

## A Family Grows Old in Fruitport

by Eric Wiggin



Fifty-nine years ago, Bruce Lemmen, a math teacher at Fruitport Middle School, married me and my Fruitport sweetie, Dot Hackney. Lemmen was also a pastor of

the small Baptist church that then met in Bethel Chapel, at 4th and Maple in Fruitport Village. Together, Lemmen and Dottie decided that Bethel's 80 or so seats couldn't accommodate our guests.

As I remember, on June 1, 1963, Spring Lake Baptist Church, borrowed for our wedding, had seated nearly 300 friends and relatives when cute little cousins Sandy and Karen Hackney and Mary Barnhard sashayed in to sprinkle rose petals in the aisle for the beaming bride and her bursting daddy to tread.

Since then, I've been a pastor, a school and college teacher, a tabloid and textbook editor, a journalist and a novelist. In 1984 we returned to Fruitport to be near Dot's mom, Hattie Hackney. Three of our kids were later married in Bethel at Oak and 6th, the building now housing Calvary Church. It's been our pleasure to watch our family grow, with a dozen and a half grand- and great-grandkids scattered to Maine, Ohio and Texas.

My first visit to Fruitport was in March 1962, during a college spring break at Fort Wayne Bible College. Fruitport Pavilion was still there, though I saw it only briefly as we drove past on Park Street. In summer I returned, and all that was left after a fire were a few pilings, and some charcoal floating in the water. This spot on Spring Lake, I've learned since, was once an entertainment center drawing big bands from across the USA; and the Pomona Hotel, that years earlier stood on the hill in the park, had been a west Michigan landmark.

Folks once traveled to Fruitport by boat from Chicago and Milwaukee for a night of fun, or came on the Interurban electric railroad that connected communities by streetcar from Grand Rapids to Whitehall, Michigan clear to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And because the Fruitport end of Spring Lake is deep, ocean vessels could load fruit and deliver coal and ore to a foundry near the Pavilion.

The old streetcar car barn still stands at the bottom of the Park Street hill beside the lake. It's now a factory, but you can plainly see the outlines of tall doors that once let streetcars roll in for repairs. Much of the gully, where the track once crossed Fruitport, is still there. Transformers now sit in the gully next to Park Street, and the power line that crosses the parking lot of Calvary Church marks where streetcars formerly clattered along. Since I grew up in Maine near a country village that had had a narrow-gauge railway, I noticed Fruitport's relics of former glory.

Grander to me, though, was that March day in 1962 that Dottie and I spent at Hoffmaster. A month earlier, on Valentine's Day, walking her back to her dorm in a snowstorm after an evening playing board games with a married couple, I'd asked Dottie to marry me—on only our second real date. How foolish was I to think I should propose to a girl I'd just met that fall? Besides going to church together, our only other date had been a

romantic Christmas banquet. But when we visited Motorcycle Hill Climb near Hoffmaster, she asked if I remembered the question I'd popped in the snowstorm a month earlier. Of course I did!

She said, "Yes!"

Several considerations had gone into my decision to ask Dot to marry me:

I'd already graduated from college once, in the spring of 1961, and I'd found a secure job in Fort Wayne. Socially a nerd, I was, however, considered and intellectual on campus and accepted as a leader. Yet like Adam, I'd had enough of being alone. I believed the Lord wanted me to court a woman. I'd never considered dating to be casual entertainment.

In childhood, God gave me five wonderful women by which later to measure my adult relationship with Dot: my mom, two grandmothers, and two aunts—all who loved me—in fact, liked me. Yes, Dottie *liked* me. She made me feel she enjoyed being with me, and I loved her.

Further, Dot, a senior, was secretary of the Student Missionary Fellowship the most-admired campus job for a young woman. Dot is highly gregarious, and I sensed I needed a girl to develop social relationships where I have difficulty doing so. Over the years that I've been a pastor and adult Sunday school teacher, she's been my delightful social secretary.

Genesis 24 is the only complete Bible story of marriage. This record of Abraham's son, Isaac, taking Rebekah as bride is nearly 4,000 years old. Teen Rebekah's terse "I will go" marry this man remains for all time the best example of a godly marriage that succeeded. No church, synagogue or temple was involved; no minister, rabbi, priest or justice officiated.

As with Isaac and Rebekah, Dottie and I married with both sets of parents' approval. I asked her dad's permission, and my parents were thrilled with the arrangement. According to the Bible, marriage and baby-making are both *family* affairs that God has planned.

Nor did Dottie's vanity demand a costly wedding. At First Baptist in Spring Lake, we had a reception put on by family members and friends. An uncle lent us a trailer on a lake in the woods for our honeymoon. My expenses? Half a dozen black bow ties and rented dinner jackets. I did buy new shoes, underwear and a pair of black wool slacks. I probably also paid for a car wash! (My parents and grandparents were married in a living room.)

By the time we returned to Fruitport in 1984 I'd had job experiences that opened doors as an editor for Mott Media, a Michigan publisher of home-school curricula. I also found part-time work with International Aid, and as a substitute teacher. My journalist work in Maine now opened publishing house doors to contracts for three series of youth novels, since Fruitport was close enough to bookseller's conventions for me to visit editors. While teaching in a college in North Carolina, I'd made friends with Dr. Gary Chapman, later the author of *THE FIVE LOVE LANGUAGES*. After our first grandchild was born, Gary wrote a foreword for *THE GIFT OF GRANDPARENTING* for me.

Our four kids were born in Maine, Indiana and North Carolina—three generations follow in our train. Fruitport has been a fabulous place for them to finish growing up. They're now spread across 2,000 miles, and several have been short-term missionaries in Europe, Africa and South America. Today, for the most part, Dot and I are called to pray for them.

honored her legacy and reached the heavens on high.

Among others in attendance were her daughters Charlotte Bouwhuis, Cathy Cherrette, many grandkids, nieces and nephews, and mainstays from Norma's longtime association with the Fruitport Bethel Baptist Church. Presenting a touching speech was Dr. Cody Knuppenburg, her grandson...it was all as she would have wanted it.

An all-around entertainer and comedian, Norma was self-taught in piano, accordion and the organ, and loved to yodel. She was active in Brownies and was a Day Care Provider. The 83 yr. old was well known for her sing-alongs at her house and leaves a rich heritage behind with 17 great-grandchildren.

Fighting the good fight, Fruitport's one-of-a-kind Mrs. Norma Knuppenburg will be dearly missed and forever remembered...but her influence will no doubt continue to live on.

## Norma Knuppenburg

by Larry J. Pellet



A very fond and heart-felt farewell was bestowed upon Norma Jeanne Knuppenburg as she lay at rest at Fruitport's First Congregational Church on March 5, 2022, before her internment at the Pine Hill Cemetery landmark, next to

her previously deceased husband Martin. A warm crowd of approximately 150 filled the sanctuary and sang songs of old, hymns of love and hope - Norma's creed-, as voices spanning the decades



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