

How a small-town teacher and librarian gave the gift of books



Carol Person

The other day, on the eve of National Teachers' Week, Rose Bell came to mind.

It's strange how images of people from our long-ago past can suddenly rise up like that. The memory of Mrs. Bell was a welcome one, a female version of Dickens' Ghost of Christmas Past, flooding me with memories of a time of unalloyed happiness, a time when, with Mrs. Bell's help, I discovered books.

I recognized the joy of reading early on, but in my early years, the reading material in our farm home in southeastern Minnesota was confined to *The Farm Journal*, the *Winona Daily News*, and the 50 or so books in our Lutheran church library. By age 9, I knew how to fatten a pig for market, I knew that Winona's Fish House restaurant was *the* place to go Friday night, and I had read every biography of Martin Luther ever published.

But I knew nothing of what Rose Bell was to teach me, nothing of *literature*.

I first met Mrs. Bell when I discovered our little town library. Mrs. Bell not only taught English literature in the

high school, she was also the high school librarian and, in the summer, the town librarian. Lanesboro, the little town of 900 where I went to school, had dedicated an area of about 600 square feet in the community hall to a town library. When I found out, I pulled the old Schwinn out of our garage, made sure the basket was firmly attached, and rode the eight miles over gravel roads into town. Mrs. Bell greeted me as if she'd been expecting me, not at all surprised a child would bike eight miles to borrow books. To her, that was the most perfectly natural thing in the world.

Mrs. Bell's teaching reputation was already legendary by the time I entered her class. Even though she'd been born and raised in the area, there was something downright glamorous and cosmopolitan about her. In a time when the women I knew wore practical cotton print housedresses from the J.C. Penney catalog, Rose Bell wore straight, tight skirts, blouses that looked like real silk, and, amazingly, high heels. She wore her reading glasses around her neck on what looked like a chain of genuine pearls.

I quickly learned that Mrs. Bell's reputation was well-deserved. She always expected the best of us. She saw only promise. She never ridiculed. She searched for common ground, even with those kids whose idea of great literature

was the latest comic book from Hanson's drug store.

Mrs. Bell knew all of us would eventually make our own reading choices. She wanted only to make sure that, at least once in our lives, we were exposed to the best. She never gave up hope that at least some of us would learn to love Shakespeare and Chaucer and Hardy and Donne with the same passionate intensity she displayed as she read to us. She wanted us to recognize and appreciate the timeless themes in great literature — themes of love and loss and birth and death — and to see that those themes were all around us, in our little town, in our lives.

Over 40 years on, I can still recite, "Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote..." and, "Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player...."

A few years ago, Lanesboro's Buffalo Bill Days Committee chose Rose Bell, then well over 80, as parade grand marshal — an inspired choice. Mrs. Bell rode through town in the back of a convertible, waving like a queen, accepting homage from her court of grateful readers.

And we readers recognized royalty when we saw it.

CAROL PERSON practiced law in Duluth from 1981 to 1993, when she was appointed a judge of state district court, chambered in Duluth. She served until her retirement in 2004.