

*Billie Luther obituary*

Willie (Billie) Enid Luther, 88, longtime resident of Broken Bow, died June 21, 2006, at the Crestwood Convalescent Center in Port Angeles, Washington, where she had resided for the past few months.

Billie was born in Osceola, Missouri, on November 3, 1917, to Lena Leota (Jordan) and William Henry Rodabaugh. A few years later she and her family moved to a ranch near Thedford, Nebraska. Billie attended schools in Thedford, graduating from Thedford High School in 1934. She worked as a waitress for several years, then did a program of study at Grand Island Business College in 1940-41. The following year she lived in Washington, DC, and worked for the federal government. She married Omer Kem (O. K.) Luther on January 2, 1945. She and O. K. lived on a ranch one mile west of Broken Bow for more than forty years. During these years Billie was a mother, homemaker, and bookkeeper for the family businesses. After O. K.'s death in 1989 she remained on the ranch until 2001, when a stroke made it impossible for her to continue to live on her own. From 2001 to 2005 she stayed with her son and his family in Ontario and British Columbia.

Billie is survived by her son, Kem Luther, her daughter-in-law Jeanne (Isaac) Luther, her granddaughters Jeni and Erin, Jeni's husband Steven Kelly, and a great-grandson, Finn Luther Kelly (all of Victoria, British Columbia). She is also survived by her sister and brother-in-law, Bonnie June and Roy Mays of Gooding, Idaho, and by many nieces and nephews.

She was preceded in death by her parents and by six of her siblings and their spouses, Golda (Barney Powers), Sylvan (Artie Stewart), Walter (Suzy Hepworth), Evelyn (Loren Price), Hank Jr., and Kenneth.

Interment will be in the Broken Bow Cemetery following a private ceremony for her immediate family. Memorials are suggested to Jennie M. Melham Memorial Medical Center.

*Memories of Billie Luther, by Kem Luther, at a memorial service*

Willie Enid Rodabaugh was born November 3, 1917, in Western Missouri and died June 21, 2006, in Port Angeles, Washington, at the age of 88. She gained the nickname *Billie*, the name we all knew her by, about the time she married, but to her natal family she was always, as her birth certificate says, *Willie*, presumably named for her uncle Willie Jordan.

Billie's father, William Henry Rodabaugh, was born in 1879, her mother, Lena Leota Jordan, five years later. Grandma and Grandpa Rodabaugh came from different backgrounds and ancestries. Lena was a product of the vast Scots-Irish infusion into North America during the thirty years on either side 1800. She was, as so many of these Americanized Scots-Irish were, a devout Baptist. She associated with various churches throughout her life, occasionally playing the organ for church services. Her husband Bill could also claim the Scots-Irish heritage on his mother's side, but on his father's side he was an offspring of the German-speaking immigrants that came to North America in the hundred years prior to the American Revolution. These people were mostly Lutherans and Reformed, but a small number, perhaps ten percent, belonged to what we call the "Anabaptist" traditions. Anabaptists signaled their disaffection with the Lutheran state church by baptizing their members as adults, even if they had already been baptized as children (the *ana* in Anabaptist is the Greek prefix for *again*). Bill's Anabaptist tradition was the German Baptist Brethren, the so-called "Dunkers." His father, Abraham Rodabaugh, was a widely-known minister in that tradition. When Bill first became an adult, he was, I believe, an active member of the Dunker Church. But he left it early, and for the remainder of his life, unlike his wife, he maintained no formal connection to a church.

Bill was 26 and Lena was 21 when they married. The pair went on to have eight children over the next twenty years, all of whom would live to old age. The first five of Bill and Lena's children, including Mom, the fifth child, were born in Western Missouri. Bill, we presume, kept a store in Missouri at some time during the fifteen years after he and Lena were married, because in 1920, when he was about 40 year old, he traded this store for a dryland ranch near Thedford, Nebraska, in the heart of the Nebraska Sandhills. He, Lena, and the five kids moved into a sod house on this ranch. The ranch, however, was too far from town, and too insecure in the income it produced, so Bill and Lena mortgaged the farm and set up a general store in Thedford. They also bought a house in town. During the school year the family lived in town and Bill spent weekends at the ranch. In summers, the family transferred to the soddy so that they could help with the ranch chores. Mom had many happy memories of her days on the open prairie.

The fifteen years that Mom spent in Thedford, from age 3 to about age 18, were, I believe, the happiest years of her life. From the stories she has told, I think that her happiness was more connected to her life outside of the home than with the circumstances at home. She did well in school, eventually graduating in 1934 near the top of her small Thedford High School class, forming close friendships along the way with her classmates and teachers. Her home, however, was dominated by an austere and often sullen father, and his increasing difficulty at making ends meet, especially during the depression that began in the early 1930s, led Bill into conflicts with his children and his neighbors. Many of the stories that Mom tells about her home life in these years are not happy stories. The little that I knew of my grandfather as a boy, learned from occasional trips to visit he and Lena in their retirement cabin in Twin Falls, Idaho, confirms this impression—I remember an unsmiling man who had little ability, and less desire, to relate to his grandchildren.

Billie stayed in Thedford for two years after she graduated from high school, working two days a week at a temporary government job in Thedford. She then left town with one of her Thedford friends, Lillas, to make a fresh start. She and Lillas moved to Scotsbluff, Nebraska, where Mom landed a job in a cafe by claiming that she had previous work experience in restaurants. Later Mom and Lillas moved to Mitchell, Nebraska, where Mom worked in another cafe. Mom's oldest brother, Sylvan, had found a job on a ranch in Wyoming, so Billie and Lillas hitched a ride to Cody, Wyoming. Billie and Lillas met up with Sylvan, but they couldn't get jobs in Cody, so they went on to Sheridan, Wyoming, where Lillas had an aunt. At some point Billie went back to Cody, where she lived and worked on the Kid Nichols Ranch for two summers, employed as a maid and as a companion for the two Nichols daughters.

In the five years after graduating from high school, between 1934 and 1939, Mom still thought of her permanent home as Thedford and she came back to Thedford between jobs. But her Thedford years were nearly over. Her older brothers and sisters had moved away, and her parents, bankrupt and landless, would soon leave Thedford and take Mom's younger siblings with them to Idaho. Toward the end of this itinerant period, Mom heard of a job at a cafe in Broken Bow. She took the job, but stayed at it only a short time. The job was not what she had been told it was—she found that she was expected to act as a taxi dancer, a woman who danced with the customers for money, in addition to being a waitress. It was through this job, however, that she got to know one of the café owner's friends, a frequent customer at the diner. Her relationship with O.K. Luther would continue to mature over the next few years. Though Billie and O.K. would not marry until 1945, and though Mom and Dad were not always an item in their early years together, Mom's life choices in these six years were obviously orchestrated by her off-again, on-again relationship to Dad. Mom moved to Ogallala and worked at a hotel and cafe, for example, about the same time that Dad was working on a construction project at the new Ogallala dam. Mom decided to attend business college in Grand Island, Nebraska, in 1940, and Dad loaned her the tuition money. After business college Mom accepted a secretarial position with the War Production Board in Washington, D.C. When she left for Washington she didn't think that O.K. wanted to pursue their relationship, but by the spring of 1942 she had an engagement ring from him and was making plans to leave the Washington job and return to Nebraska. I still have some of the touching letters Dad wrote to her when he was trying to

get her to return.

For the next few years Billie and O.K. were on the road a good deal of the time, travelling from one Nebraska job site to another to look after Dad's expanding gravel contracting business. They lived mainly in trailers and hotels. Mom kept the books for Dad's enterprises. Sometime after their marriage in 1945, O.K. and Billie gave up their transient lifestyles and settled down at the ranch west of Broken Bow that Dad had purchased in 1941. I was born the next year, in December of 1946.

Mom and Dad were not the only occupants of the ranch in the early years there. Gerald, Dad's youngest son, and Gerald's wife, Sonty, resided there for a while, and several of Dad's employees lived on the ranch in trailers. Dad's father stayed at the ranch during the last few months of his life (he died in 1951). Mom was kept busy in the late 1940s and early 1950s not only looking after a son, but also cooking meals and cleaning up after a constant stream of guests and employees. I don't think Mom enjoyed these years very much. I have early childhood memories of several heated arguments between Mom and Dad. I wonder as I look back on the years when I was still at home in Broken Bow how Mom really felt about her life on the ranch. Did she feel trapped by her love for Dad? Willie had been a happy and adventurous young woman. Was Billie contented with her role in the Luther clan?

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, during my school years, Mom's attention was largely focused on me. But a growing boy is not a very good post to hitch your affection to. I wanted my own freedom in those years, especially after I became an adolescent, and I found it by cutting some of the ties that held me to Mom. In the late 1960s, perhaps in response to the loss of her intimate connection to me, Mom went through several rounds of addiction and depression, sometimes so serious that they required hospitalization. Between these difficult periods, however, Mom was able to enter in to the small compensations of growing old. She learned to love her grandchildren after they arrived. Dad, almost 30 years older than Mom, became increasingly frail, and though it was hard work caring for Dad in the 1980s, I believe that Mom found a measure of fulfillment in it.

Dad died in 1989, and Mom decided to stay on at the ranch by herself. In the early 1990s Mom and I took several trips together to do family history research. These were important times for renewing our mother-son relationship. Some deterioration of Mom's mental faculties—we don't know what exactly it was—began to affect her behavior in the late 1990s. At first these physical failures took the form of emotional changes, but later they began to affect her cognitive responses. In 2001, her first major stroke exacerbated these mental losses. For all of the heartache that her increasing senility brought to those of us who loved her, there were some advantages for her. As the emotional storms that shaped her life after 1940 began to recede from her memory, some of the stability and well-being that had been hers as a young woman came back. She was able to handle the dramatic changes in her life during her eighties—having to move in with Jeanne and me, seeing the farm home sold, experiencing the death of many of those she had known over the years—with surprising resilience. It was as though Willie had returned.

Our most intimate relationships are not conveyed by historical summaries of what we did or even of what we believed. They are conveyed by the stories we tell. Mom loved her stories, and as she began to repeat some of these stories during her slow decline into senility, I came to realize how important these stories were, not only to Mom, but to all of us whose lives were bound up with hers. Two stories:

The first story happened in the mid-1940s, when she and Dad first set up housekeeping together. No one knew it at the time, but Mom had missed an essential element in the formation of young women in that era—she didn't know how to cook. In Thedford, her sisters and mother had done all the meal planning and preparation. After her Thedford years, she had eaten out in the cafes where she had worked. Now she found herself in possession of her own kitchen and she didn't know where to begin. She confessed her problem to one of her friends. Her friend explained to her how she could prepare a pot roast, complete

with vegetables. Mom fixed this for Dad the first time she used her kitchen. The next night she presented him with pot roast again. After a few nights of pot roast, Dad began to get suspicious. He asked whether she could cook anything else. She admitted that she didn't know how to cook anything but pot roast. So they bought a cookbook, and Mom began remedial learning of what everyone thought she already knew.

The second story is something that happened to Mom and me. In the early 1990s, when I was putting together our family histories, I sent Mom copies of the documents I had found and the family history summaries I wrote. She read them with interest. I never imagined, however, that I was doing more for her than filling in a few gaps in her family tree and giving her something to do in her lonely evenings at the ranch. In one case, however, I was able to pass on something of more significance. Mom had several close friends over her life—she tended to have, as I have had, a few really close friends, rather than many less intimate friends. One of her best friends was Iris Armour, the wife of Milford Armour, Dad's business partner for twenty years. In the 1950s and 1960s Mom and Iris spent a lot of time together. They discovered that they had a lot in common. But one of the most important things they had in common, neither of them knew at the time. I learned about it when I was reading through a family history of George Andrews that one of my correspondents had sent to me. George Andrews was a tragic figure, a well-educated young man from Massachusetts who had married Margaret Rodabaugh, the aunt of Abraham Rodabaugh, Mom's Dunker minister grandfather. George and Margaret had brought seven children into the world. George, however, had died soon after the last one was born, leaving Margaret in deep poverty (I have a handwritten letter from Margaret's father, composed in the 1850s, telling about his concern for the welfare of his daughter and her young family.). As I read through the pages of George and Margaret Andrews's descendants I was barely paying attention. It was just a list of names of people that I had never heard of. Suddenly a name caught my eye: Milford Armour. How many people could have this strange name? As I read the paragraphs more closely, I realized that the Milford Armour I had known as a boy had married one of the descendants of George and Margaret Andrews. Iris Armour, Mom's good friend, had been born Iris Nell Andrews, and was the granddaughter of George and Margaret. She was my Mom's second cousin! I passed this along to Mom. She was amazed. In all the time they had spent together, she and Iris had never talked about their grandparents and had never learned about their family connection.