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My Friend Opal

—By Mary S. Redmond

Companionship



At my age, I have come to the point that I know I should expect it--but it still came as a shock on August 7, 1983, to learn that my long-time friend, Opal Koeninger LaForce, had died. I had spent the previous day with her, at our Stover School Reunion--and she had been, as always, vibrant and full of life.

The most wonderful thing about my recent association with Opal, as opposed to my long-time association, was that her memory was so much better than mine. More than a few times, as I worked on articles of reminiscence about life in our old community in the 1920's, I found myself reaching for the telephone to call Opal or dropping by her house for a visit. She'd been there, too--and, time after time, she recalled specifically what my mind could only generalize about. I remain in the most debt to her for the information she gave me for my articles on the blizzard of 1929, early-day telephones, and our 1920's pie suppers. But her influence can be felt, I realize now, in everything that I write.

Opal was a true Stover School community pioneer. She was born November 23, 1907, at Willow Point, Texas, and she moved by wagon with her family to our area in 1919. Her name then was Opal Morine Koeninger, and the Koeninger family was most durable stock. Their journey started on December 25, 1919, and, after traveling all day and all night, they arrived at their new land, four miles north of Marlow, Oklahoma, on the next day, December 26, 1919. Opal always said that the main thing she remembered about the journey was what they ate: sugar-cured ham they'd brought with them from Texas to their new home.

They stayed with relatives while they built their house--and it was tough work. Opal remembered the work with plow and horses that had to be done to clear away all that Oklahoma blackjack. But finally they were settled, and I first met Opal when she, along with one sister and two brothers, came to enroll at the Stover School. A friendship developed--and before long Opal was part of a large group of young people who used to come to our farm on

Sundays after the church services, which also were held at the Stover School.

Those Sundays remain among my dearest memories. One, deep in winter, stands out particularly. We'd all been sitting inside for quite a while, complaining that it was just too cold to do anything--when somebody suggested skating. And we skated, just down the hill on Buckhorn Creek. Nobody had more fun that day than Opal did.

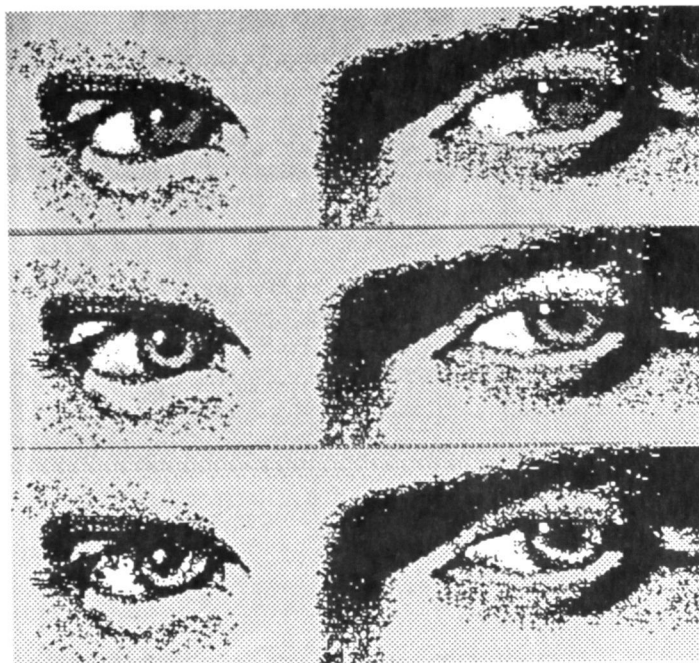
We grew up, of course, and Opal married Claude (Skeet) LaForce in June of 1927. They lived first in Chickasha--and I didn't see Opal very much for a few years. Finally, though, they moved closer, to Duncan, and we resumed our close relationship. By 1946, it seemed that much of our conversation had turned to memory: we were getting older. But what memories they were. Opal had attended school at Stover, and she had also joined our church during a revival that had been held there. The preacher had been Brother Scifres, and we never forgot him. Opal was baptized in the West Ward tank northwest of Marlow, and we never forgot that either. We had many shared experiences to recall.

There was reminiscing on August 6, 1983, too--a full, rich day of it. Opal had attended and enjoyed our first Stover School Reunion, held in 1982, but this one was special for her. At this reunion, she got to hear a lovely piece written by Mary Elizabeth Moore Houghton, Fort Worth, Texas, about W. N. Koeninger, her late brother.

Opal attended the reunion in the company of her other brother, Thurman, and her daughter, Jeannine. She was as happy as I had ever seen her, and that's just about what Jeannine said that she told her on the way home that evening. Opal died in her sleep that night.

Ironically, Opal's obituary and the article on the Stover School Reunion would run in the same issue of the same newspaper. Those who knew her describe her now, as they did when she was alive, with terms like "popular" and "hardworking" and sometimes even "the salt of the earth." She once described her earlier days to me by saying, "We worked hard, and we didn't have much." And all those things are true--with the possible exception of the last one. As I'm sure Opal knew, she had all her life, much more than material possessions. She had a lovely family, good friends, and the ability to give as she was still doing on that Saturday of our reunion.

I'll have the memory of Opal and, like the memories of good times we shared, that's to be treasured always. ☘



(MARY STOVER REDMOND, a free-lance writer, was reared on the family farm located four miles south of Rush Springs. She is the author of a book titled ADVENTURES IN THE FOUR-MILE STRIP: AN OKLAHOMA CHILDHOOD. "My Friend Opal" is her second work published in WESTVIEW.)

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