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Remembering Yakima By Those Who Were There

Each week the YAKIMA VALLEY SUN presents a feature about a Yakima pioneer.

Local History

Life on Her Own Began Early for Anna Ackerman

Text and photo by Patricia Brown

Anna Mary Plaza stood alone in the large, dark room. She was somewhere between 10 and 11 years old. The room was somewhere between Poland and Pennsylvania.

A child at the century's turn, Anna was traveling by herself from her parents' home in Poland to the row house in Pennsylvania mining towns where her aunt and uncle lived.

They had written to Anna's parents telling them they needed help in order to keep the house, the aunt and uncle had to keep boards; and their new baby brought added demands. Could Anna cross the Atlantic and give them a hand? Her parents agreed.

There were few waits for the ship until a longer voyage ahead, but Anna befriended an older girl who was traveling to New York. They became close companions for the journey's duration, watching over each other's baggage, taking their meals and sleep in shifts so that their belongings would be safe.

But the friends parted when their ship docked in New York harbor, and Anna was alone once more. "What an experience!" exclaimed the diminutive lady perched on a wing chair in her Yakima apartment.

Anna Plaza Ackerman recalled that day. Seemingly long ago and far away, still sparks vivid memories for her.

"It was getting dark in the fall of the year when we arrived in New York," she began. Debarbed, she hooded shoulders to shield with a swarm of other recent arrivals. Unable to speak English, she heard an announcer call out trains and their destinations as they pulled up on the tracks and watched as the room emptied of the immigrants

overflow. Anna was the only one left standing as the conductor reached down to pick up the block that had helped passengers board the day's last train. She tried to ask him if this were her train, but there were no words that both of them understood. He motioned of the girl away.

Frightened and desperate, Anna threw her luggage on her shoulder, grabbed on to a bar between cars, and hung on. The conductor saw her, but there was nothing he could do. The train was in motion.

"I got to Pennsylvania. I don't know how," she said, a trace of eastern Europe still

texturing her speech. Anna Ackerman credits no less authority than God with bringing her through that crisis safe and sound. "The good Lord was with me," she said. "No one else was."

A native of Krakow which is also the hometown of Polish Pope John Paul, Anna began life with a strong

Catholic faith; and that conviction has stood by her. She remains an active member of Holy Family parish in Yakima.

Arriving at last on her relatives' doorstep, she became their extra hand around the house, helping with boards and babies until the family left Pennsylvania on

another train.

Her uncle had heard that workers were needed to help rebuild San Francisco after the aftermath of the great earthquake that had all but leveled California's most scenic town. What stretched across the west had no ready work.

The party of Poles stayed only overnight in San Francisco before heading back East to stop midway in Chicago where Anna's uncle set up a small grocery. Anna's job was to care for the couple's children, and she remembers walking a wicker pram through Chicago's streets. Barely tall enough to match the pram's high handle with her nose, she became a livens baby-sitter for her relatives' two boys and two girls.

News from the West told of new mines, and Anna's uncle closed his store just two years after opening to move the family to Cle Elum. This move brought Anna a paying job.

"At 14, she went in work in the laundry where stacks of gentlemen's collars and hives awaited just the right touch. They had to be washed and starched, then smoothed and dried on a rack. The next day brought dumping and pressing and pay day found Anna the proud possessor of an envelope containing two dollars.

She traded her services as a housekeeper for room and board with one of Cle Elum's more socially prominent families. There was two stoves to light every morning, one for cooking and the other for heat. Anna cooked breakfast for the couple, their four children, an elderly neighbor, and herself before going to work.

In 1915 after more than five years of board-

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ing Anna Plaza married Henry Ackerman. One of 13 children, he had come West with the railroad.

Ackerman continued to work in the Milwaukee Railroad's roundhouse until the line shut down in Cle Elum. "The old timers kept their jobs," she said.

The Ackermans had just made the last payment on their home in South Cle Elum when that job left them. They had five dollars and no work. To support his wife and four children, Henry Ackerman became a drayman, hauling anything that needed to be moved. The family lived in South Cle Elum for 64 years.

Anna Ackerman's home is in Yakima now. The couple moved here in the mid-1970s shortly before Henry's passing. Three of their four children—Marguerite, Myrlin, and Bernard—are still living. The oldest son, Melvin, passed away in 1973. Anna Ackerman has 11 grandchildren and a dozen great grandchildren. A family reunion and birthday celebration will honor her on June 27.



ANNA ACKERMAN: "What an experience!"

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