

Memories cherished of a special lady

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We walked into my mother-in-law's house over the weekend. It was hard to fathom that she wasn't sitting at her kitchen table working a word-search puzzle or doing her Bible study. Reality confirmed that we truly did gather for her funeral a month ago where we celebrated the life of a dear lady.

She so enjoyed the recent wedding of our daughter and at the reception dinner, she shared memories with me of her own wedding in 1942. She spent time with children, grandchildren and great-grands, who she didn't often see.

Just three days after that special event, she fell and broke her leg which also uncovered the fact that she had a heart condition. One thing led to another and in just eight days, she joined the angels in heaven.

I'll cherish the time I spent with her that morning when I stopped to say hello before heading across the state for a meeting. She seemed determined to tell me something but the BiPAPP mask made it difficult to understand her. I noticed a stack of get-well cards on the counter so I suggested that she just relax as I took the opportunity to share kind messages from friends and relatives.

But she still had something to say as her lungs labored so very hard. Fortunately the respiratory therapist entered and I asked if we could remove the mask long enough for her to tell me something. Hesitating at first, she did agree to a brief break.

Hulda's eyes focused on me and she very intently said, "I've had enough. I can't take this anymore." We shared special words before the mask went back on. I prayed with her and asked her to greet my Dad when she got to heaven. My heart swelled and the tears flowed.

This started a new course of action. As the day progressed, the mask was removed for good and she was allowed a drink of water that she had longed for.

She was about to be moved from intensive care to a hospice room when she took her last breath. I couldn't help but wonder later if she just decided there was no need to cause someone to have to clean another room. Sometimes we don't have those choices but her wish was granted.

I've especially appreciated the spark of stories and memories, some that I'd never heard. How refreshing to hear the grandchildren laugh together and to see the granddaughters each pick out a pearl necklace to wear to their grandmother's funeral.

She's definitely known for her cooking and especially her pie making. One gal recalled high school years in Grant when she worked with Hulda at the restaurant, fondly acknowledging her peanut butter pie. Hmmm. That's one kind I never saw at a family dinner in the 37 years since I first dated her son. Banana, chocolate or coconut cream stood out as my favorites.

I had a flashback of a story when Hulda caught her hand in the mixer at that restaurant. She

was concerned the owner was going to pass out so she just picked up the mixer (possibly just the beaters?) which entangled her hand, headed out the back door and walked down the alley to the medical clinic. She was small but a tough ol' German soul!

Baking was her role at the restaurant, but in earlier years she did it all at the sale barn they owned. Weekly sale day food prep started at home making 12 pies, frying chickens and preparing the beef and taters for hot roast beef sandwiches. To top it off, she flipped hamburgers on the fry grill once the meal began.

That was all before my Pankonin days but she frequently told me in recent years, "I don't know how I did it all." No kidding! Just hearing about it made me tired. She no doubt fed the chickens, gathered the eggs and made bacon and eggs for breakfast as well. Of course she needed some kitchen help as she also clerked the sales and had to balance the books by the end of the day.

During one sale day lunch time, her cousin asked if she put sugar in the chocolate pie. Get this. She slid the meringue off the remaining pie, stirred in sugar, set it in the oven a few minutes while she continued to serve customers, returned the meringue to the pie and cut the next piece. Now that's a successful meringue for you.

One day she even took the ditch on the way to town with her precious food cargo. But she drove back onto the highway and those pies survived. Wow!

I loved her homemade macaroni and cheese, a common staple at church pot lucks. I recall once setting aside portions for my father-in-law and myself as we were concerned there wouldn't be any left when we reached the food line. And we were right.

Several of her sons' friends made time to visit Hulda over the years, having spent many hours at the Pankonin abode. Nieces and nephews came from California many summers. Maybe it was her cooking they liked. But they also respected her discipline, having treated them like her own.

My husband well remembers Mom taking him out of church just one time. That's all it took. Not that he was never ornery again, but he did behave during church.

One activity she cherished to the end was the weekly quilting time at the country church where she was baptized, confirmed, married and now buried. I'm a firm believer that those quilting hours served as counseling time through both the good and tough times of those hard-working ladies.

Other friends have commented of Hulda's kindness and how she didn't speak ill of anyone. "It'll all work out," was one of her phrases that someone noted in a card. And her special neighbor repeated one of Hulda's most common responses to any situation, "So be it."

Like always, it was a windy day at the quaint Trinity Lutheran country church as family and friends gathered for Hulda's funeral. With space set aside for family, the sanctuary filled quickly. The power went out which meant the overflow crowd in the basement would be in silence rather than hearing the service happenings.

The organist moved to the piano and the friendly funeral director asked people to squeeze together. More people filled the pews and chairs were set up on the inside and outside aisles. As soon as everyone fit snugly into the sanctuary, the power returned prior to the service starting. It was a God thing that Hulda would have liked.

Living a good wholesome 87 years on earth, then rejoicing in Heaven. One certainly can't feel sad about that. We thank the Lord for memories.

