

# INTRODUCTION

A sense of discomfort and uneasiness overtakes me as I stand on the skeleton of what was once the sidewalk that ran in front of the A.N. Larson Store in Tenney, Minnesota. For as long as I have been working on this project to understand the Tenney that existed in 1928, I have had a wrenching desire to see and touch the A.N. Larson Store, the building that served as my grandfather's livelihood and my mother's childhood home.

As my mother and I stand on this overgrown sidewalk, she announces that as a young girl she roller skated on this spot, literally on this very hunk of concrete on which the soles of my Adidas are currently parked. Back and forth along the sidewalk that started at her stoop, young Helen Jo, with pigtail braids flying behind, would skate past the A.N. Larson Store, past the Louie Wittman Garage, past Cliff's Place, past the Winfield Scott home, past the post office, to the church at the end of the block and back, with pal Neppie Iler not far behind.

Now, only a short section of that sidewalk exists, going from nowhere to nowhere. It stands as a guardian of the empty lot on Main Street where the A.N. Larson Store once stood, a collection of broken chunks of concrete and grass, with the grass clearly having gained the upper hand. And the grass isn't looking well.

I think, with a lump in my throat, about a carefree young school girl who was to become my mother, navigating this section of once-smooth concrete on a pair of old strap-on metal roller skates. For heaven's sake, where has this lump in my throat come from, when my mother standing next to me doesn't even have one? Perhaps it's because she already has the picture formed in her memory and that picture isn't particularly pleasant. I have heard her say that there was a time when she was more than ready to leave Tenney, a dying town

that had long since seen its best years. I, on the other hand, have not had the benefit of seeing this little town in its prime. The Tenney Quilt has given me an unquenchable thirst to drink in the sights and sounds of Tenney when Tenney was good.

I feel a palpable, gut-wrenching desire to know and touch the A.N. Larson Store. How did it feel to walk into that store? How did it smell? Did Grandpa have a smile on his face for his customers, or a more serious, thoughtful look? How did he greet his customers and what did they chat about? What was amusing to him in the daily course of his work? What did Grandpa wear to the store? Did he respond immediately when Grandma banged on the stove pipe, indicating that it was time to come upstairs for dinner? Or did he dilly dally around a bit? Was he meticulous about the placement of canned goods on the shelves, and were the boots and work gloves lined up by size from small to extra large?

And what was Tenney *really* like in its prime? What was it like to wake up on a Tenney morning? Were dogs barking? Were people milling about on the street? Who were those people, and what activities filled their days? Was piano music wafting through the open door of the Tenney Church in preparation for the Sunday morning worship service? Were there clean clothes flapping in the breeze on Minnie Wittman's clothesline? Was the train whistle blowing? Were there sounds of children playing in the Tenney School yard? Who were the unmistakable personalities that gave Tenney its identity?

I want so badly to see it now and to have Tenney put her arm around my shoulder and share her secrets. All I can conjure up at this point is a broken up old sidewalk, a bunch of dilapidated buildings, a few stories, and some old photographs. And—the Tenney Quilt.

The sidewalk serves no purpose. The building—indeed the entire town—that this sidewalk served is long gone. There are no children in Tenney to roller skate. Its few inhabitants have no knowledge or association with the people who built Tenney from the ground up, danced in the Town Hall and drew their water from the town pump. They cannot even imagine a time when children's voices were heard in the school yard and services were held in the Tenney Church. They did not know A.N. Larson, and never had a beer at Cliff's Place. I

suppose I could be grateful that the A.N. Larson building was mercifully demolished before it could suffer the slow but sure degradation that has befallen the rest of Tenney's structures. Instead, I am a little ticked off that it is not where I want it to be.

Tenney stands eerily deserted and lonely today, the wind blowing through town with little to slow its progress. Doors in abandoned buildings hang from one rusty hinge, stuck in a half-open position, causing an occasional creaking sound as the wind accelerates or changes direction. A sway-backed mare that seems to be on the further side of middle age is tethered to a stake in what was once the backyard of the church parsonage, looking up from her afternoon snack with only casual interest. A stray cat emerges cautiously from the building that once housed the Klugman Store. I have a sense that people are looking out of their windows at me. It is way too quiet. This is how it has been for many, many years.

I am torn between a sense of uneasiness and an intense sense of belonging. I want to turn around and run away from the eeriness of it all, and at the same time I want to find a rake and a shovel and make amends with the damage that time, weather, and neglect have created. I take a picture of my mother on that sidewalk. I walk back and forth a few times on an imaginary route between the A.N. Larson Store and the Louie Wittman Garage. I spend some time silently studying that piece of sidewalk, forcing my mind to magically transform the broken pieces of concrete into something that would befit a carefree young girl's roller skating path. Occasionally, I find myself looking up and trying in vain to make the A.N. Larson Store materialize before my eyes.

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