

Note: My husband and I have lived in Mankato three years,  
but had not experienced the city fireworks display.

**Fourth of July 2019** Deb Fitzloff

It is a warm calm evening across the city of Mankato.  
Earlier in the day we had purchased a pack of super size sparklers.  
We fire them up at dusk . . . swirling them around in the air.  
Higher in the sky a sliver of moon . . . and in the grasses below, fireflies . . . offer their  
own silent light show.  
Energized, primed for more, we hop in the car for a drive around Mankato.  
For now it is dark. It is nearly 9:30.

Traveling down Warren we begin to notice on the sidewalks a few people walking . . .  
and then in groups and families with chairs and children in tow.

Taking a right on 2nd Street, now, many more pedestrians, and kids on bikes and  
skateboards. It is slow going with the traffic and darkness . . . and folks crossing in front  
of us. We realize everyone is navigating toward the river.  
And every random parking space and lot is filled . . . or filling up fast. This must be BIG!

At Mulberry we discover the bridge, all the lanes, are CLOSED to traffic. And the bridge  
deck has become like a park . . . a gathering spot!

We circle the CoffeeHag Block and head south on Riverfront . . . people have found  
viewing locations in the higher levels of the parking ramps, side by side dark silhouettes!  
At the YMCA we head back taking 169 over the river and toward N. Mankato. The exit  
ramp to Belgrade is closed. This time we are not surprised. Along 169 the top of the levy  
is full of people set up on the bike path for a good view. And once again, CARS. Parked.  
Everywhere below.

Glancing across the river at Mankato, we catch random fireworks silently blossoming  
above the hilly dark landscape.

We exit onto Highway 14 East and then South Victory heading for home.  
It has been an amazing display. Of people. Of holiday. Of Anticipation.  
We pull in the garage just at 10:00 and walk into the house mid booms and sizzles as  
Mankato's annual 4th of July show begins.

We step out on our bedroom balcony overlooking Glenwood Avenue and the city. We  
see the very tops of the highest fireworks through the trees.  
And hear other smaller celebrations nearby. And now and then, the rapid chatter of a  
string of fire crackers.

And in the pause, from the woods just below us, a barred owl hoots.  
Wonderful. Rich. Light and sound, celebrating life!

## NEVER SO HAPPY TO SEE A PAIR OF OLD SHOES

Jan Prehn

Growing up in Radcliffe, IA, a town of 700, the Iowa State Fair was a big deal to a young girl about 7 or 8. During the forties, however, people stayed away from crowds because of the fear of contracting polio.

I could barely contain my excitement when I learned we would be going to the State Fair. My mother had made me a red and white striped skirt and midriff, sleeveless top to match in white, trimmed in the red and white striped material. On the matching top she had sewn a letter J. out of the striped material. I thought it would be the perfect thing to wear to the State Fair.

The State Fair occurs in August in Iowa and I had already done some shopping for school clothes. I was thrilled with the purchase of red penny loafers. Of course, I expected to wear my new shoes to the fair especially since they were a perfect match for my skirt and top. My mother advised me that we would be doing a lot of walking and wearing new shoes would not be the best idea. That made no sense to me at all. I persisted with my request and she finally relented.

She was right. There were acres of sights and lots of walking. When my feet began to hurt I did not want to tell my mother. After all, she had warned me and I had begged to wear them. I did get some rest when my parents and the parents of the other family enjoying the fair with us decided to go into a very large tent to see Sally Rand and the Fan Dancers. Children were not allowed. We were given strict instructions to wait outside. I was glad to be able to rest my feet. It was fun just staring at the big pictures advertising the show and watch the people coming and going. I thought with rest, my feet would be fine again. Sad but true, they still hurt after resting.

I put my feet out of my mind when I became enthralled with the stand selling little live chameleons. The man was explaining how chameleons could change their color to match the environment around them. I was fascinated. Each chameleon had a little leash with a safety pin on the end. You could pin it on your lapel and the little creature could walk around on your shoulder on the end of the short leash. I decided, of all the souvenirs available, taking this little live creature home with me would be the most interesting and my parents allowed me to purchase one and pin it on me. I began thinking what I would name it. The chameleon kept me occupied for quite some time but I was slowing down in walking. My feet still hurt. I did not say a word but my mom could tell. She did not say anything until we gathered for our picnic lunch. She had me close my eyes and hold out my hands and there in a little bag were my old shoes. I was never so happy to see a pair of old shoes. Now when I hear the sayings about fitting like an old shoe I am reminded of my Iowa State Fair experience. I thanked my mom for

bringing my old shoes and put them on immediately. The rest of the day I could enjoy the fair in comfort with my new little pet riding around on my shoulder with me.

When we got home that evening I began working on providing the proper home as instructed by the salesman at the fair. A little dish of water was included in the box I had set up. The next morning when I went to check on my new little pet I was devastated to find it dead. Some tears were shed. The only explanation we could come up with was that the cotton leash shrunk from getting wet and choked the poor thing. We had a proper burial in the back yard. Much to my mom's embarrassment, as I told about my State Fair adventure and the death of my chameleon I also told our friends and neighbors about the Sally Rand show my parents saw. I can never recall the experience of receiving my well worn, old shoes without being reminded of one of my favorite poems from childhood titled:

### CHOOSING SHOES

NEW SHOES, NEW SHOES,  
RED AND PINK AND BLUE SHOES,  
TELL ME, WHAT WOULD YOU CHOOSE  
IF THEY'D LET YOU BUY?

BUCKLE SHOES, BOW SHOES  
PRETTY POINTY-TOE SHOES,  
SNAPPY,CAPPY LOW SHOES  
LET'S HAVE SOME TO TRY

BRIGHT SHOES,WHITE SHOES,  
DANDY -DANCE BY NIGHT SHOES  
PERHAPS A LITTLE TIGHT SHOES,  
LIKE SOME? SO WOULD I.

BUT  
FLAT SHOES, FAT SHOES,  
STUMP -ALONG-LIKE THAT SHOES  
WIPE THEM ON THE MAT SHOES  
THAT'S THE SORT THEY'LL BUY.

Author Unknown

## Mouse Encounters

Karen Verburg Memoir

(The late 1940's in a Dakota Plains country school grades 1-8)

I spent one winter as a trapper. When the trapping season was announced, our little band from Sunnyside Country School went home in anticipation of finding a trap or tow. I think my brother Jerry and I found two traps we shared. Pelts were worth five cents that year. Five cents then would buy a Hershey candy bar. Or whatever kind you wanted. That meant if you had a successful night you could get TWO candy bars from one night's trapping. We were very competitive and not always so nice to each other. We each knew the best places to have our trap. We did not have kindly thoughts toward each other if our trap was not one of the traps that held the stiff little body.

I am quite sure when Miss Kayser went to teachers' training one of her methods class had a section on how teachers were to act if they encountered a mouse in the classroom. Miss Kayser must have learned her part very well when the teachers-to-be practiced that lesson. A little furry creature would come under the door, and then bolt across the classroom. Miss Kayser would immediately rise to the occasion---up on her chair or desk and scream. Miss Kayser had an ingenious solution. She would pay five cents for each mouse we trapped. Part of the bargain was that we had to empty the trap outside. When the trapping was slim inside, a few of us had the brilliant idea of putting our traps outside in the outhouses. These yielded success every night! However, then Miss Kayser was unwilling to reward our services.

At home I had two intimate encounters with a mouse. After Dad finished off the upstairs, we kids slept up there. We actually were in the attic as the house was only a story and a half. There was a small 3-foot-by-3-foot opening above the pantry with a stepladder set upon the base cupboards. The house was not insulated and it was very cold up there. The kitchen below was heated by a cook stove. By morning the fire would be out.

Mama had taken a pair of long underwear and dyed them bright pink. I wore those and snuggled down in a big pile of quilts. One night I woke to discover I was sharing my bed with a mouse. It drew near to my warmth. I reached down until I felt the furry body, flung him out, turned over and went back to sleep. That mouse survived the experience for it wasn't about the next morning. But it never returned.

There was a period of time we kept sacks of chicken feed out in the garage. Mama had a large empty tin can down in the sack to scoop up the feed. I was doing chores, and reached down in the sack to get some feed. The surprised mouse ran up into my parka sleeve. When it reached the middle of my forearm, I grabbed the unfamiliar bump in my parka sleeve and squeezed. That mouse did not survive the experience.

## Happiness in Unprecedented Times

By Laura Bealey

Inspired by a recent survey that found only 14% of us said we are “really happy,” I decided to explore where I could land in the survey during these “unprecedented times.” Of course, happiness varies with the influences of our environment, especially those things that happen to us, such as the weather and our immediate circumstance, COVID-19. So, how in these days of “unprecedented times” do I stretch and expand the boundaries in order to find happiness in new ways and in new places?

Last February, after many warm and sunny days vacationing in Florida and Arizona, we were happily preparing for our Costa Rican adventure. This was a much-anticipated trip to explore the rain forest, sea turtles, butterflies, birds, new foods, new culture and so much yet unknown. My primary concern last February was taking the right clothes and gear to be comfortable in the Costa Rican climate. Those days seem light years away now. It is interesting to reflect upon my changes in my awareness after we returned to the U.S. at the end of February.

As March turned into April, I can't identify my happiness level because so much energy was expended on reacting to the unfamiliar and searching for the best ways to react to so much unknown. We returned to Minnesota early in March because my grandson was going to be delivered on March 19. Baby Milo's birth was to be a celebration of great joy, but joy became wrapped into my daughter's scary trip to the hospital for the only medical procedure allowed, Cesarean sections. Ariana's doctor was over the age of 60, so she found out he wasn't allowed in the hospital because of his age. Ariana and Eric were met at the hospital door by a hazmat team, as Ariana described it. The maternity ward was silent and empty except for a few staff and a few other very nervous and scared parents-to-be. We were all scared. I stayed with my not quite 2-year-old granddaughter, Orla, during Milo's birth. That's the last time I hugged her. We were all receiving unfamiliar messages from the old life as it collided with the new “unprecedented times.”

As the former morphed into the current, no one knew what to expect next. What could keep feelings of being “very happy” alive when so much was out of balance? Last March and April, I was bottling and storing water, freezing bread, ordering garden seeds on Amazon, poring over recipes for hand sanitizer and watching all the calendar's upcoming events be cancelled – not rescheduled, but cancelled. Our April 17 tickets to MSU's “Mamma Mia” are still hanging on our bulletin board; still waiting to provide a wonderful evening of entertainment shared with others in our community. Happiness seemed to have taken a back seat to uncertainty – a back seat to confusion – a back seat to concern. It had become difficult to find lightness with so much heavy unknown filling the days.

Though the unknown still looms large, today we know a lot more about COVID-19 than we did six months ago. We are now seasoned stay-at-homers, we are social distancers and we are all masked up! We enjoy ourselves out of doors and we know that fresh air is healthy. I know my own happiness doesn't just come skipping down the road of life anymore, without me even paying attention. Like the stages of grief, I have moved into the acceptance stage (on most days) with less time spent fighting the pandemic's restrictions to figuring out how to carve out the most joy in the here and now: golfing, gardening, boating, exploratory car drives, baking, Memoirs, porch visits, Marco Polo videos, books, Netflix, and so on. It's been fun to find creative ways to be with other people safely. Even the State Fair found a way to bring people a shared food experience to address Pronto Pup and cheese curd withdrawal!

I know full well that I am beyond blessed with security, a safe home, an income, food, healthy friends and family and a life partner. I should never take these things for granted, though sometimes I do. Still, I'm trying to be intentional in finding my happiness and remaining in the survey's 14% of "very happy" people. Of paramount importance is to be part of other people's happiness and to have meaningful contact with others. Our current predicament requires all of us to commit to the "greater happiness" as well as the "greater good," and to carve happiness out of each day. It is a priceless gift to be happy and to share happiness with others in these "unprecedented times."

My parting message is don't forget to vote in November, and let's hope for tremendous happiness on November 4.

## The Old Lady

by

Linda Good

July 10, 2017

I overheard him say, “Look at the old lady,” as he splashed in the water at Hiniker Pond with his sister. I kind of chuckled to myself as he said this, but then it occurred to me that he was talking about me. He had probably based his assessment of me on my gray hair, because he couldn’t see much more of me in the water. I had not thought of it before, but I am a bit of an anomaly at Hiniker Pond.

If a painter were to come represent the scene at Hiniker Pond, the picture would show a grassy hillside descending to a sandy beach. At the top of the grassy hill there would be picnic tables with families or older people sitting around these tables looking at the pond and visiting with one another. There would be people sunning on towels or blankets near the water, checking their phones, and sipping on a beverage or reading a book. The small children might be sitting on the shore with their sand toys, contenting themselves with digging up the sand. The water in the buoyed, designated swim area of the beach, would be peopled with little people and a few parents supervising them. The babies and toddlers would be near shore with their floaties on their arms; they might be sitting in the shallow water or toddling out to a parent. The young children would be splashing, diving under water, having contests to see how long they could hold their breath under water, and perhaps playing with a ball or inflated water toys. Beyond the young children, outside the buoyed area, where the water is deeper, the teenage boys would be found throwing footballs back and forth. There might also be some teenage girls sunning themselves on floaties in close proximity to one another and the boys. Occasionally, the teenage boys might challenge one another to swim across the pond. In the deeper water, approaching the middle of the pond, one might see the older college kids on their floaties, sometimes on floaties large enough to accommodate several adults, often with a can of some beverage in hand. Occasionally there might be people in kayaks or on stand-up boards traversing the width of the pond. But, if one is watching closely, an old lady might be seen swimming around the perimeter of the pond.

So, seeing an old lady in the water was a novelty to these children. “How does she do that?” the boy said, as he watched me doing my end-of-routine surface level sit-ups as I come into shore. As I made my way under the rope for the buoys and headed into the swim area, he addressed me directly: “Hey, old lady,” he said.

“Well, I am old, and I hope that I am a lady, but it is more polite to call me a Grandma because I am a grandma and a great grandma.” His mother, standing in the shallow water said: “I’m sorry. He has no filter.” I replied, “That’s OK. I know that young

children say what they see and can be brutally honest at times.” The mother apologized again.

I wish that I had been more quick-witted. I could have asked the children if I was the Old Lady who swallowed a fly or the Old Lady who lived in a shoe. Nursery rhymes do not do justice to senior citizens. I wish I had stayed a bit longer and played with them, having them jump off my shoulders like I used to have my grandchildren do when they were small. But, I had finished my hour-long swim and had errands to do before I came home, so I left the water with thoughts of my being the only old lady in the pond.

Chicago Southside 1957

Each Sunday afternoon  
Emma visits her grandmother.

Both 10 years, we are about the same height.  
Emma has straight blond hair and blue eyes.  
My hair is brown and curly.  
I also have blue eyes.

For months,  
We share stories,  
Read aloud Nancy Drew mysteries,  
Cut out paperdolls, or  
Play jacks on her grandma's front porch.

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The Sunday after Easter  
I ring the doorbell

Wait a while.

Slowly the front door opens.

Emma, latches the screen and says:

"I can't play with you anymore  
—You killed Christ."

The door shuts.

## Diversity Presentation: Get to Know Your Somali Neighbors

You walk into the hotel and join 200 other white, mostly female social service professionals. Farms and small towns surround this city of 50,000 people.

Sitting in rows of chairs,  
You face the middle aged Somali speaker.  
He shares cultural and religious anecdotes.

Someone asks: "What would it take to bring peace to the world?"

He responds, "If there were no Jews!"

You hold your breath

Hope someone will respond.

There is silence,

No embarrassment

No surprise.

After the talk,  
You approach the speaker,  
Ask about his comment.

He says: "Oh, you must be Jewish,"  
He quickly changes the subject.