

Early Memories

By Kathryn Cubalo

I think I have already mentioned my earliest family memories from life in the John Beck house. So what I plan to record now are some of my early memories of my creative activities, which seem to be dominating my later life.

We Olson children had access to crayons, coloring books, paper, scissors and glue, so we always had activities to keep busy. I don't remember any specific time except when I was put to bed early and Sonny and Joyce were having fun coloring in the living room. How I wanted to be there, too!

In school, my happiest times were when we could make something. Once, we made a house out of a shoe box. We made little furniture out of cardboard and had wallpaper pieces and colored paper to decorate. This was a project I really enjoyed and completed. I already knew that I did a better job of creative things than most of my classmates.

In fifth or sixth grade we studied the history of the early colonies. The assignment was to keep a notebook and to illustrate to the best of our ability some of the scenes we could imagine. The picture I remember especially was a scene of the Pilgrims landing on the shore at Plymouth Rock. I didn't make the ocean blue like most of my friends, but tried to make waves washing against the rocky shore. I used several colors in the waves so they were not just plain white. I don't remember anyone complimenting my efforts, but I know it was an improvement on my earlier efforts at drawing.

One of the things I looked forward to in high school was art classes. I was allowed to take three semesters of art and I had three different teachers. They all thought I had talent. My first teacher gave me a picture to copy and some colored chalk (not pastels). She thought my copy was great, and I think I still have that picture someplace. I found it fairly easy to copy something, but doing my own compositions was harder. One time, I sat in class for two whole sessions, trying to get started at a story illustration. The teacher finally asked me "what was my problem!" I explained that I had the picture in my mind, but didn't know how to draw a figure. He was kind enough to get me started, and I learned another lesson. I could always look up a picture or drawing of something to get started. It's OK to copy as a learning experience. One time, the teacher talked a classmate into posing for us to draw his face. Some of our pictures were put on display. On Parents' Night, the teacher told my parents, "He really looks just like that!"

At that time, I was trying to think what I wanted to do with my life. The school nurse, Miss Lawson, was sure I should be a nurse (she had been a school nurse when my mother was in school); my history teacher, Mr. Bjorstad, who was also my counselor, knew that I loved history, so thought I should be a history teacher; my art teachers were sure that I should plan to teach art. What a dilemma! No one thought I should be a secretary, which seemed to be one of the choices open to women. I never got over 40 words a minute in typing class, much to my dismay. I wasn't used to getting poor marks in school! I once told Miss Lawson that I wanted to be a social worker so I could help all the poor people. She told me it was much too stressful an occupation. I guess she knew that I wasn't tough enough for the job.

Anyway, I chose teaching, and headed for Central Michigan for further education. My first art class there was a big disappointment. My teacher did not think I was wonderful. She liked modern art and did not have much admiration for my abilities in that regard. I decided I was not meant to be an artist and lost all confidence in my artistic abilities.

I soon realized that my parents could not afford to keep me in college so I switched to a two-year program so I could teach school and earn my own way. It was many years before I regained enough confidence to renew my interest in creating art.

In the next chapter, I will talk about my second life in art.

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