

# WILLIAM AND MARY

## Their Lives and Times

By Frank Lyons



### CHAPTER FIVE

## THE MIDDLE YEARS TOGETHER (1936 to 1946)

**B**Y the early 1940's, Bill and Mary settled into a more routine and less stressful period of their lives. They had learned to cope with their large family and comfortably wear the mantle of parental authority. The children regarded Bill and Mary as the ultimate authority figures and assumed they had the power to make things right whenever required. They did not think a problem could arise which they could not handle. Bill and Mary had learned how to give adequate attention to each child to make them feel individually important and worthwhile.

The disastrous agricultural drought finally ended. World War II stimulated the economy thus ending the Great Depression. They fully settled into the family and community activities that would hold their interest and attention for the rest of their lives together.

Bill and Mary were members of the Democratic Party. They inherited their party affiliation from their families. Bill's uncle, Dick Lyons, and mother, Catherine, were active in the Democratic Party. Uncle Dick was the Chairman of the State Democratic Party. He was a leader in promoting legislation granting statehood to South Dakota and North Dakota and writing the South Dakota state constitution. The party had high confidence in Uncle Dick. It selected him as its delegate to go to Washington to meet with President Cleveland to discuss subjects of concern to South Dakota. Grandma Lyons was involved in local politics and served on the local school board. They were both strong, vocal partisans for causes espoused by the Democratic Party and issues beneficial to South Dakota.

Bill taught the children at an early age to memorize the names of key political officials, especially if they were Democrats. He was particularly pleased when they learned to recite the names of Democratic Governor, Tom Berry (a rancher) and President Franklin Roosevelt to visitors.

Farmers usually operated their farms on credit when they bought major supplies and livestock. In the fall Bill customarily put on his "going to town clothes" and set out to see his friend Jimmy Lloyd, president of the American State Bank. They first discussed rural agricultural markets, prices and predictions of future conditions. Bill then signed a bank note for the money he needed to buy feeder cattle for the season. The notes were written to fall due in the spring and early summer of the following year when the fattened cattle would be shipped to market. When Bill came home from the bank visits he was usually in an expansive mood and he liked to relate the details of his conversation with Jimmy Lloyd.

Farm credit could be an insidious taskmaster. When the economy and weather were stable, credit allowed for an expanded scale of operations and prosperity to farm families. When unforeseen and uncontrollable circumstances arose, it could be a demon and destroyer of years of accomplishments as happened to many people during the Great Depression.

Bill was a strong advocate and leader for the local and county 4-H clubs. 4-H clubs were for the purpose of teaching children farm-related subjects and developing self-reliance. The four H's stand for head, heart, hands and health. The boys clubs were built around projects for learning animal and crop husbandry. The girl's clubs focused on home economics projects. The boys were expected to raise animals and crops and keep comprehensive records of feed, costs and results. The girls were expected to raise gardens, can food, bake and sew clothing. In some instances the girls also raised livestock.

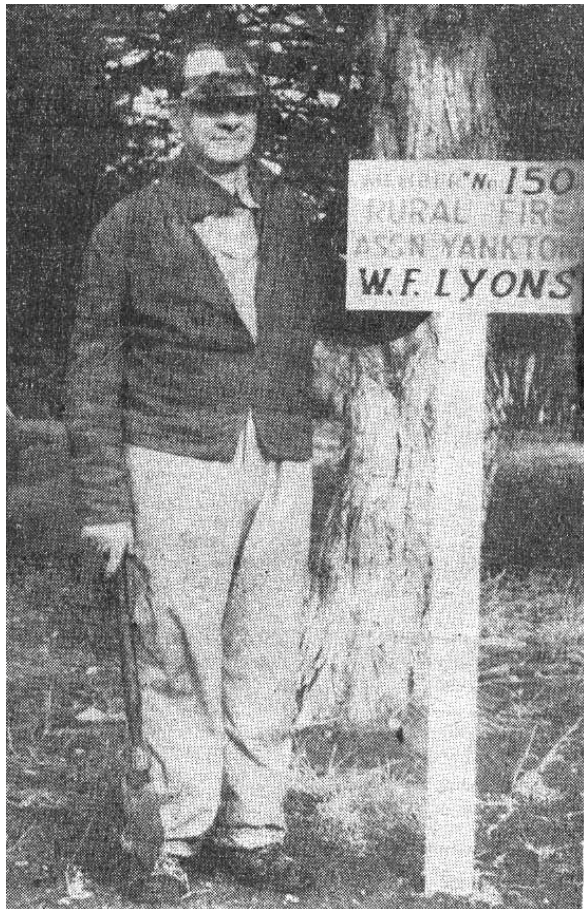


At the end of the summer the 4-H club projects were taken to county "Achievement Days" shows for judging and evaluation. The club members also attended animal and crop judging seminars. Sometime the winners then took their projects to the next step - the State Fair in

Huron. It was great fun to go to the State Fair to competitively show projects, meet other young people, and to sleep in the barracks provided for the fair exhibitors.

The Lyons boys usually undertook 4-H projects with Hereford (Whiteface) cattle. Whitefaces were beautiful animals with red bodies, white faces, wavy body hair and curly white tail hair. They were Bill's favorite breed. One of the items on the judge's checklist was grooming. The animal's bodies were washed and their hair curried and trimmed before shows. Tails were shampooed with the best available bathing products and curled. Hoofs and horns were polished and shined with a coat of linseed oil. Throughout the year, horns were weighted with lead so they would grow downward in a gentle, attractive curve. When animals become excited at the shows they are prone to nervous and vigorous "discharges" – often on their own fresh grooming or on nearby animals, equipment and show participants. What a mess!

Bill gave generously of his time and management talent for the affairs of the 4-H Clubs. He was active in constructing permanent buildings in Yankton for the summer Achievement Days meets. After Bill's death people often said to Mary, "It isn't the same without Bill Lyons overseeing the needs of the 4-H clubs."



Rural property was at severe risk due to lack of firefighting equipment and services. Bill was a leader in establishing a private subscription, Rural Volunteer Fire Cooperative for Yankton County. A subscription, at a cost of \$500 to the Fire Cooperative, gave the member rights to the use of a fire truck, equipment and fire fighting services when a fire occurred. A dilemma, that was never fully resolved, was whether or not the Fire Cooperative should put out fires on the property of non-subscribers. At a later time the county was divided into numerical coordinates to better define the location of fires when calls were made to the Fire Cooperative - but it was hard to break the old ways. Pat called to report a tractor fire and gave his newly assigned coordinates. After a long, uncertain silence by the dispatcher Pat finally said, "The tractor is on fire in the field east of the Willowdale School." The dispatcher then knew exactly where to send the fire truck.

Bill dreaded uncontrolled fires because he knew how devastating they could be to remote farms in areas where there was no fire

protection service. He knew of his brother, Dennis' terrifying experience during a prairie fire as he tried to save his livestock and then huddled with his family in his tornado cellar while the fire roared and rampaged over his ranch. During the fire, sixty-five neighborhood horses crowded against a barbed wire fence and died. Bill never went to bed in the evening when a fire had been burning during the day until he first went outside for a last minute check to ensure that the fire was extinguished.

Francis vividly remembers riding along a country rode with his aunt, Ann Lyons, when they came upon a rural house on fire. He recalls the owner, Mrs. Hollenbeck, frantically waving them down with a dishtowel. Nothing could be done to help her as they watched her family's house burn to the ground. Even though Francis was only five years old he understood that a terrible thing had happened and he knew the family was in for a tough time.

Bill's social consciousness and volunteerism for the 4-H Clubs, the school board, and the fire department instilled in his children an example and an incentive for them to volunteer for community service. The reason for Bill's patronage of certain down-at-the-heels businesses and hiring of marginal people became clear to the children when they realized what a soft spot Bill had for the underdogs.

A hazard in the neighborhood between the James and Missouri Rivers was periodic flooding. The floods resulted from fast melting upriver snow and spring rains combined with ice jams. The Lyons farm and buildings were on a slightly higher elevation from the surrounding farmland so there was seldom a "flood scare". However, in 1952 a major flood did develop that threatened the farm. Bill and Mary decided that the rapidly mounting flood risk must be dealt with. They evacuated all of the livestock, put the household goods and furniture upstairs and abandoned the farm. By that time the water had completely surrounded the farm, so Bill, Mary and Kilroy, the dog, left in a boat and motored down the flooded roads to the higher elevations of Yankton. The children had left earlier. The water flooded the farmland and lapped at the Lyons house yard perimeter but did not enter the house. With hindsight it seemed like an adventure, but to the neighbors who had to clean up the devastation in their homes, it was a sad and costly event. The wood in flooded houses becomes warped and can never be properly restored.

The U.S. Corp of Engineers built a series of massive earthen dams across the Missouri River in South Dakota, North Dakota and Montana in the 1950's. These dams provided multiple benefits of electricity generation, recreation facilities, wildlife refuges, and flood control. They were costly to build but they provided an economic and recreational boon to the communities that they served. Since the completion of the dam projections there have been no more serious floods in the Yankton community.

The building of the Missouri River dams also provided jobs. Gene and Jack Lyons worked as construction laborers on the Gavin's Point dam which created the beautiful Lewis and Clark Lake a few miles west of Yankton. The work was hard backbreaking labor. When the

boys came home from work they were dirty and brown as shoe leather from the summer sun and so tired they could sleep on the edge of a two by four. The jobs paid well. The money provided a helpful contribution to their college education funds. After the dam was built it continued to provide maintenance and service jobs in the community.

When each of the Lyons children turned 13 years old, they opened personal checking accounts funded with enough cash for maintaining a modest balance. Bill and Mary believed the use of checking accounts would teach thrift and money management skills. Each child was expected to pay his or her own personal bills from the account. No specific amount of money was established for replenishing the accounts. It was understood that the money was to be used prudently - and it always was. Some of the town merchants were not accustomed to such young children having checking accounts. If any of them challenged the checks they got a "derisive snort" and, if necessary, a call from Mary. Occasionally one of the children erred in their check book balance arithmetic. Jimmy Lloyd, the bank President would call Bill and say, "Drop in sometime so we can look at the child's account." A Saturday afternoon ritual in the late summer and fall was the Yankton livestock auctions. Bill frequented the auctions to buy partially grown feeder cattle that had just been shipped in from the open range ranches in the west. He bought them to grow to marketable size and to fatten them in his feedlots. He fed them corn, hay and silage (chopped whole corn stalks). The bidders at the auction sat on wooden benches in an amphitheater arrangement surrounding a roped ring where cattle were brought in for viewing and bidding. Hogs and sheep were also sold. Behind the ring on a raised platform sat the auctioneers in their broad brimmed Stetson hats as they warbled their colorful chants and exhorted the bidders to pay the highest possible prices. The auctioneers typically extolled the livestock for having more quality and value than most of the bidders were able to discern. A successful auctioneer was good at bantering with the bidders and individually acknowledging their presence. Bidding was done discretely. The attendees seldom saw another bidder make a bid. The only evidence of a bid was a minimal body signal such as a wink or the flick of a finger. The auctioneer and his staff watched active bidders like hawks to identify the bids. The clerks, who recorded sales, and sometimes bank representatives, also sat on the platform. A verbal bid was considered to be a binding contract. It was a serious matter for someone to bid and then renege or dispute the purchase.

The livestock auctions were also a place for socializing. Some people came just to "hang out." A number of truck owners also came to the auctions in hopes of being hired to transport the newly purchased livestock to the farms of the new owners. A few women attended the auctions but it was mostly the domain of men. Livestock auctions were a good place to smoke, chew tobacco, spit and exchange "he-man banter." On the other hand, the auctions were a place of dignity and seriousness where the selling prices could determine the profitability for the year for the livestock sellers. It also would set the basis for profitability for the next year for the buyers.

The principle livestock auction business in Yankton was owned by a pair of short, sage brothers named Hans and Nils Callisen. They were Danish immigrants and Bill's good friends. Bill valued their advice – and also the occasional sharing of their whisky that was kept in a well-disguised cache in their office. The whiskey was quietly brought out after the auctions were concluded and as worthwhile business transactions were completed. The Callisen brothers were highly energetic. Often after an auction closed late in the evening one of them would stretch out to sleep in the back seat of a car and instruct a hired hand to drive them 450 miles through the night to a western livestock center where he would conduct more business the next morning with the ranchers. The Callisen brothers also operated farms.

In the midsummer when business was slow, the Callisen brothers sometimes went by boat back to their childhood homes in Denmark for visits. They always took a new Nash car with them to provide transportation when they arrived in Copenhagen.

Bill liked to load the family in the Dodge car on warm summer evenings after supper for a "trip around the block" to look at the crops and neighboring farmsteads. While driving the car, Bill sang a song that opened with the line, "When evening shadows softly fade away....." He and Mary enjoyed a special communion between them during these rides. Popular songs of the day were Bing Crosby's *White Christmas* (which always made Mary cry); *WPA Blues*, *One O'clock Jump*; *Blueberry Hill*; and *The Gangs All Here*. People were going to movies such as, *The Philadelphia Story* - starring Katherine Hepburn; *Casablanca* - a classic with Humphrey Bogart; and *Gaslight*, - a Victorian melodrama with Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman. *The Grapes of Wrath* - adapted from a book written by John Steinbeck captured the desperation of the depression as an impoverished "Okie" farm family fled their drought-plagued home in Oklahoma to head for the "promised land" in California. The futility of the situation is captured by a line from "Muley" who said he was left behind to "watch over things in Oklahoma 'til the folks come back from California" He then wistfully added, "But I know they ain't never comin' back!"

Attending the movies was a weekly ritual for many people. On the hottest days of summer, movie attendance skyrocketed because the theaters were the only place in town with air-conditioning. An effective drawing card for attracting movie attendance in mid-week was a drawing for a cash prize. The ceilings and walls of many of the "moving picture emporiums" were encrusted with plaster cupids, doves, cavorting nymphs, ripe roses, soaring Corinthian columns and clouds. The theater's decorators were apparently inspired by Viennese opera theaters. Other songs and movies of the day are related to World War II. Some of them are listed in the next chapter on the war.

When the Lyons children started to grow up it became obvious that they were more strongly influenced in their appearance by the Lyons' genes rather than the Donohoe's. All of them, with the possible exception of the twins, had similar facial appearances that recalled the looks of the Lyons predecessors. They all had medium builds rather than the tall, more

powerful builds of most of the Donohoes. The hereditary Lyons family appearance continued on into the future for at least one more generation. Comparison of a picture of Bill when he was twenty to a picture of John Lyons, Francis' son, at the same age shows a startling similarity that makes it almost impossible to distinguish one from the other. The personalities of the Lyons siblings were varied. Frank's late wife, Rita, observed after she became acquainted with the family, "I cannot see any similarity whatsoever, other than physical, among the Lyons siblings. They range from quiet and reserved to extrovert; from artistic to scientific; from taciturn to talkative; and from spiritual to worldly. "

At the end of the period covered by this chapter the "big kids" were coming to the mid-point of their teen-age years. The "little kids" would be teenagers in a few more years.