

Margaret Richards Thiessen's Story

Lorain OH Tornado

June 28, 1924

The Ray Richards family from Columbus, Ohio, arrived in Lorain, Ohio, for a weekend visit with Ray's sister, Margaret (Richards) Van Deusen, and her family that Saturday, June 28, 1924, looking forward to the weekend family reunion. "Aunt Ruth," another Richards sibling, joined the two families, unaware of the tragedy soon to unfold.

But as Margaret Van Deusen was preparing dinner for her family guests that Saturday, her brother Ray noticed the sky darkening and a storm brewing, noting he was glad they weren't still on the road. But his brother-in-law, attorney C. E. Van Deusen, called out in alarm, "Everyone! Go to the basement!" The families rushed for the basement stairs—all except 13-year-old Margaret Richards, whose nose was buried in a book. As adults and children rushed for safety, the house at 1128 Fifth Street seemed to explode as the tornado ripped through it at 5:14 p.m. Caught on the basement stairs, *every other person* was struck and killed by falling floor joists—who just happened to be four members of our mom's family: her father Ray (41), her mother Grace (a day shy of her 39th birthday) and her two younger siblings, Leonard (11) and little Lois (6). The injured, dying, and dead lay trapped in the basement. Margaret Van Deusen, injured but still alive, lay with her brother Ray's body across her until rescuers arrived many hours later. Young Dick Van Deusen (13) said his cousin Leonard "suffocated" from falling plaster. There was also a fifth fatality—Dick's little brother, three-year-old Wilbur Van Deusen.

What happened to young teenager Margaret Richards? The family story is that she was lying on the living room couch reading and did not respond immediately to the urgent warning to run for the basement. The second story collapsed, but Margaret was probably saved by the back of the couch which held off the timbers that would have crushed her. Another story says she hid under the piano. (Both might be true!) After the tornado passed, she crawled out and ran outside to get help, but it was chaos outside with everyone trying to find out the fate of their own families. Her cousin Dick and his mother and father suffered broken and fractured bones, but it was almost midnight before rescuers could get them out of the basement and to medical help.

It is painful to imagine what young Margaret suffered emotionally, realizing her entire immediate family had been killed and she was now an orphan—a young teenager who had just finished 8th grade. But her extended family rallied. Her mother's unmarried sister, Gladys Capell, and her maternal grandparents moved into the Richards family home in Columbus to raise her.

As Margaret's children, we never knew our grandparents, Ray and Grace, or our mother's siblings, Leonard and Lois, who would have been our uncle and aunt. The Capell grandparents died before we were born, but "Great-aunt Gladys," who raised our mother, became the only grandmother we ever knew, and she fulfilled that role and was beloved by us as if she was truly our grandmother.

Our mother graduated from high school in 1928, then graduated *suma cum laude* from Wheaton College in Wheaton, IL, in 1932. Living at home to help care for her aging maternal grandparents, she spent three summers taking education and library science courses at Ohio State. (Years later she earned credits at the University of Washington and Seattle Pacific College and received a teacher-librarian certificate.) In 1935, she married Isaac Thiessen, a fellow Wheaton student, and they spent their married life dedicated to Christian schools as educators and administrators. Even though we four children were aware that our mother had survived the Lorain Tornado, she almost never talked about it. Most of what we know we learned from other relatives, especially her cousin Dick (Richard) Van Deusen, who also survived that day and told stories firsthand.

The Mother we knew was rather quiet, thoughtful, dedicated to her family and her work, generally good-natured, a person of faith and steadfast even in the face of life's challenges and disappointments. However, we rarely—maybe never—saw our mother cry. Even when she lost her beloved husband, our dad, in a car accident, she lamented, "Why can't I cry?"

As far as we know, our mother never got "help" for the trauma she had experienced. After our father died, only then did she join a "grief group" and keep a journal of her thoughts and feelings. After her death, her journal revealed a story we'd never heard before: On the morning of the funeral for her parents and siblings, young Margaret came downstairs and saw all four caskets lined up in the living room of their home in Columbus. This stark reminder of her loss was too much. She crawled into the coat closet and wept. However, that time of weeping

in the closet on the day of her family's funeral may have been the last time she was able to cry.

—compiled by Margaret Richards Thiessen's children (2024)

Margaret (Pegge) Saylor—deceased

David Ray Thiessen

Neta Thiessen Jackson

Lois Thiessen Love