

Looking Back: A Perspective on growing up in the small town of Tuttle, ND

Submitted By Burt Riskedahl on October 26, 2021

I was born in the Bismarck Hospital on September 8, 1940. In that year, the population of Tuttle was 357, as reported by NDSU census data for ND communities. Twenty years later, at the end of my growing up years the population had declined to 255. After subsequent decades of steady population decline, the reported population of Tuttle in 2021 was 81 residents.

Prior to the economically hard times of the 1930s and prior to the stock market crash of 1929 economic activity in the city had reached its peak. There were two banks functioning, a city newspaper and a collection of viable businesses that did not survive the dustbowl years of the 1930s. However, in the decades of the 1940s and 1950s which I will write about, main street of Tuttle was lined with bustling business activity. During most of my growing up years the town had three grocery stores, two or three cafes, three bars, two creameries, two grain elevators, two implement dealers, a Chevrolet dealership, a lumber yard, blacksmith shop, shoe and harness repair shop, hardware store, hotel, barber shop/drug store, meat market, bulk gas and oil distributor, propane delivery business, movie theater)(later replaced by a community activity center that hosted public dances and other community events) and two or three gas stations and auto and farm equipment repair shops. There were three protestant churches and a small Catholic Church that was served on a part time basis by an out-of-town priest. There was an active Lions Club and a Wildlife (hunting and fishing) organization. Amateur basketball and baseball teams were fielded in the late 40s and throughout the 50s, providing weekend games during the winter and the summer baseball season. The Tuttle School District provided grades 1 through 12 educations, with many of the high school and later elementary students as well, being bused into town from the surrounding farming community. My recollection is that by the time I completed high school in 1958 most of the one room rural schools had closed and children living outside of Tuttle were being bused to the central school, which had been expanded with a major addition in 1959.

Much of the cohesiveness and 'community spirit' was centered around the school system. Sporting events and other activities such as play productions drew many spectators. For most of my school years, Basketball was the principal sport, but there was several years an effort was made to field a football team and track and field became a major sport that thrived in the 1960's and beyond.

The operation of the Tuttle School System was quite unique by comparison with school staffing patterns currently. Four elementary teachers represented the total staff working with all the elementary students. The high school staff was also four, including the Superintendent, Prof. Petersen, who also taught at least two courses, with other teachers having coaching and music programming in addition. There were no auxiliary staff, special ed. or other support staff to deal with special needs and no assistants with the classroom teachers. Prof's career in Tuttle was at or near the 40 year mark I believe, when he retired in the 1960s. Although the curriculum offerings were necessarily limited because of the limited number of instructors, the quality of the education possible in the Tuttle System was good.

Through the years I have often mentioned to people I have met or worked with, that I have no regrets about growing up in a small town. Having lived in larger cities for the most part in my adult life, I feel there was something special about the culture of Tuttle. To start with, everybody in town (almost) knew everyone else. Beyond knowing all the kids in town, the adults felt some responsibility, at some level, to care about and protect the young people. The 'community spirit' factor meant that the whole town was excited if the teams were winning, and loyal to the teams when they experienced defeat as well. My years as a basketball player were wonderful because of a group of athletes and concerned coaches that made up the athletic culture of the school. We were 'winners,' by winning the district tournament three of the four years I was playing on the high school team. This success that all our team members felt, was uplifting and gratifying and confidence building. I was fortunate also that during my years in the high school band, which actually started when I was in 7th grade, the instruction and leadership in the music dept. was strong. One of my high school years, with Mr. Heppner as Director, our band achieved a 'Highly Superior' rating, something that represented a major achievement because this was a state event at which most of the bands were from larger school systems than ours. Experiences like these generated enthusiasm and spirit in the community and at a very meaningful level, those successes were a part of forming the person I was to become in life. As young kids, we thought people like Prof. and Lone Goldsmith were so strict, so fussy about achievement and doing things correctly. It was only as we grew older, perhaps were even adults, before realizing the importance of people in those positions having high standards and expectations of success, for which we ultimately were the benefactors.

I am writing this story, intending that it be a part of my contribution to the history of the Sauter Family, the maternal side of my family of origin. Family was such an integral part of my growing up and learning experience. Not only did I have two concerned parents, who to the best of their abilities and knowledge supported me in very meaningful ways, but aunts and uncles and grandparents that were close by and influencing my outlook on life in so many different ways. Five of the seven Sauter sisters were a part of my life and influenced my life, along with all my mom's brothers. All of them resided in Tuttle. Only Hilda and Viola did not live in Tuttle. However, the family dynamics being what they were, they would be at all family holiday and other gatherings as well, traveling from their homes in Jamestown and Bismarck. A

part of growing up was also experiencing those two families in their homes or workplaces whenever our childhood experiences included trips to their communities. For example, we would always eat at the Bus Depot restaurant in Bismarck where Viola and Jack were employed when we would go to see doctors or dentists or have events in Bismarck. Hilda and Earl probably averaged at least two weekends in Tuttle, staying at our house, while I was growing up, and they were consistently present in the lives of all the family kids that went on to college at Jamestown College.

Starting in middle school years I would spend many hours each week working at the main street general store owned by my father and mother, Riskedahl's Store. The two dependable employees working in the store every day as I grew up were my mother's sisters, Ruby and Louise Sauter. My time working with them, and my dad was valuable learning about life's responsibilities. I remember quite clearly the interest that both Louise and Ruby took in mentoring me with the various tasks of providing good service to the customers of the store. Working in the store also afforded the opportunity to know adults in the community who were regularly in the store. I grew up feeling a certain kind of connectedness with many adults who were friends/customers of the store. I felt supported in my growing up years by many of those people, in a way that was uplifting and confidence building.

I have lived in St. Paul, MN area since 2015, following a move from Bismarck, where we had lived for 43 years. I have thought about my childhood years and the sense of security I had as a child in a small town, compared to the trauma and fears that I have observed being experienced by families and children here in a large metro area, particularly in the last couple of years. The combination of the events following the murder of George Floyd and the disruption to life caused by the pandemic, have clearly taken a large toll, especially on families in the inner city. Gun violence and actual deaths of children caught in crossfire, have occurred with some regularity which is very troubling. I think about growing up in Tuttle...and always having literally three layers or rings of protection around me, my family of origin, my extended family of grandparents, aunts, and uncles, and all the other concerned citizens of Tuttle who knew me as well as all the other children in the community. There was a sense of security and safety that strikes me as one of the most important ingredients for those formative years.

I am convinced the benefits of growing up in a small, stable community in ND far exceeded any detriments that may have been because we were small.