting

and swearing and hitting. Billy teased me too and he would hold me down to stop me and all the kids would laugh. One time when I was about nine the kids came into the garage where I was making something and they started to tease me. Well, I picked up a gallon of oil paint and threw it at them. When it hit the ground the cover popped off and paint shot into the air and slopped all over the front of my friend Donny Zornes. He was teasing me too and I'm sure he remembers that incident to this day. Mom

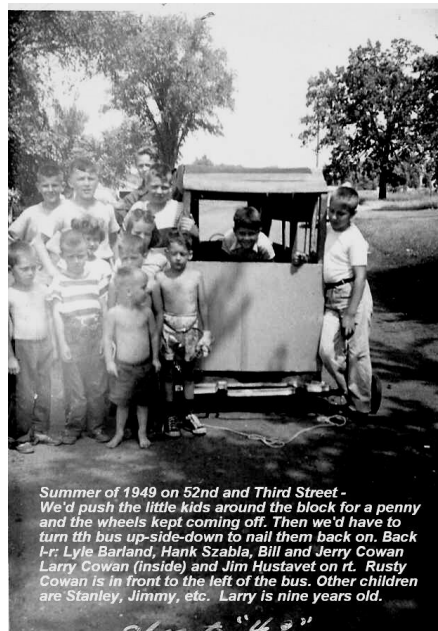


would tell me, "Don't pay any attention to them," but the teasing hurt. My sister didn't help either and just said to not let them do that. I remember that Billy and Mary Ann would get together and tell funny things and laugh and laugh until they cried. I never did that. I was sort of a serious, quiet kid who liked to make or fix things. I thought I was very shy even into my late teens. I remember that I would often plan things to say in my mind before saying them and then turn beet red.

Another thing I didn't like about early years was the scary nightmares. It was probably stupid (Yes, it was!) but us kids would walk down to the Camden Theater on Saturdays for the matinee and see movies like, "Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein," or, "The Thing" and hide under the seats. I loved to be scared during the day but then I'd have nightmares about being chased by monsters at night. The basement was a particularly scary place that I'd have nightmares about. I'd dream of going down there and then be chased upstairs by a monster from behind the furnace. In my dreams, I was lucky enough to get away or wake up before it got me except the last time. My very last nightmare was when I was down in the basement and the monster finally got me and picked me up. I thought I was done for - - but nothing happened. That was the end of my nightmares.

As kids we would walk down the alley past Mr. Egert's house to Magnuson's grocery Store on Lyndale Avenue and there, on hot summer afternoons, we could get a big bottle of Sarsaparilla for 15 cents. We would then go out on the steps of the store with our Sarsaparilla and count cars - "You would get all the Chevys and I'd get all the Fords," we would say. Sometimes a car would go by missing a tire. I guess they were stockpiling tires out at Fort Snelling for the war. This must have been about 1944 or 1945 before the war ended.

Those also were the days before the refrigerator. Instead, we had an iceman. The iceman was Mr. Lindberg who lived back across the alley from us. He had a barn by the alley where he kept the horses but I have no idea where he grazed them because they just had a city lot. The ice was cut from the lakes and stored in sawdust for the summer in a cold storage building on Humboldt Avenue about two miles away. Mr. Lindberg drove his wagon and horses down there every day in the summer to pick up the ice for delivery throughout the neighborhood. Mom would put a card in the window telling the iceman whether or not we needed ice and, when we needed it, he would come right in and put the ice in our icebox by the back door.



Summer of 1949 on 52nd and Third Street - We'd push the little kids around the block for a penny and the wheels kept coming off. Then we'd have to turn the bus up-side-down to nail them back on. Back l-r: Lyle Barland, Hank Szabla, Bill and Jerry Cowan Larry Cowan (inside) and Jim Hustavet on rt. Rusty Cowan is in front to the left of the bus. Other children are Stanley, Jimmy, etc. Larry is nine years old.



Dad - March of 1952

The green card meant we were OK and the red card meant we needed ice. One of the wonderful things about having an iceman is that there were always scraps and chips of ice on his wagon. We kids would run behind the wagon as it came rumbling down the dirt alley and collect the chips of ice to suck on those hot summer days.

In the wintertime he hauled coal for our furnace and at off times he would hire out to dig foundations for houses. He did that with a kind of a scraper shovel that was pulled by his horses. He also collected metal and rags for the war effort.

We had a "Raleigh" man who went door to door and came by the house regularly. He sold things like cleaners and soap, elixirs and spices, pure vanilla flavoring and condensed nectar. We always bought the quart bottle of cherry nectar and he always had some sort of little gift for us kids.

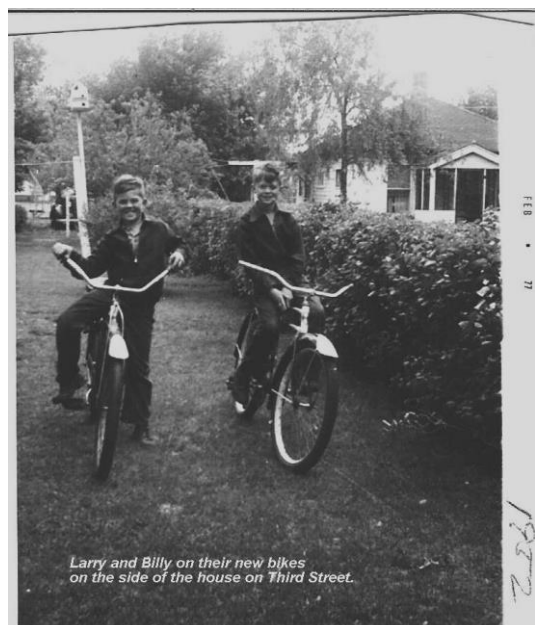
I remember the garage back by the alley with its dirt floor and back door that didn't close very well and the tools on the bench that never seemed to be in order. The garage was my workroom and it was there that I built many birdhouses and other stuff out of scrap wood. My best source of wood was from the orange crates I would get from Magnuson's Grocery Store.

I enjoyed building and fixing things. I think I was always in the process of building one sort of chug or another. Usually they were a couple of two by fours with some plywood or boards across the top and a board to lean against. The wheels and axles were from old wagons. The steering mechanism was simply a two by four that was bolted in the middle to the frame and wagon wheels nailed by their axles to each end. Then with ropes tied to the two ends, you could pull one way or the other and the two by four would pivot to turn the chug. Usually the wheels just fell off.

Once we made a "bus." It was a wide chug with sides and a top, windows and a door at the side. It was big. We could even put old chairs inside for the passengers and push six or seven kids in it. We charged the little kids a penny for a ride around the block. Usually the wheels came off about every thirty yards and then we would have to turn the bus over onto its top and climb up to hammer the wheel back in place - - what a job. It took about ten kids to push it and one trip would take half a day! A very successful financial adventure, too! We sometimes made enough money to go and buy a Popsicle.

I remember how Dad had a green thumb and could grow just about anything. There was an empty lot next door and he used part of that for his garden. Dad seemed to be able to grow anything and loved the flowers and the vegetables. I remember counting tomatoes and some plants had over 100 tomatoes on them.

I remember the two screen houses we had



and the Chinese lanterns. The first screen house was just in front of the garage and it was pretty rickety. It was old and the wood was rotting and the screens were torn. One day when Pearl and Chet and the kids were over, my cousin Lois and I (and I think Billy helped, too.) rocked that screen house back and forth 'til it almost collapsed. All of the adults were out in the front yard having a picnic and didn't see us. Dad had to take the screen house down after that.

I remember mom canning beans and peaches and tomatoes and pickles. By the time winter came around, the pantry in the basement had a couple hundred-quart jars of all sorts of stuff to get us through the cold months. Mom also made lots of bread back then. I remember the "dough gobs" that mom fried up on the stove from left-over bread dough. She rolled them in sugar and we would run in from our playing and run out with these wonderful warm treats.

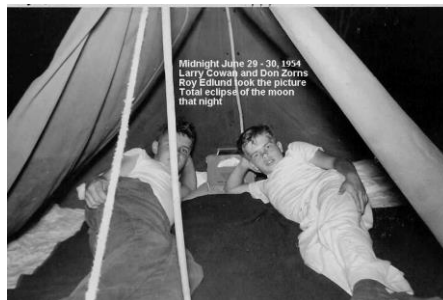
I remember how on hot summer days, the windows would be open along the side of the house and the curtains would blow gently in the breeze. I remember looking in from the yard and I could see one of the lamps just inside by the window. It had a wide red shade and a brass planter at the base. The white sheer curtain quietly brushed the lamp and music from the radio drifted out onto the yard. I remember songs like "Mockingbird Hill", "I'm looking Over A Four Leafed Clover", "In The Good Old Summertime", "The Yellow Rose of Texas", and "Shoes to Keep your Feet A Dancing". These were some of my favorite days.

I remember our next-door neighbors, Clarence and Louise Terrell on the north, and Katherine Sandbeck and the girls on the south, John and Alice Hughes and our playmates Jerry and Jimmy who lived across the street, and Vern and Carrie Zornes and their son Donny who was Billy's age who lived in a small house down at the end of the alley. The street was just an unpaved dusty road back then. I remember cousins Jerry and Rusty and their mom and dad Marty and Francis Cowan when they moved in at the Hughes' house. The Hughes' moved about a mile away up by their church and mom and dad kept in touch for many years until they both passed away. Dad and mom were glad his brother Marty and his family moved in so close. They had many good times together and Jerry and Rusty became new friends. Dad and mom were happy.

I remember the day dad brought home a bike and I learned to ride it out front in the street. Billy got one, too. Dad paid \$25.00 for them and that was a lot of money. Dad pushed me along the street and I learned pretty fast. It was second-hand but it was really nice and I had new mobility and it was like I could



Larry fixing his bike in the shade under the plum tree - Back yard on Third Street. Summer 1950.



Midnight June 28 - 30, 1954
Larry Cowan and Don Zornes
Roy Edlund look the picture
Total eclipse of the moon
that night

fly and go anywhere. I took that bike apart many times to fix it and keep it in running good - - working on it in the shade of the plum tree. It was fun working on that bike.

When I was about nine or ten, the Zornes' moved into a large house up on the corner of 4th street. Their house was on a small hill and they had a large old Weeping Willow tree in the front yard. Its large branches were the very best for sitting on and drinking Cool-Aid and eating treats. We spent many a summer afternoon sitting up in that tree talking about important kid stuff and who knows what. Across the street from Donny's house was a hill with a lot of old dead poplar trees and one night a lot of us kids camped in a couple of tents on the hill. In the morning some of the kids ran and got some food for our breakfast and I sort of roamed around looking at the hollow old trees. I noticed that the insides were filled with cobwebs and decided to see if they would burn. So I lit a match and held it to the webs and they just sparkled a little bit and didn't do much. I didn't think anything more of that until the fire truck stopped in front of our house later that day. The fireman came to the door to ask if anyone had anything to do with the tree fire up on the hill on 4th Street. I don't think I was ever so embarrassed and mortified in my life! We walked up to 4th street and there it was - - a big old Poplar tree about 200 feet tall with smoke smoldering out of the tips of broken branches like strange old chimneys. Well, the firemen said it had to be cut down and that I shouldn't play with matches!

One summer night (June 30, 1954) Billy and Donny and I camped out in a tent in the field next to the Zornes' house and got up at 4:30 in the morning to watch the eclipse of the sun. I think I was 14 then. We got up and watched the dawn come up just like a regular summer morning. But then about 5 o'clock the sun turned strangely dim and the birds started to chirp again as if it was evening. It was like looking through tinted glasses and amazing ripples of dark shadows rolled across the ground and the streets like waves on a lake. It was awesome.

I'll always remember the clean smell of raking leaves in the yard on fall Saturday afternoons. I'd be raking leaves and have the radio turned up in the house so we could listen outside to Ray Christiansen on WCCO reporting the Gopher Football games. Dad and Billy and I sometimes played catch along side of the house. I remember trying out my new glove - - sometimes Dad really threw the ball hard. I did catch the ball sometimes and sometimes the ball hit the picket fence in the front yard. I remember that he knocked out one of the pickets with the ball. I remember going to Miller ball games with Dad out at the old Nicollet Park along Lake Street and staying until what seemed the middle of the night for those double headers. I remember stopping off at Marty's Pool Hall and Bar (Buzz Arlett's) and dad would shoot pool and have some beer and I would have a seven-up. It was really smoky in there.

I remember the upright Philco radio with its big di-



Mary Ann Cowan with Pal
In back yard - about 1950
Home on 3rd Street

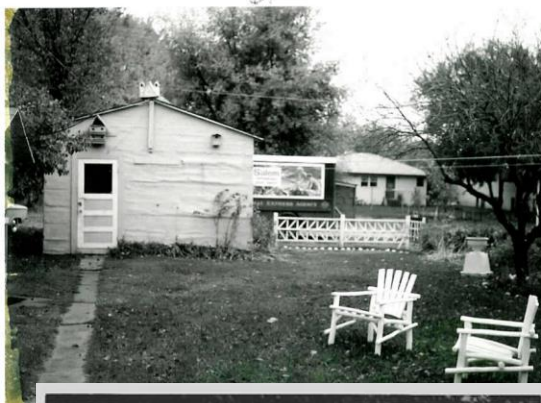
als and Walter Winchell and the News, Stop the Music, "The Shadow Knows," Inner Sanctum, and The Playhouse Theater. Dad's favorite radio news program was always "Walter Winchell and the News," at six in the evening on network radio.

I remember that on Sundays we'd either have chicken for dinner or in the evening a treat of ice cream with chocolate sauce while we listened to "Stop the Music" with Bert Parks. It was one or the other because we couldn't afford both. Later when we got a 12 inch Motorola TV, I remember that awful Mel Jass advertising on Starlight Theater. The program was in the early evening and there would be five minutes of movie and then ten minutes of advertising all sorts of stuff. The television was a table model and it sat on a big TV table next to the porch.

I remember the porch. It had double French doors that opened to the dining room, a mahogany paneled ceiling, and windows that spanned across the west and north walls. The windows had hinges so that they could be opened wide and the summer air could blow through the house. I remember how comfortable it was out there in the summer lying on the couch and dreaming of who-knows-what or nothing at all.

When I was little and we had coal heat, the porch was closed off in the winter because it was too cold. Later when we got gas heat we left the porch open all winter except when it was really cold. At Christmas the tree was put up there because we needed the room for all the kids in the family in the living room and dining room.

I remember one Christmas particularly well. It was about 1947 and I must have been about six or seven at most. It was Christmas Eve and the Christmas tree was up in the living room in front of the large window and Billy and I were up in our room sleeping. It was the front bedroom and from the window we could look out onto the front yard and unpaved street. Well, I remember waking up hearing jingling bells outside in the front and we got up and sneaked part way down the stairs to where we could look around the banister to see out to the porch and the living room. As we were sitting there on the stairs looking through the railing, the front door burst open and in came Santa Claus with his bells and sack! We turned and flew up the stairs and slid under the bed to hide. We



Home of Walter and Esther Cowan
5230 North Third Street
Photo Summer 1956

hoped that Santa didn't see us and that he thought we were sleeping! In the morning when we got up, I remember a set of Tinker Toys was lying out and a red wagon in front of the tree. I played with those tinker toys a lot - - I could make trucks and Ferris wheels and windmills and draw bridges and cranes and everything I could imagine. In another year, I remember getting an Erector Set with an electric motor. That was even better and I could make so many things with it. One of the things that I made was a colorful candy merry-go-round made with cardboard and frosting made from soap and coloring and candy canes and gum drops and licorice and it would go round and round.

Dad worked at the Railway Express Agency as a driver since the mid 1940's until he retired in 1971 and one of his regular stops was the Minneapolis Florist Company on Hennipen Avenue just south of Franklin Avenue. Dad loved flowers and he particularly liked to bring roses home from the florist shop for mom whenever he could. During the summer time we often had flowers on the dining room table - - Lilacs at the end of May and peonies in July. And on special occasions dad would bring roses.

I remember during the mid and late fifties when mom and dad would be off to bed. Their bedroom was a room between the kitchen and dining room and in the earlier years it was part of a circle where children could run around and around the house going from room to room. It was a very small room and not much privacy. When dad remodeled the kitchen in the early fifties, he walled off the doorway from the kitchen to their bedroom so that there was more room for a dresser and only one door. They had a curtain on the door between the bedroom and the dining room and it was usually open. I remember many times mom and dad getting ready for bed and we'd talk and I remember dad had a ragged Bible close by and he'd spend a little time reading before going to sleep.

It was a Fine Christmas Tree!

Do you remember that long ago December day
when we cut down the tree in the wood?

*You were three, then four, then seventeen;
and now, my children, you are grown.*

We trudged thru the woods and looked at one,
and then another to find the best we could.

*Your life is your own now and so busy
with all that's important to make it your own.*

The tree looked good wrapped in its lights,
with ornaments you made and ones from above.

*May your tree, too, be as big and as beautiful
and fill your hearts with memories of joy and love!*

Larry Cowan 1996





Larry Cowan 1949
Jenny Lind Elem. School Photo

