

Bricks and Mortar and More

Rex Frolkey – An unusual married student during the 1920s

A Deviation from the “Bricks and Mortar” with an emphasis on “More” by Dr. Wayne G. Marty

In the May Newsletter I opened my column about “Married Student Housing” with the words, “Apparently married students were rare in the early years of Western Union College...” The following notes some of the history that makes Rex Frolkey a truly unusual student for the 1920s.

Age of Rex WU YB = Western Union Yearbook

April 21, 1889 – Rex Frolkey born to Frank and Ida Frolkey in Eddyville, NE

24 June 25, 1913 - Rex marries Eva L. Lohr - A Civil ceremony by a judge.

26 **1916 WU YB** - Rex is listed as a sophomore in the Western Union Academy

27 1916-1917 - Rex left school to serve in the Army during WW I

28 **1918 WU YB** - Rex is described as “another of our loyal Juniors. He is full of wit and humor and reminds a person somewhat of Abraham Lincoln in his appearance. He expects to make the ministry his life work. He hails from the sand-hills of Nebraska.”

Oct. 25, 1920 - Eva (First wife) dies at age 28

33 **1922 WU YB** - Rex is listed as a Senior in the Western Union Academy with recognized participation in Football, Basketball, a Cleric (pre-theological student) and presenter at a YMCA meeting with the topic, “A soldier’s appreciation of Christ.”

34 April 2, 1923 - Rex marries Clara Erickson (Age 40) of Le Mars, a daughter of John and Mary Erickson. Her father John and his brother Hans were immigrants from Sweden, who homesteaded west of Le Mars, became successful prominent farmers in Plymouth County, and provided the \$200 to build the first church at Crathorn (a town that did not survive) where Rex met Clara. This church later became the Plymouth Presbyterian church of today. Rex was listed as the “Supply pastor at the Presbyterian church at Crathorn...”

35 **1924 WU YB** - Under his picture as a Freshman at Western Union College are the words, “Rex has a motto ‘Slow but Steady wins the race.’ Rex is the only freshman who speaks from experience considering matrimony and his favorite song is ‘Home Sweet Home.’ His hobby is argumentation.”

36 **1925 WU YB** - Under his picture as a Sophomore is found “A good debater is one who takes the feathers from the wings of his imagination and puts them in the tail of his reason” His weakness is listed as Arguing. Rex is also pictured in the picture of “The Clerics” and is standing between fellow students Harry Kalas and G. O. Thompson who became President and Dean of Westmar College in the 1960s. Under the picture are the words “Year by year these men go out to face the real issues of life and then must find or devise the methods to cope with the problems.”

36 1925 - Rex and Clara adopted Nathan (Age 2) and Veatrice (Age 4) following the court directed removal from the alcoholic and abusive home of Rueben and Alice Lane.

37 **1926 WU YB** - Rex is pictured as a Junior and is also pictured as a KWUC radio announcer, tennis player and mem-



Rex Frolkey at the microphone in the studio of KWUC located on the upper floor of Dubs Memorial Hall.

ber of the Excelsior Literary Society.

38 **1927 WU YB** - As a senior Rex was the Student Council President and active in athletics, Science Club, Literary organizations, the KWUC radio station, and religious activities. His picture is in this yearbook eight times.

40 Sept. 30, 1929 - Rex dies by suicide with a pistol.

Rex apparently attended Western Union during seven academic years (three in the Academy and 4 in the College) over a period of 11 years (1916 – 1927) and was married during all but one of those years. In addition to his married life, and his active Western Union student life, he also served as Manager of the KSCJ radio station in Sioux City. His adopted son, Nathan, (Western Union graduate of 1945 and now age 86), remembers playing around the acoustical curtains in the KSCJ studio as a child and presumes that it may have been the Sioux City activity that created the circumstances that led to the “Double Life” for Rex.

While he was a respected pastor at the Crathorn church with the normal duties of Sunday services, marriages, funerals, and other pastoral expectations, Rex also, at some point, began to participate in another life in Sioux City that involved gambling, a love nest, and bank robberies. His wife, Clara, with some considerable wealth, made it possible for Rex to have a quality car. This vehicle made it possible for Rex to return quickly from a successful Bank Robbery and join the vigilantes as he went out “looking for himself.”

On Sept. 30, 1929 a new Graham-Paige car with an Illinois license plate placed over the Iowa plate was observed on the streets of Sioux Center. A curious bystander walked to the car and noted that it was registered to Rex Frolkey. So Rex was a certain suspect when the robbery was announced and observers had watched Rex leave the bank and drive away. Plymouth County authorities were alerted and they went directly to the Rex Frolkey home. There was total denial when Rex was accused at his home and all warrants for arrest were not in order so the officials left. When the Sioux County law officers arrived a short time later, Rex had left and headed west. He drove to a nearby farm, handed a roll of bills (\$423) to the farm resident declaring, “They are after me. I have done something dreadful.” Rex then

proceeded to the farm barn and shot himself.

There were hints and occasional suspicions of Rex's Sioux City Life but most were easily dispelled by his pious behavior while a student at Western Union and as a pastor following his graduation. Some of the 1929 news stories indicate that his wife Clara was totally unaware of the gambling life of Rex. However son Nathan, now age 87, who I visited with in Missouri on August 5, 2009, says that his mother, Clara, took her children to California when he was age 4 (1927) and was considering a divorce because of gambling debts that she had been covering for Rex. However they returned to Le Mars after only six months.

Clara raised her family in Le Mars, residing in the house just west of Union Hall. This house was sold to Westmar College in the 1970s and was renovated to become the location of the Art Department. Both adopted children attended Western Union Col-

lege. Nathan graduated in 1945 and went on to a very successful teaching and school administration career that included years in Hospers, Le Mars, and Sutherland, Iowa plus many years in Arkansas and Missouri. He leads an active life, continues to reside in southern Missouri and is currently playing his euphonium regularly with a group of "old men" who perform at various events as "The Fossils." In the 1970s Nathan and his sister (now deceased) located their birth mother and there have been some major Lane family reunions to reestablish blood relative connections.

After adoption from an alcoholic home at age 2 and loss of his bank robber father to suicide at age 6, Nathan still says, "I could not have had a more wonderful life." I guess life can often be what we make it.