

Agnes L. Poch's History - Reconstructed August 17, 1997

Having been granted the gift of life, I, Agnes Louise W****, was born on January 3, 19**, the youngest of eight children.

My only recollection, at age 10, of a grand-parent, was of my paternal grandmother who came to live with our family on 34th Street in Milwaukee, one week before she died. My father, Joseph John W**** (Valis), came to the U.S. at age 7 from Prague, Bohemia (Austria-Hungarian Empire), met and married my mother, Josephine Wondraska (von Draska), when he was 31 and she was 19 years of age. She had been doing outstanding tailoring in her father's tailor shop, living a very protected life until her marriage. At which time she became a convert to the Catholic Faith.

The W**** side:

My father, Joseph, although unskilled, tried several ventures to support his growing family. One was in real estate, with relatives in Chicago. Not being alerted to many business practices, and also being a person of high integrity, he lost out on this venture, and turned to a furniture business in Beloit, Wisconsin. Again he was unsuccessful in that a fire destroyed the business. He was hired by the Dahlmann Construction Company in Milwaukee. Somewhere in between all these efforts he traveled to Sacramento, California, job-hunting.

It seemed that my mother, who followed him later via train with Marion, Alice, and Helen, was most unhappy there, and after two years, they returned to the Midwest. At the Dahlmann Construction Co., my father showed excellence in figures, had beautiful hand-writing (until the day he died), all self taught. Apparently, he was able to acquire the knowledge of running a business, but, through circumstances unknown to me, he was embarrassingly eased out of his job. I was told the family lived from week to week on his paycheck, with my mother sewing for her three daughters, cooking, baking bread, etc., loyally upholding her husband's decisions and efforts.

Then a Plastering Contracting Co. was entered into, between my father as the estimator and office control, and a Robert Dufton, knowledgeable in the art of plastering and details involved. Gradually the company grew in size, quality of workmanship, and requests for their services. To the growing members of the family, it always seemed as though we had to "pray" for more workers when jobs were abundant, or, "pray" for more work when my father tried to keep from laying off more men. Their work was confined to large construction projects, such as the Milwaukee County Nurses Home, huge movie theaters filled with the artistry of ornamental plastering, the Milwaukee County Courthouse, St. John de Nepomuc Roman Catholic Church on 38th and Keefe, and more.

W****-Dufton Company flourished with my father at the helm until one year before he died, at age 79, of several strokes he had through out the previous year. Completely bedridden, incapable of speech or self-care, we were unable to communicate with him or fulfill his final wishes. A practical nurse lived with us for the entire year, to care for him, as my mother was unable to give him the constant care he needed and still run the household. My mother lived to 85 years of age. One Saturday noon, she had just come home from an appointment at the beauty parlor, and found Gene and Bob cutting the grass on 34th and Hadley where we lived. She mentioned how very tired she was, so my brothers made a chair for her with their arms and carried her upstairs to her bedroom. Being very careful not to "upset her hair", they laid her on her bed - and about 7 PM, she slept away. She died of angina. As almost daily communicants, my father and mother set a beautiful example for all of us, and family life, in general. It was a simple life, but full of good memories and personal responsibilities. For example, when I was very young, a walk with my father to Washington Park from 34th and Hadley to see a ball game, was enhanced by his promise of an ice cream cone, for me. Simple pleasure!

My father's sister, Mary, married George Polka in Chicago. They had several children, one of whom I remember as cousin Agnes, a school teacher who never married, but kept us fascinated with her stories of her teaching experiences. She taught for years, was dedicated to the profession, and made many lasting friends, especially among the Jewish students who always took the time to get all the information she had to offer on their subjects. It seemed to be their interest in learning which repaid her efforts.

Two other sisters in the W**** family were Aunt Emma and Aunt Mary Schneiberg of Beloit, Wisconsin.

The Wondraska (Wondracek) side consisted of:

1) Uncle Will (Aunt Mary) who had 1 son who died at age 12. They adopted the Christian Science concept, became readers and were considered our "wealthy relatives". It was a custom of theirs, on Sunday afternoons, to come for a visit to our house, sing songs around our piano, while my sisters played, and then stay for a light supper (ham, rolls, homemade cake or pie etc.). Aunt Mary died one afternoon sitting beside Uncle Will on their davenport while he was doing their readings. He later died of cancer in Oconomowoc, Wis., at a retirement home for Christian Scientists. In his mental state totally disowning all Catholics, even to my mother, his sister, for whom he formerly had high regard.

2) Aunt Lizzie (Elizabeth) Langenohl (Charlie) had six children - Ervin, Charlie, Alice, Ella, Bill and Eddie. Ervin had two children and was a life insurance agent. Ella married John Hoffmann whose two children are cousins Ellen and Ed. Alice was never married.

3) Aunt Libbie married Dr. Edward Bruns, who became the family dentist. Their son, Pat, followed in his father's footsteps. One daughter, Verna, married Frank Falkner, the other, Pearl, married an attorney, Howard Elder. Both daughters, at present now live in Brookfield, Wis.

Returning to my immediate family -----

My oldest sister, Marion Elizabeth, preceded me by 19 years. In memory, I can recall her kindness and regard for family and friends, plus her loyalty to her job. She attended Miss Brown's Business School and became an excellent legal secretary for Miller, Mack and Fairchild law firm. They were outstanding in Milwaukee and even to the present time have offices in several areas of the country plus European representation. Their name underwent several changes through the years to Fairchild, Foley & Sammond, Sammond & Lardner, etc. This law firm handled the interests of many of the wealthy families of that era. Marion was 19 years older than me, and often guided me in a very kindly and concerned way. I can remember one letter, especially, that she wrote to me after I was married. She was so very aware of the responsibility of raising four little children in the absence of Norbert, as he had to travel with his job in the government. She often took me on little trips, such as to the Eucharistic Congress when it was held in Chicago (I must have been about 12 years old). She and Helen also took me to Egg Harbor in Door County, Wisconsin a few times. I still have two books she gave me - both authors of whom she held in high regard - "What of the Morrow" by Albert G. de Quevedo, and "Way to Inner Peace" by Fulton J. Sheen. Joseph, the oldest brother, but 2nd in the family, died at 6 mos. of age, so, consequently, I knew little of him.

Alice Mary, the 3rd to arrive, and 17 years older than I, also attended the same business school. Her outstanding employment in Milwaukee was as a secretary for the architect of the Milwaukee County Courthouse. At the completion of that building, and the retirement of the architect in charge, she applied in Washington, D.C. for a government position. After being connected with several departments there, she retired after approximately 30 years.

Helen Josephine (4th in the family) and I shared a bedroom in the house in which I was born, (2811-N. 34th Street). She took special care of her brother, Edward Aloysius, (and later, me), always seeing to it that we were cleanly dressed. In regard to that, I have two pictures of myself, at three years of age, sitting on the front steps, "all dolled up". She also walked Ed to school - the Bohemian school, St. John de Nepomuc, a long way from our home on north 34th street, towards downtown Milwaukee (Marion and Alice also attended that school). All three of my sisters never ever forgot to send lovely clothes for all of our children at Christmas and each birthday, which was really appreciated during that time of need in our lives. They were also responsible for several good books for them also.

To digress a little, before Ed was born, my mother took her three daughters and joined my father in Sacramento, California, where he had gone on ahead in search of work. She was unhappy there and after trying it for two years, they returned to the Midwest. Ed was born in Beloit, Eugene in Chicago, and Robert and I in the house my father built on 34th Street, when it was very difficult to find housing for his growing family. I believe a loan from my Uncle Will enabled him to build - a loan which was repaid as rapidly as possible. My mother baked and sewed for the family and was truly loyal in the difficult times. None of my three sisters were married, but they worked to help support the family, in many unselfish ways. Helen worked for W****-Dufton Co. for many years, maintaining the office all through my father's yearlong illness, and the absence of Gene and Bob, during World War II. She always impressed me by how meticulous she was in her personal appearance, and, in fact, everything she did. Like my father, she had beautiful handwriting - self taught. She was extremely kind to our mother, along with Marion (Alice was in Washington, DC) and helped her in so many ways before and after our father's death.

Ed, the fifth to be born, at one time was able to attend night school and was very interested in law. He was also very good in history, loved a good time (was a beautiful dancer), and, like all those before him, a most sensitive person. He worked for the main Post Office many years, held the position of night supervisor, and eventually retired from there. Retirement really was not for him and he continued to work at Marshall-Isley Bank downtown for some time. He met and married Ann . They had two sons, Tom and Jim. At the date of this writing (1995), Tom is retired from the Police Force, and Jim, living in Buffalo, Minnesota, works in Minneapolis. Ann is living in Grafton, Wisconsin, where Tom and his family also reside.

Gene, Bob and I, the last three members of the family, all graduated from 8th grade at St. Thomas Aquinas School. Gene and Bob finished Washington High School during the depression years, and then worked for my father at W****-Dufton Co., while attending Marquette University to get their Civil Engineer Degrees. Bob was the civil engineer in Ripon, Wisconsin before he and Gene enlisted as officers in the Navy - World War II. Gene had his pilot's license and was immediately sent to Norman, Oklahoma to teach and train fliers, for the next four years. Afterwards, Gene married Margaret Schaefer, to whom I had introduced him during our Mt. Mary College days. They have two daughters: Kathy and Mary Jo. At present Gene and Marge live in River Hills, a suburb of Milwaukee.

Bob was sent to Pensacola, Florida, and then on to Wake Island, about three weeks before it was bombed by the Japanese, following the Japanese raid on Hawaii. For three more weeks, the contingent of the Navy, kept the Japs at bay with minimal defense, burying the dead at night, and defending by day, but were no match for their enemy, with the huge onslaught of aircraft. Just before being captured, Bob went to the storage depot and took a complete new outfit of clothes and shoes, which ironically, he lived in until finally replaced with Jap togs, such as

they were. Cruelty prevailed, even to being taken in nets, into the hold of ships, to China, and finally to Hokkaido, a northernmost island in Japan. Life as a POW for 4 years consisted in eating wormy rice 2x/day, reciting alphabets and arithmetic riddles, engineering geometrics, etc., to keep minds busy, limited exercising each day, dirt floors and starvation. One day, in August, 1945, the Japs started "bowing" to the officers who had survived. Rumor drifted in that the war was over, food improved, beatings ceased - freedom! They were almost forgotten as this was 3 months after the bombing of Hiroshima and the end of the war. After spending one month in Hawaii to build up health and rest and sunshine, Bob arrived on our doorstep, amid tears and joy of all present. Our father had died in March during Bob's absence and all of our mail, care packages, etc., never reached that group of POWS. Only our prayers sustained him, as we all realized. Anything is possible with prayer!

Agnes Louise was the youngest, tenderly treated by her older brothers and sisters, no doubt, spoiled and the recipient of many advantages in her life, as a result. Gene and Bob, with permission from our mother, made an ice rink in our back yard and there taught me to skate (on 14" runners!). In summer they taught me to swim, and had the patience to show me how to golf and play tennis. Although no one in the family was especially demonstrative, love, and care and the grace of God was present. Memories of childhood include "Shivarees" (a clanging of pots and pans outside the home of a bride and groom following their reception, also at their home - after which coins were distributed to the children outside); "Bump's Boarding House" - which occurred every 6 months, was housecleaning time. Curtains, washed and stretched, rugs beaten on the outdoor washline by my brothers, walls washed, floors scrubbed and varnished, even to the kitchen. It meant that the basement kitchen came into use, upsetting all usual routines; Scrawny whole chicken during the war; Mother's wash hung outside in the coldest of weather, and the sight of the long johns, swinging in the breeze, stiff as a board - only when it rained was the wash hung in the attic; nine people sharing a bathroom on the second floor, with an extra commode in the basement; while in grade school, the Saturday morning movies at the public school on Center street for one dime; the butcher, grocery and bakery on our same street; the 4th of July when Gene had me hold a "safe" firecracker in my hand, while my brothers tossed one too far and it caused an awning fire across the street at the bakery; several trips to Egg Harbor with my sisters, a beautiful spot in No. Wisconsin; A sailboat ride while there one year which overturned in a squall - a second sailboat experience in the Bay of Naples many years later, during World War II, which was delightful and overcame the trauma of the first.

To continue, I attended St. Thomas Aquinas grade school for 8 years (as did brothers Gene and Bob), walking 10 long blocks in the a.m., home for lunch at noon, back to school, and home again after school, each day - snow, wind, rain or sun - well taken care of by my brothers and no doubt, healthier for it. Often each hand of mine was tucked into a pocket of a brother on each side of me, as my feet barely touched the ground. They were responsible for taking me to Bechstein's on the Milwaukee River, after Mass, on Sunday morning for swimming and also an

air show in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. (This has now become an outstanding event but not as rural as it was when we attended). Their well remembered advice was always "Be a participant, not just an observer." It was at St. Thomas that I also started Piano lessons, which continued for eleven years. My delight was always in classical music, while my friends, who also played, far surpassed me in modern dance music of the time.

My father was the plastering contractor for the building of Holy Angels High School as I was finishing 8th grade. When the nuns found out, they prevailed upon him - and so I spent 4 years at Holy Angels High School - all girls. It provided a wide background of arts and sciences. The entire freshman class was unique in that it remained together for 4 years, thus forming many lifetime friends. There were yearly plays, concerts, 4 years of Latin. After school, dancing and swimming were taught at the Knights of Columbus, across from Marquette University. Marquette University High School - all boys - provided the opposite sex interest at the usual high school dances. Both Gene and Bob had entered Marquette University, Civil Engineering.

But it was decided that I enter Mount Mary College, Milwaukee - an all girls school, again. Since these were depression years, the enrollment was low - only 38 graduates after 4 years. Like high school, college life was intriguing, happy and full, even as a day student. Bob used to drive me out Center street, past fields to 92nd street to the Locust street entrance of Mt. Mary. Social life was again enhanced by Marquette University students, many the same ones who were on hand at Holy Angels High School. Every year there were outstanding plays and concerts, as the Notre Dame nuns really knew how to challenge the best in the students. Can't say I graduated with honors - but can say I ended up as president of the senior class. In retrospect, they were 8 wonderful years through which I was guided by the Grace of God and the outstanding family He provided. In 4 years I graduated in Foods and Nutrition with a major in Dietetics and minors in Chemistry and English.

To become a Dietitian, required 1 year internship at an accredited hospital, following a Bachelor of Science Degree. After submitting several applications, I had 2 acceptances and chose Indianapolis City Hospital in Indianapolis, Indiana, for my required 1 year internship. All Dietetic students worked split shifts, 7AM-2PM. & 4PM-7PM, which meant getting to 6AM Mass (up at 5AM), on Sundays and Holy Days and going by cab. To this day I have one friend, at whose wedding I was granted permission to be a witness (Justice of the Peace). Her gift to me was a sterling silver rosary, which I treasure. The year was work-filled, no salary, only board and room, after completion of which I was eligible and became a member of the American Dietetic Association (of which I am a lifetime member). Fulfilling that, I accepted a position as Dietitian at Mercy Hospital, in Monroe, Michigan.

Hearing of a vacancy at Misericordia Hospital in Milwaukee, after one year in Michigan, I applied and was accepted as the Dietitian there, also for 1 year.

Through a civil service exam at Milwaukee County, a therapeutic dietitian's position became available at Milwaukee County Hospital and I remained on the staff for 4 years. Meanwhile the infamous Dec. 7 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor occurred, my brothers had enlisted in the Navy, after which my father died, following his long illness. (Gene and Bob had been denied a waiver by the Army to be able to assist my mother during the helplessness of my father, thus their choice of the Navy just before they were to be called up by the Army). At that time, hospital dietitians had their own corps only in the Army, and not wishing to be a part of the Wacs or Nursing Corps, etc., or their branches of the armed forces, I enlisted in the Army as Hospital Dietitian, 2nd Lt., with the serial number, R15. I spent 10 months at Fort Ord, in California, was ordered to the east coast, boarded a troop ship for South Africa. After 10 days of lights out, zig-zagging (to avoid mines), horrible weather on the Atlantic Ocean, all over Christmas and New Year Season, we landed at Casablanca, on to Algiers and Oran, where I was assigned to the 70th General Hospital.

After 1 month in South Africa, I was among a group of several Physical Therapists and Dietitians who were detached, flown across the Mediterranean, to Naples, Italy and there to join the 21st General Hospital, a reactivated Texas unit, with Washington University medical personnel from St. Louis, Missouri. Our quarters were located at the Sulphur Baths, a former location for Dictator Mussolini. In 10 months there were fierce battles, one of which was the long assault at Montecassino, outstanding surgical and hospital care, and rest periods (one at the Isle of Capri, and one week in Rome). The highlights of this trip were two visits to the Vatican, one of which Pope Pius XII laid his hand on my head and I was able to kiss his ring. As a result of this unexpected, vibrant meeting with the Pope, I wrote a 7 page letter home complete in every detail with the wondrous experience of that visit to Rome. To the day I die I shall never forget that experience. Fifty years later I found myself again in Rome, following trips to Fatima and Lourdes, to be present at an audience with Pope John Paul II. Again I found it overwhelming.

Since we were only 20 miles behind the front line, this 5,000 bed hospital, received patients from all the field hospitals in the area. There was now an assignment to move into France, and accordingly, via hospital ship, the unit sailed to Marseilles, France. The staging area was at Mirecourt, famous for violins. Several brand new buildings constructed by the Germans with French workers (who sabotaged much by filling underground pipes with cement whenever they had the opportunity), were abandoned. These were taken over by our outfit, who spent three months correcting the problems. We knew what it was like to be without heat, light and water during this time. Washing everything, hair, clothes and body out of a helmet of water was not an unknown. Our Kitchen was bombed besides, but since it was at night, no one was in the building. At one time I had an opportunity to go via train to Marseilles to meet with a friend who had arranged to get me to Lourdes. But it was not to be. All movement was shut down and I had to return via train from Marseilles to Mirecourt, mission unfulfilled. (However, I

had the chance to get to Lourdes and Fatima and Rome 40 years later, as noted above).

Following our honorable discharges from military services, and resuming civilian life, Gene met and married Margaret Schaefer, also as noted above). Their children, Kathie and Mary Jo, went to Holy Angels High School also, and then on to Wisconsin University at Madison. Kathie married Steve Palmer. They have one daughter, Ann. Mary Jo married Randolph Scoville. They have one son, Conrad. Incidentally the girls met their husbands in Madison.

Bob met and married Paulyne Cernicky. They also had two children, Jane and Bob, Jr. They attended Whitefish Bay High School, but Jane went to University of Kentucky, then Madison, BS, Medical College of Milwaukee, MS, and University of Illinois, PHD, while Bob spent his college years at University of Colorado, then received an advanced degree at University of Wisconsin.

I, Agnes, worked at American State Bank as a teller, just as a change from dietetics, always expecting to return to my profession. However, I was introduced to my husband, Norbert William Poch, on March 30 in 1947 through a mutual friend, Ida Stanish and her friend Germaine Neis. Then we were married that same year on August 14 (in those days, one could not be married on a Holy Day (August 15, our first choice). St. Thomas Aquinas Church with Father Shanahan as the Pastor was the setting for the 11:00 AM Mass, on a Thursday. Pauline Cernicky and my brother, Bob, were bridesmaid and best man. The ceremony was followed by a dinner at the Astor Hotel in downtown Milwaukee for about 50 people. Later that afternoon, we left for Chicago, and after Mass at Holy Name Cathedral on Friday, the Feast of the Assumption, we drove to the Blue Ridge Mts., for a two week vacation.

Apartments were very hard to find, so we stayed at the Knickerbocker Hotel for 1 week, on our return from our vacation, and then found a furnished apt. near Marquette University. This lasted 3 weeks, when a friend of my sister Marion, who was in real estate, found an apt. on 50th and North Ave. which was unfurnished, one bedroom, large living room, dinette, kitchen and bath. We knew we were pretty lucky and really appreciated our good fortune. Our happiness was further increased when our first son, Norbert Francis, was born on September 24, 1948. We managed in our little apt. and even made room for David Anthony who was born February 24, 1950. Two things stand out in that period. One was to see Norbert F. taking his first step around the rectangle coffee table shortly before his first birthday. The other was the wonder in his eyes when we brought David home for him, and David's beautiful eyes, as he lay in the basket and looked up at his brother. Now our apt. was really too small.

As Veterans, we applied for and were granted a two-bedroom Row House on W. Florist Ave., called Berryland. It was new and we really felt happy all over again. The extra bedroom was a bonus as the other rooms were practically the same size as the apt. No matter on September 14, 1951, Virginia Mary was born.

who was our first girl, and completely refuted her father's feeling that perhaps we would not be blest with a girl. We decided that a house should be our next step. My sister, Helen, was an angel and loaned us enough money to make a down-payment for a house we found in Whitefish Bay. It was an older brick home, 2 story, 3 bedroom, on Berkeley Blvd. While there our little family was further blessed by the birth of Lola Marian on December ****.

My husband, Norbert, meanwhile, changed jobs. From the Milwaukee Sentinel, he went to Loeffelholz Co. of Milwaukee. Simultaneously with working he attended Marquette University to obtain a degree in Accounting. Thus after graduation in 1951 he subsequently applied for Federal Civil Service status. He was accepted for employment as an auditor with the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture to work in their Chicago office. This necessitated a move from our lifelong residence of Milwaukee. Not wanting to move there -a big city -we found a large 4 bedroom home in Kenosha, Wisconsin. It was just one block from Lake Michigan, 411 - 68th Street, and in the boundaries of St. Mark's Parish. This all happened in the year 1955. We remained in Kenosha for almost five years, during which time Norbert F., David and Virginia all attended grade school at St. Marks. Lola, the beneficiary of learning from her older brothers and sister, was ready for pre-kindergarten, and was enrolled at St. Rose's, along with about 60 other little boys and girls. The nun in charge was very young and energetic, she had to be, as, except for time out for lunch, which an older nun supervised, she completely controlled the young group. Their learning even included manners and acceptable conduct at Holy day and Birthday Parties.

Here I began to work on weekends in Kenosha at St. Catherine' Hospital to supplement our finances and that was when Norbert could take care of the children. I was a therapeutic Dietitian and was doing a service for those who wanted a weekend free. Since Norbert had to do some traveling in his position, we coped with that although it was hard for him to be away and for us to be without him. Once, the four children and I took the Northwestern train from Kenosha and met him after work, in Chicago. The highlight was the train ride. We were expecting our fifth child by then, but it wasn't to be as this pregnancy ended with a miscarriage. By this time I was 41, so we were grateful that in nine years we had really been blessed. All the Baptisms, First Holy Communions, graduations and Confirmations were duly noted and celebrated with entire family gatherings -Joyous memories, busy and over-whelming as they sometimes were.

Norbert had an opportunity to transfer to the Forest Service Division of the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture based in Milwaukee. We were eager to return as it meant being back with our families again. So, in 1960, we decided to buy a house on the west side, as the total of ten years spent close to Lake Michigan were too cool and damp. We found a Lannon Stone house on 3604 N. 86th Street, in St. Margaret Mary Parish, with a good school - and, within walking distance. However, Norbert F. had to attend Mother of Good Counsel School on 70th and Burleigh, as that was the closest for the two top classes. Norbert and I had decided early on that, if possible, we would try to give all of our children a good

foundation in their faith by means of Catholic Education, and we have never regretted that decision.

Then in Milwaukee, I applied in Civil Service for a similar position at Milwaukee County Medical Center that I held in Kenosha. All the children were in school and we were able to enlist the supervision of an older mother of two children, the ages of our children, to be on hand after school, at our house. This was especially important when I later became the Chief Dietitian and Department Head at Milwaukee County Medical Center, with the responsibility of 150 employees, including 13 dietitians, 8 food service supervisors, 1 chef, 15 cooks, and the rest food service workers.

For every First Communion, Confirmation, Graduation and most Holy Days, there was a party with all the relatives or a few friends for Birthdays. Of course, the Baptisms were the starters for all the events, and nothing less than dinners would do. Marge and Gene would always host the Fourth of July picnic annually, so there were many, many happy get-togethers.

Norbert F. passed the required exam for entrance to Marquette University High School, followed by David. Virginia went to Holy Angels High School like her mother, while Lola attended two years when, to our surprise, the school was closed and she chose to finish at St. Pius coeducational school. It was very large, Lola seemed to lose interest, but hurried and graduated in a year and a half.

As parents, we were secretly opposed to Madison and Wisconsin University, because of the aura of Communism and the lack of Catholic influence. When both our boys settled for Marquette University, it fulfilled our desire for the Catholic influence in their lives, although we became aware of the rebellion that was occurring on so many campuses.