

Excerpt From the
Grinnell Historical Museum

NEWSLETTER

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Remembering Aunt Kate

Kate Siehl had a long connection with the 1895 house that is now the Grinnell Historical Museum. For 40 years, she served as the housekeeper and trusted friend of owners Mr. and Mrs. J. H. McMurray. When they died, they deeded the house to her. For the next 15 years or so, she ran it as a boardinghouse. At her death in 1963, her heirs sold the house and some of its furnishings to trustees of the Grinnell Historical Museum. Recently, museum board members Betty Moffett and Carol Nielsen spoke with Kate Siehl's niece, Irene King Anderson, who shared her memories of her aunt and the lovely house. Mrs. Anderson has lived most of her life in the Grinnell area and now resides in Seeland Park.

Tell us about Kate Siehl

I remember that she was always really good to me. When the McMurrays had the Broadway Clothing Store, I was in high school (about 1937), and she took me into Broadway and bought me a winter outfit for my birthday. It was a red sweater, angora, soft and fuzzy, and a pleated skirt. Oh, it was expensive! Yes, she was good to me. I remember when my dad would go to farm sales in Grinnell, my mom and I would come and spend time with Aunt Kate in the kitchen. She would be getting the meals, and we'd sit here and visit until my dad would come back and take us home.

She did all the housework of course. They had parties way back then, and she did all the cooking and serving. I was there sometimes when she would set the table with the best of china for a dinner party. It was very, very upper-crust.

I remember she had a room upstairs at the end of the hallway, just the other side of the bathroom. I remember the bathroom. It had a pedestal lavatory, and it smelled so good. I think it was Cashmere Bouquet soap.

I'm sure the McMurrays really appreciated her. She was very good at her job. In fact, when they got so they couldn't take care of themselves, she continued to do that.

After the McMurrays died, she had roomers upstairs, a lot of the time college men, people who worked at the college, teachers ... I think that was probably her income. I remember her saying, well, they never caused her any trouble and that she would rather rent to men than women. She was, of course, an old maid, and I thought it was kind of strange for an old maid to say that. I never did meet any of them.

What do you remember best about the house?

My mom and I would visit in the afternoons. We'd always come in the back way, right into the kitchen. Sometimes we sat on the porch. The house doesn't look really different from what I remember. When I was a little girl, the house seemed something like a palace to me. I was a farm girl, and I had never seen anything like it. I never went into the basement. Way back then, they didn't use their basements, only just for coal and stuff they didn't want.