

Remembering an earlier Duluth Downtown was a lively place of people and commerce And the city's famous aerial bridge hadn't yet got its lift

Editor's note:

The writer of this article was born Ernestine Traubman in Duluth on October 12, 1906. Her mother was Irene Silberstein, also born in Duluth, and her father was Lionel Traubman, from New York City. Their home was at 2327 East Fourth Street. Mr. Traubman was a vice president of Silberstein and Bondy, a department store on Superior Street, owned by Bernard Silberstein, Ernestine's grandfather who built his home on 21st Avenue East. Mr. Silberstein also was responsible for building the first reformed Jewish Temple in Duluth and was commissioner of Public Safety at the same time Bert Ferrel was commissioner of Health and Public Welfare.

Ernestine had two brothers, Edward and Karl (whose name was changed to Charles during WWI because it was considered too German-sounding). Both brothers are deceased.

Ernestine attended Normal Elementary School and Duluth Central High School. She graduated from high school in 1924 and then went on to St. Scholastica, where she graduated with seven others in 1928.

We're pleased to present this shortened version of a reminiscence that Ernestine has written. Regrettably, we did not have room for the longer and much more richly detailed piece that she originally submitted

My maternal grandfather was an early settler in Duluth, an immigrant from Budapest who was always years ahead of the times. His boundless energy compelled him to translate his dreams into reality with astounding rapidity. I recall him as having twinkling eyes, endless good humour and loving a good joke. The latter often took the form of tying fruit on a tree in the yard of the first home he had built and calling all the grandchildren (there were seven of us) to see what had happened overnight.

When all the excitement had subsided, he would slip a quarter into each hand, admonishing us to say nothing to our parents. It was a continuing conspiracy to spoil us privately and in his own fashion. He adored and spoiled us all — his children and grandchildren — often to the obvious chagrin of my grandmother.

She was an austere woman who loved the arts more than people; none of us ever remember being kissed by her. She was to enrich our lives in other ways.

Every Friday night she would set her yeast dough and early Saturday morning would rise and make what today would fill a baker's shelves

with wonderful kuchen; schnecken; prune, cheese and plum-filled tarts; and bundt. Then we would all be summoned to come and take our share home. I can still recall the wonderful smells of that home on Saturday morning.

On Sunday nights we could make no plans. We were all expected for supper, and 17 sat down with regularity.

The merchants all respected and feared her. As my grandparents' fortunes increased, she

became one of the grand dames of the town whose taste in furnishing and art were regarded as impeccable. She was also a terror in the markets, threading her way through, pinching and ruining plums, pears, etc., until she found what she wanted. No one dared to challenge her — not the merchants, her children or her grandchildren.

She traveled everywhere to pick up rare antiques, and we often felt as she passed her hand softly over a rosewood chair or gazed lovingly at a rare piece of Dresden or Limoges that she loved all these, not us.



SUPERIOR STREET
1916

Photographer Louis P. Gallagher captured the vitality of downtown Duluth, here looking east from Fifth Avenue West.

Photo courtesy Northeast Minnesota Historical Center, Duluth

We sometimes had a good last laugh when an antique failed her. Like the time she summoned all of her five sisters to a family reunion and had them sit on an old rosewood sofa for a picture. As the sisters raised their heads and smiled for the portrait, the sofa, unable to bear the traffic of five fullsome derrieres, cracked and collapsed, and the five aunties fell to the floor.

The new home was frequently the setting for receptions, teas and banquets. On occasions grandma would hire a doorman, a lady's maid and a musical ensemble and would roll out a red carpet from the front steps to the curb. Grandpa loathed all the

pomp but could never bring himself to deny her slightest whim.

She made Grandpa build secret shelves in the basement to house her excess silver and china, and we were never to learn which shelves were fake and which opened into a hidden closet until her death, when barrels of unopened Haviland and Minton were found,

as well as beautiful old silver.

The silver in the butler's pantry was counted once a week and Grandma usually found a piece or two missing. "It's the maid," she would say with icy finality. And when the poor unfortunate would deny all knowledge of the lost treasure, Grandma would say, "Well, I'll give you another chance — we'll look again. The article always turned up. Sometimes the current girl wouldn't be intimidated, and we all shudder when we remember the day that the accused picked up a butcher knife and threatened to cut Grandma's throat unless she was cleared at once. Needless to say, there were fewer recriminations after that episode — also less turnover.

We learned to stand tall, to appreciate art and beauty of line from this ancestor. We also learned to speak with grace and handle ourselves with poise and dignity. She gave us a sense of family pride.

Grandpa gave us his love of humor and a sense of duty to the community and our fellow men. As he acquired more materially, his fulfillment was in the field of community service and he worked hard to improve the lot of the underprivileged.

He finally turned toward government and ran for city council. There were only two important council jobs. The one to which he was elected was the Commissioner of Public Safety. This included the police and the fire departments. His Irish friend was then the Commissioner of Health and Welfare, so a Jew and a Catholic ran the city for four years. Since no one could "buy" Grandpa, it was said to be one of the best and most honest administrations the city had known for some time.

Grandpa prided himself on the slogan that, "The customer was always right." Sometimes it was hard to bear, as on one occasion each year when one society matron would always buy the most expensive gown and wrap for the Charity Ball and then return them for credit the next day, usually with her white gloves in the pocket of the wrap.

Many years later my father recalled that when an elderly lady returned a pair of stockings and said they were not satisfactory, my father looked at them and said, "But madam, we have not sold these for 10 years." "Yes," she replied, "but they didn't really wear well." He refunded her money and displayed the stockings in the window the next day with a sign saying, "True to tradition, the customer is always right, and though 10 years had elapsed, a refund was granted."

Frequently the city would repave and repair the sidewalk on our street, pouring hot tar between the blocks of concrete. As soon as the men left we would pull out the tar and chew it. It seemed delicious at the time, and we cared not a whit that pedestrians were constantly tripping in the crevices and cracks left when the tar was removed.

In summer we waited for the ice wagon, and when the iceman hoisted his block of ice on his shoulders to deliver to his customers, we would climb onto the wagon, grab pieces of ice, wash off the sawdust and lick it. It tasted better than ice cream to us, possibly because it was forbidden.

I was to remember this later when we moved into our new home in the fashionable part of town. My father wanted to try his hand at designing a home. He found a builder and both men ignored all advice to secure an architect.

One of his innovations was an icebox with a door that could be opened from the outside. "What could be more modern or more clever," he said, "The iceman will never have to enter our kitchen again." Alas, as often as our ice went in, our meat, groceries, ring

molds, etc., disappeared. We never knew who stole our food from the outside, but even the addition of locks did not prevent it. Fortunately the electric refrigerator made its appearance shortly and was duly installed.

The house was three stories high and contained five bedrooms. It never occurred to my father to put in an extra bathroom and when we moved in we were horrified that the occupants of the two bedrooms on the third floor had to run down (and up) to share the bath with the occupants of the three bedrooms on the second floor. There was no guest bathroom on the first floor and only a toilet in the basement that was nearly always out of order.

My younger brother insisted on one of the bedrooms on the third floor. He was a teenager and a "heller" in those days. Mother felt that he should have spent more time at home and was delighted when for several months after she hired a pretty young maid (who occupied the other room on the top floor), he suddenly became a homebody and even went up early "to study" every night. Mother could never understand why, with all that studying, his grades did not improve.

One year Mother decided that we should learn French. She engaged a teacher to come to our home three days a week to instruct my two brothers and me.

She was followed by a German teacher, a no-nonsense woman with buck teeth. She taught us all a little German prayer, but then the First World War was looming and she disappeared. After that we didn't have to say the prayer any more because it was unpatriotic to speak German.

That same year my younger brother changed his name from Karl to Carl and then to Charles. It was less Germanic and more comfortable during the war years.

We were three lively young children when World War I broke out, and by 1917 the whole town was involved. My father joined the National Guard. Mother rolled bandages at the Red Cross Center; my second brother and I sold at various bazaars to help the war effort.

It was always cold in Duluth and the winters were long, and some say hard, though it didn't seem so to us. We loved to see frosted window panes that looked like etchings of fairy tales. We made snow men and forts and skated and rolled in the snow. We engaged in dangerous sports like tying our sleds to the back of a car and literally flying through the air as the unsuspecting motorist turned the corner.

When it was very cold and the ice on Lake Superior was frozen solid, we would drive our cars over the ice to Superior, and it was not an uncommon sight on Sunday to see a fair amount of motor traffic on the lake.

Our aerial bridge was a great wonder to us. When it was closed we would be miraculously swung over, whether on foot or in a car, to Park Point for a swim or picnic. When it opened with a great creaking yawn to let the ships go through, the noise and excitement was great. The ships would sound their horns, the bridge bells would clang, and we would remind each other and any stranger that there were only two such bridges in the world; the second one was somewhere in France.

In the mid '20s we all began to leave for our various colleges, and then as the course of our lives altered we moved to different parts of the country. "We always had such fun in Duluth," my cousins would frequently say. "We ought to write about it some day."

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