



Fallow fields and power poles within a mile of the farm in Roosevelt Township where Don Grant grew up, circa 1992.

From the yet to be published book
The Road I Grew Up On: Requiem for a Vanishing Era
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DEALING WITH DEATH

A Day of Mourning

Don Grant died on September 29, 2001. I had visited him on Thursday, September 13, two days after the World Trade Center and Pentagon were attacked on September 11. Then on the national day of mourning on Friday, September 14, I wrote an essay in response to the events of the week. It included the following portion that begins with reference to a photo excursion I had taken with with a friend, Janis Pyle. She wanted me to bring my camera and help her document farms and other places of her rural heritage in central Iowa. It was on that outing that I saw Don for the last time.



Janis and I talked about the attacks on New York and Washington and how people would be quick to retaliate rather than understand that the best form of national defense is to share power and resources more equitably in the world.

Janis and I also talked at length about rural and small-town life and how the agricultural economy is in really bad shape. It is hard for some people to realize how bad things are because the tragedy of the farm scene doesn't have the kind of visual impact for television as airliners hitting the Trade Towers and the subsequent collapse of those icons of American prosperity.

The farms we visited were like so many around the Rolfe area, vastly different than when they thrived with activity in past decades.

We went to the McCallsburg cemetery where Janis feels a close attachment. She asked if I had anything to stand on so she could get a better view. I remembered that my friends Mark and Connie live on a farm near McCallsburg and suggested going to their place to see if they had a step ladder that we could borrow. Mark and Connie are both active in the Practical Farmers of Iowa organization, and Mark once served in Haiti for the Mennonite mission program. He is quick to point out that mission work is not the same as missionary work — that is, no proselytizing.

We found Mark in his machine shed listening to NPR and preparing his combine for harvest. He was most willing to loan us a step ladder. He also took time to talk with Janis and me about the attacks on Tuesday and about the farm economy. Again, there was a concurrence of thought that vengeance and hate and domination of the world was not the right attitude. And again, there was a discussion of the rural economy. I said that my income for the last farm year was pretty good but that 40 percent of my net income had come from government subsidies. I asked Mark how the federal government's budget shortage and the events of this week would effect the farm economy. He responded that he knew many farmers who said they weren't going to survive financially even with government assistance.

I am reminded that a friend from Rolfe recently wrote an e-mail saying,

Pocahontas County is dying. There is little new economic development occurring, and the businesses that remain are barely surviving. Each year a few close and no new ones take their place. We are forced to leave the area to shop.

A heaviness also settled on me after Janis and I paid a surprise visit to an older couple in Colo. I had originally met Don and Rosie Grant in the early 1990s when I interviewed him for my documentary project about the road I grew up on. The farm where Don grew up is one of those places along the road that is now cleared and covered with row crops each year — corn and soybeans. Janis had met the couple when she frequented the small cafes in the Colo area. During that time, Don and Rosie kept insisting that Janis should look me up because our work of documenting our rural heritage was so similar. Janis followed their advice, and that's how we became friends; however, the four of us had never gotten together at the same time.

One of the grandest things about my road project has been getting to meet fine people and hear their stories. Don and Rosie were terrific, not only in letting me record lots of their stories and loaning me some great old photos of the Grant farm, but in making me feel at home when I moved back to Iowa. Rosie had always been a great Catholic and advised me to pray to Anthony, the saint of travel, for help in finding an apartment when I moved back to Iowa in 1993. Everyone that I know who knows Don and Rosie has great respect for the couple. Both are thoughtful, yet have a great sense of humor. They tend to have liberal thoughts and have an admirable tolerance and compassion for people. I've known for a number of years that Rosie is dealing with Parkinson's disease. I also knew that Don was getting thinner and thinner the past few times I visited him.

Janis and I have spoken often about the sense of being called to the kind of work we do, documenting our rural heritage and how we often don't know where it will lead us. Neither of us had thought of visiting Don and Rosie yesterday until we were driving past Colo. The clouds had gotten too gray for doing photography, and a light rain had begun to fall. It wasn't time for lunch, and we were in no hurry to be anywhere, so it seemed most appropriate to stop and see the Grants.

It was as if the Spirit had led us to Don and Rosie's house. Their daughter, Ellen from Tennessee, greeted us at the door. Something seemed vastly different, and I realized when I saw him that Don was not the same man I knew when I first met him some 10 years ago. He was dressed for the day and sitting in his easy chair. He conversed with us some but was frail and mainly quiet. We had not only a good visit, but one to cherish. Don has cancer and has decided not to fight it with chemotherapy or radiation. Our conversation had its moments of tenderness, sobriety, and humor — of hugs, tears, and smiles — even some chuckles.

Rosie wanted to show us the gift she had received for her 80th birthday last March from "Old Dad," a term she uses endearingly for Don. Ellen brought in a small, antique, shining white, porcelain music box shaped like an old-fashioned Victrola record player and played it for us. The five of us smiled when we heard the tune that went, "Let me call you sweetheart."

Rosie and Don are a pair of lovebirds. But the love isn't that of young love such as the times when they were dating at Iowa State and visited Don's folks and necked in the hammock. Nor was it like when Don was a radar cadet at Yale University and he and Rosie ate at the restaurant in New Haven where Glenn Miller dined; nor when the couple danced at the Friday night cadet dances where Miller and his band performed; nor when they were married in 1944 at the Catholic chapel on the Yale campus, the day after Don was commissioned and before being shipped out to Florida and later to Europe as part of the Air Corp's Pathfinder Division.

This day, the love was mature and pervasive, touching each heart in the room, enveloping us in a sacred circle. We were silent, and the air stood still. The sound was as pure as the ringing of a bell in a Tibetan meditation hall, and the music — speaking a language of its own

— said everything that needed to be said. It enabled us to feel both the intense sorrow and the beauty of the day. Even though none of us used the word good-bye, it seems that was what our encounter was about.



Don and Rosie at Yale, 1944.
From their collection.

Not only did Don run around with my dad when they were kids, but Don's parents, Cap and Addie Grant, were friends of my grandparents, John and DeElda Gunderson. They all belonged to a couples' club called the Country Jakes, but being good Methodists, they couldn't play anything that resembled poker. Instead, they used a special deck of cards to play a game called Somerset.

The loss of Don will not only be the loss of a friend I have known for a decade but will be the loss of one of my father's friends. Don's death is also symbolic; it represents the loss of the ancestors who settled or built our small towns and rural neighborhoods.

My heart is usually heavy at this time of year because October is the anniversary of my grandfather John's death in 1956 when I was 11. He and I were very close, and I understand some of the reasons for our closeness. Unfortunately, I hardly grieved his passing until I was in my forties. I keep thinking that I will get past the grief but wonder how long it will take.

I am also reminded of the yin and yang of life — that there is always light and darkness in the world. How often do we know of an octogenarian who dies the same day that a new child is born into a family? Don and Rosie's son John and his wife are about to have their first child.

How often is an exquisite work of art with long-lasting impact created during a time of intense duress?

Often, I think of the traditional hymn “Now Thank We All Our God” and the social context in which it was written. As the web site, *cyberhymnal.org*, reports,

Martin Rinkart (1586–1649) was a Lutheran minister in Eilenburg, Saxony. During the Thirty Years’ War, the walled city of Eilenburg saw a steady stream of refugees pour through its gates. The Swedish army surrounded the city, and famine and plague were rampant. Eight hundred homes were destroyed, and the people began to perish. There was a tremendous strain on the pastors who had to conduct dozens of funerals daily. Finally, the pastors, too, succumbed, and Rinkart was the only one left—doing 50 funerals a day. When the Swedes demanded a huge ransom, Rinkart left the safety of the walls to plead for mercy. The Swedish commander, impressed by his faith and courage, lowered his demands. Soon afterward, the Thirty Years’ War ended, and Rinkart wrote this hymn for a grand celebration service. It is a testament to his faith that, after such misery, he was able to write a hymn of abiding trust and gratitude toward God.

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers’ arms has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us still in grace, and guide us when perplexed;
And free us from all ills, in this world and the next.

The Death of Don Grant

Don Grant died on Saturday, September 29, 2001, but I didn't know of his death until Monday, October 1st. I learned of his death when I read an e-mail letter from my older sister Clara in Omaha with a link to Don's obituary in the *Des Moines Register*. I couldn't believe this day had come — the day of reading the obituary of one Don Grant. During the previous week, I had been vacationing at my mother's cottage on Lake Okoboji in northwest Iowa. The only good news about reading of Don's death was that I was back home and learned of his passing in time to attend his wake and funeral service.



Don Grant, circa 1924. The Don and Rosie Grant collection.

I had an appointment in Des Moines on the day of the wake and arrived late at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Colo. The Rosary and other prayers had already been said, and people had publicly reminisced about Don. By the time I arrived, people were talking in small clusters in various parts of the sanctuary. As I had anticipated, I recognized no one except Rosie and her daughter, Ellen, who had hosted my friend, Janis, and me when we visited Don and Rosie on September 13 at their home. I felt for Ellen in many ways, including her role as helpmate to her parents for at least a week by herself. She had not gone home after Janis and I had paid our visit. Instead, she stayed on as a hostess and sentry and was later joined by her brother Jim for

a week and then by all her siblings. I saw Ellen at the side of the sanctuary, walked over, and we gave each other a long hug. It seemed as though I was an extra sister who knew the weight Ellen had carried and was willing to provide a shoulder for her to cry on and a heart to connect with.

I moved to the front of the sanctuary intending to speak to Rosie, but on my way, I found myself going past the simple pine casket and stopped to look at Don. I could engage in a long discourse about the pros and cons of being able to see a deceased person. Part of my belief is that a person's spirit is released upon breathing his or her last breath. What we see in the casket is analogous to the brown, crusty body of a cicada that I once saw sitting on a wooden fence post. The insect had morphed into a new green creature, was sitting an inch away from its former shell, and was drying off in the rays of the sun with a iridescent drop of water rolling down its back. I watched for several minutes. I even got my camera and took several photographs. Then in a moment when I turned my attention the other way, the cicada vanished.

I also believe that even though the body in the casket is not truly the person we once knew, it is a focal point for coming to terms with the finality of that person's life and reflecting on who the person was and what he or she meant to us. Don's face was bland and pious looking. There was little about him that portrayed the feisty, fun man I had known during the last 12 years nor the boyhood friend my father had known. However, one needed to appreciate the job the undertaker did of preparing the body, considering how emaciated Don had probably become when cancer took its final toll.



Don Grant, 1990.

I grinned when I realized that the family did not require Don to be dressed in his best suit and tie. Instead, he lay in the casket with a red Iowa State University cardigan sweater with an embroidered emblem of the university sports mascot. It was not the current mean rendition of the cardinal mascot but the spunky Cy that Iowa State used when Don and his family returned to Ames in the fall of 1968.

I also chuckled when I saw a rosary in Don's hands. He was raised in a Methodist family on a farm located between Protestant families of German and Scandinavian descent and Catholic families of Bohemian descent. There were taboos against mixed dating and marriages, but Don was not the kind of person easily influenced by taboos. After all, he had been married 57 years to Rosie, a devote Irish Catholic. While in college, his roommate was engaged to her roommate, and the two wanted to line Rosie and Don up, but neither Rosie nor Don wanted to be lined up.

There were times when Don and Rosie visited his folks at their farm and times when Rosie visited Cap and Addie by herself when Don was in the service. Cap and Addie were gracious toward Rosie, rising above any disparaging comments people in the community might have made because their daughter-in-law was a Catholic.

In an interview with the Grants, I asked Don about the kind of modeling he had in learning to deal with hard times. He responded,

The biggest thing I have learned is the value of faith, and a lot of that Rosie has taught me. My dad had faith in the soil and himself. It was probably in God, but he never verbalized it and maybe wouldn't have known how to verbalize it. I guess his faith was in God and [he believed] that God would take care of him if he took care of what God had given him to take care of. But there was no talk of that.

There was a time after high school when Don thought of becoming a Methodist minister. Instead, 10 years after marrying Rosie, he became a Catholic. His conversion, he said, was the result of seeing the connections between Rosie's faith and the beliefs that Cap and Addie had been "leaning on" but never verbalized.

It was awesome to look upon Don from my perspective of having worked with photographs of him from boyhood to manhood, having interviewed him, and having transcribed and edited his stories. I realized that the Don who was lying in the casket and the Don who had taken flight like a cicada was and is a complex being. He is a mysterious soul influenced by many eras — if not multiple lifetimes — within the one grand life he spent on this earth.

I turned toward Rosie, who was sitting in the front pew near the center aisle. She finished her conversations with other people and turned her attention to me. I knelt beside her to talk and give her a hug. She seemed to be doing exceptionally well, considering she has had Parkinson's disease for several years. I had expected that Rosie's grief would compound her illness and that she would be fragile. Instead she was strong — conversant with a positive outlook.

When I left Rosie, I felt lost. I sensed that the people gathered in the various clusters were old friends catching up on lost years. I moved to a side pew by myself and watched. I studied physical features, mannerisms, and expressions to discern which people were Don and Rosie's offspring. I had met Ellen's other sisters, Annie and Mary Margaret, about ten years earlier at a family gathering at Don and Rosie's home. It was much like a circus with lots of children coming and going, and at the wake, I couldn't remember which sister was which. I knew at some point I would be able to meet the family, but I had no idea how they would receive me.

As I waited, dare I say, what seemed an eternally long time, I noticed a lanky young man, probably the age of a college student, approach the casket and stand by it for several minutes. I perceived an extraordinary amount of comfort on his part — a gentleness and a love. Not wanting to stare, I shifted my gaze to other people or facets of the sanctuary. Finally, I looked

back toward the young man and saw a beautiful grin on his face. I interpreted it as a sign that he recognized the ways he had benefitted from knowing Don and was saying farewell to his friend, knowing that Don would be OK. The next day, I learned that the young man was one of Don's grandsons and that his name is Matt.

Eventually I approached some of the clusters of people and introduced myself to more of Don and Rosie's children. By the end of the next day, I had met them all and found them to be much like their parents — fun, hospitable, and caring about me in a way that was a welcome surprise. They hardly knew me but took me in almost as though I were a cousin.

Wednesday morning when I arrived at the funeral, the sanctuary was nearly full, and again I knew no one but family members. Soon though, I saw some Unitarian friends, Roger and Kay, and slid into a pew next to them. Roger had been a colleague of Don's in the Iowa State engineering department.

As the priests and family members escorted the casket from the main entrance of the church through the center aisle to the front of the sanctuary, a CD player in the balcony played a recording of Ella Fitzgerald singing, "It's been a long, long time from June to September." How in character for the family to choose that song since Don and Rosie have both been fans of big band music. The song represented an era and conveyed a sense of love and loss as effectively, in fact, more effectively, than a conventional hymn would have done.

Then there was the Mass. The fine congregational singing was led by a small group that included Don and Rosie's daughter, Mary Margaret, playing the guitar and their granddaughter, also named Rosie, who sang with the group. Ellen was one of the eucharistic ministers.

When it was time to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, I walked forward to receive the bread and wine. It had been a long time since my days as an active Presbyterian when I looked forward to the Eucharist. As a Unitarian — well, let me simply say that I have let go of certain traditions and that the Unitarian Fellowship in Ames does not do Holy Communion. However, at the funeral, I was eager to get back to the roots of the Christian experience and tap the well that sustains Rosie's faith. I wanted to participate in the sacrament even though I was apprehensive about picking up a cold or incurring some other malady by drinking from a common communion cup.

A friend of the family read a fun poem she had written called "Old Dad," and the priest spoke fine words and told great stories about Don. Among Father Seda's remarks was his observation of something I had already realized: that Don and Rosie were soul mates. Their relationship was the kind that many people yearn to have.

The service ended as the priest and family escorted the casket back up the aisle to the main entrance of the church. For the postlude, the CD player played a recording of Frank Sinatra singing, "I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places." Time seemed suspended.

Eventually there would be lunch in the church basement served by members of the parish. There were juicy slices of hot beef in hamburger buns, baked beans, potato chips, salads, cakes, and coffee. Such a meal can be the best part of a funeral and is replicated in many churches, including the Methodist Church in Rolfe where Don's family had attended and where funerals had been conducted and lunches served when my grandfather and grandmother died. A funeral is a time for people to break bread together, whether it is shared as part of a holy sacrament or around a cafeteria table with fine reminiscing.

Don and Rosie's children told me many stories. They told about their impression that Don was the only faculty member at Iowa State with only a bachelor's degree who had achieved the rank of tenured professor; about how he had "gotten out of college by the skin of his

teeth,” barely earning a C average; about how he had a way of genuinely connecting with students and promoting their well-being. As Jim Grant said, “What Dad did best was the people stuff.”

In his interview in 1992, Don said he was not a great engineer but that he liked talking and listening to people. He tried to have a sympathetic ear, and his advisees often came to his office, had a cup of coffee, and were able to “blow their stack.” Perhaps he developed his skill as a listener in part from being around his father. Don says he could talk to his dad, and even though Cap was deaf, Cap could hear Don. But Cap didn’t know what to say, so he didn’t say anything in return but would listen and be sympathetic. There are times I have felt Don’s presence in a similar manner, with few words but an ability to listen and be sympathetic, and other times when he spoke with just the right humor, affirmation, or advice.

The family told about how Don had often talked about wanting to be buried in a pine box in the grove at the acreage on 24th Street in north Ames where Don and Rosie lived until moving to Colo in 1994. However, Don had not initiated the arrangements, and when it became clear that he would be departing, the family members had to figure out how to fulfill his wishes. They assumed the city and current homeowner would not want Don to be buried at the 24th Street location, so they thought about the university cemetery located in Pammel Woods.

Don’s boys (Jim, Joe, and John) did the legwork and made phone calls to put the pieces of a plan together for Rosie’s approval. They contacted the Facilities Planning and Management Department at the university and found out there were less than a dozen lots left in the cemetery. They also discovered Don met the three requirements for admittance to the cemetery. First, he had retired from the university and had not simply left. Second, he had achieved tenure. Third, he had worked at the university a few days longer than the minimum requirement of 20 years of employment. As John said, the arrangements worked out “just like other things Dad did — he just kind of slid in at the last moment.”

The sons also found out the university had an egalitarian policy for who could have what plots. When a landscape architect representing the department showed the family the layout of the cemetery, there was a space in the center for presidents, but otherwise, people would get lots on a first come, first serve basis. The family could have Don’s name pencilled in on an informal list, but as the representative said, the university couldn’t make a final burial plot commitment to anyone until his or her death actually occurred.

The family told about John saying he had heard about pine caskets being available through the Internet and about Jim using his portable computer to locate a site called *trappistcaskets.com*. It was for the New Melleray Monastery near Dubuque, Iowa. When the sons called and explained to the Trappist representative that Don’s death was imminent but that they did not know exactly when they would need the casket, the man allayed their concerns. He said, “Trust us, this is our business. We know what you’re going through. The casket will be there when you need it.” Eventually, two Trappist monks drove across the state and arrived in a late-1980s, dusty blue pickup truck with a topper. They unloaded the casket at Ryan’s Funeral Home in the county seat of Nevada for temporary storage until the family made a final decision about what funeral home to use.

The family described how the casket was beautifully crafted, but a screw was off kilter; therefore, one of the metal handles was not properly aligned. Yet the family says the flaw was a perfect reminder of Don and his style of home handiness. As an example, Jim told about the towel rack that Don installed in the bathroom that was askew even though Don was an engi-

neer. Jim added that there used to be a cartoon stuck on Don and Rosie's refrigerator, showing a towel bar with a drill still attached to one end and a caption saying, "He started seven years ago but never quite got finished."

I also learned from Don and Rosie's children about the week prior to Don's death. All six of them and Don and Rosie were camped out in the same house with only one bathroom. An outsider such as myself can only speculate about the events during that week and the connections among the family members. It was a private time that only they experienced and only they will remember. Even when they tell other people about it, none will fully understand what transpired. However, I imagine it was a difficult week but also a beautiful one that they cherish. I also imagine the Grants were close-knit and did better than most families would. Of course, no one does a statistical analysis of how families rank in handling intimate times together. Such a study would be ludicrous and could lead only to the sports mentality so prevalent in our society: the one of measuring events quantitatively and calculating who is number one rather than appreciating the experiences on a qualitative basis and focusing on being human.



Rosie and Don Grant, circa 1967,
from their collection.

The Grant family has some similarities to mine. There were six siblings, our dads were childhood buddies who went to Iowa State where they met our moms, but our families are also different.

I speculate that my own family will handle our living with dying situations in a much different way than the Grants did. Also, I do not anticipate that members of my family will choose the minimal medical path that Don did, nor do I anticipate that we would do as well under one roof for an entire week, even though my parents' home has more than one bathroom.

Don lived with liver cancer and took no treatment but gradually became weaker, more frail, and moved toward death in his own home with his family close around him. He experienced remarkably little pain, and the hospice nurses were impressed at his low level of medication. There is something about the closeness of Don's family members and their love that made their week sacred. Yes, it was a difficult time, but it was extraordinary in a way beyond words.

Don's children told me about how there were long periods of time when the six of them and Rosie gathered around Don's bed. Rosie sat, rested, held Don's hand, chatted, and attended to her rosary. Sometimes she said her prayers to herself, and other times she spoke the "Hail Marys" out loud and her children joined her.

Each sibling had his or her opinion regarding what strategy would be most helpful to Don.

I asked them if Don knew what was going on and whether he rolled his eyes at them or tried to swat them with the back of his hand in loving disgust. They chuckled and said he didn't have the energy to roll his eyes or swat anyone, but that if he could have, he would have.

Rosie says each evening during the last week of Don's life, the family watched a John Wayne movie with Don. Each time he moved, one of his children would ask if there was anything he or she could do to help. The same quality of care occurred during the nights when there were at least two of Don's children sleeping on the floor beside his bed. Again, if he made the slightest movement or sound, one of the loyal sentries would ask, "Dad, do you need something? Is there anything I can do for you?"

Rosie is extremely proud of how her children helped Old Dad. She adds that she has never seen a woman more gentle than her sons were in ministering to their father's needs.

During lunch at the church, a few people were taking snapshots, which prompted me to get my camera out of the trunk of my car and put it beside me in the front seat. I wanted to be prepared to take photographs at the cemetery.

I had never been to the university cemetery, but I knew that it was in a woods between the northwest edge of campus and the Unitarian Fellowship on Hyland Avenue. Feeling somewhat confident I could find the place, I drove by myself the 20 miles from Colo to Ames via U.S. Highway 30. I wanted to be there early with my camera before other people arrived, but I also needed to have my car in Ames because I had an appointment at the Fellowship at three o'clock to have my portrait taken for the church directory.

Although the cemetery is hidden in the woods, I knew I was at the right place when I saw ushers from the funeral home at the gate giving directions. I parked on the street, walked through the gate, and waited for the funeral procession to arrive. Soon the hearse and limousines carrying the family arrived. The funeral director unlocked the back of the hearse and Don's three sons and three sons-in-law carried the pine casket and placed it on a stand at the gravesite.

There wasn't anything fancy about the committal service. The gravesite was in a shaded area. Rosie, sat with her daughter, Annie, and pregnant daughter-in-law, Mary, on chairs under a navy blue awning. Other people stood behind the women or nearby. Matt, the grandson who I had seen standing near the casket the night before grinning at Don, had recruited some of his fellow members of the university marching band to play the university anthem, "The Bells of Iowa State." After the official ceremony, people lingered and talked much like they had at the wake and luncheon.

Green hills for thy throne, and for crown of golden melody
Ringing in the hearts of all who bring thee love and loyalty.
Dear Alma Mater, make our spirits great,
True and valiant like the bells of Iowa State.

Enhanced are our lives by thy wisdom and fidelity
Each inspiring moment here implants enduring loyalty.
Dear Alma Mater, keep life's pathways straight,
Hearts allegiant to the Bells of Iowa State.¹

1. Words and music by Jim Wilson, Iowa State University English Department, 1928-31

The cemetery that particular day was as beautiful as I had ever seen any part of the Iowa State campus, and for the most part, the campus is known for its beauty. The woods was like a large bowl similar to a giant terrarium or part of a human biosphere project. The grass was a well-groomed carpet. The trees with their tall trunks formed a circular outer wall. The leaves — a mottled mixture of radiant red, brown, and gold colors — formed a canopy. And above, in the center of the canopy, was a large portal for us, the inhabitants, to see the rich blue sky and for the radiance of the sun to shine upon us.

I approached a few of the family members and suggested I would be willing to take family photographs. Then I stood aside and waited.

My imagination led me to memories from long ago of reading the *Tales of King Arthur's Round Table*. In my mind, the university cemetery had become a holy forest that afternoon, not because it was a cemetery but because of the people gathered, the purpose for which they gathered — saying good-bye to a heck of a fun and wise fellow sojourner — and the way they loved each other. In addition, the sun and the trees in our little biosphere were perfectly aligned and were offering blessings to the family, other mourners, and Don. Subsequently, in the midst of that woods on that day, there was no need to search for the Holy Grail. It was there and evident in the people and the place.

I picked a knoll in the middle of the cemetery. Soon the grandchildren assembled on it for a round of photos. Then Don and Rosie's six children gathered for their photos. Next Rosie joined her children for more photos, then the spouses joined the six children and Rosie for yet another round of photo taking. Finally, I finished the roll of film by photographing Rosie by herself. She was beautiful. Indeed she had a rosiness in her cheeks and a glow in her eyes even though a person would suspect there was a deep vein of sorrow in her heart.



Rosie Gulden Grant, 2001.

I occasionally talk with Rosie on the phone and visit her at her home. I'm impressed by her resiliency. I also enjoy hearing new stories that shed light on her and Don's lives. Several days after the funeral, when I spoke with her, Rosie told me about the last day the family had with Don. She prefaced the story by saying that Don had been a temperate drinker. He would go for months without having a drink, but if he did have a drink, he would opt for Scotch. Also, she said that on the occasions when the family toasted special events, they were accustomed to having a little Scotch for Old Dad.

Rosie explained that on the final day when the family was gathered around Don's bed and after he took his last breath, they put a selection of his favorite music on the CD player: big band, Dixieland, and old country western. They also notified the undertaker of Don's death. Then son Joe went to the kitchen to get a bottle of Scotch that he had brought. She was not sure if it was one Joe had brought back in recent years from Scotland or one he had a friend in England send him especially for Don. In either case, it was particularly good and the only Scotch remaining in the house, with only a couple ounces left in the bottle. Joe brought the bottle to the room and handed it to John, who opened it, moistened his finger with the Scotch, and wiped some across Don's lips. Then the bottle was passed around, first to Rosie, then to the rest of her children. Rosie ended her account, saying, "We all figured Old Dad would go to Heaven, and in his honor, we felt we should finish the bottle for him." Eventually the three sons went out into the darkness of the night for a walk while Rosie and the three daughters stayed in the house and talked.

None of Don and Rosie's six children knew their grandparents — neither Cap and Addie Grant nor Matt and Annie Gulden. None of them had ever lived in the Rolfe area, in fact, their main developmental years were not in Iowa but in Texas where Don had worked for Collins Radio before joining the Iowa State faculty.

In the interview early in the 1990s with the Grants, Don said both he and Rosie liked the farm.

It was the anchor for us, even after we were married as long as the folks were alive. We made our home and had six kids, but the kids were born after my parents were dead and her parents were dead. But even after my parents left the farm, it was still in the family. I would say it was always an anchor and still is to the extent that I still have a foot in there somewhere.

Rosie added,

Our children didn't want Dad to sell his half to Duncan [his brother]. It was very special to them all the time they grew up in Texas. They knew Dad had come from a farm in Iowa. And of course, we liked the farm and talked pleasantly of it. And when it came time to sell it, they all said they wished we wouldn't.

Rosie continued by saying there were too many complications not to sell the farm, but even for her children it was a "spot of security."

Don went on to say that whenever the family came back to Iowa, the first thing the kids wanted to do was go to the farm and look in the buildings, even though no one lived there and the buildings had deteriorated. He also spoke about how his daughter, Annie, while on her way back from her honeymoon at Lake Okoboji in 1984, made her husband stop by the farm and realized the place had been cleared. Don says, "That's when we discovered the buildings were gone."

In my encounters with Don and Rosie's children, it is clear they have a high regard for their rural heritage and carry on the values and characteristics of Cap, Addie, and Matt and Annie. But the heritage they carry is not and cannot be defined by a sense of place. Instead, whatever they carry from their heritage will be through qualities of the heart and spirit. The grandchildren will know even less about Don's farm heritage. To them, it will probably be something mythical that happened once upon a time.

Learning about the Grant family — through interviewing Don and Rosie, going through their collection of family photos, meeting the clan at Don's wake and funeral, and paying an occasional visit to Rosie at her home in Colo — is a way for me to reflect on life. Sometimes it's easier to learn life's lessons by reading a biography or, in my case, getting to know people through this project than by looking head on into our own situations.

An important lesson I am learning is that life is not static but is fluid. Another lesson is that life has its mysteries. There are questions we need to ask and reflect on, but we also must recognize there are no concrete answers and need to learn to live with mystery.

Where is Don now? Where is my grandfather now? Where will other loved ones go when they leave this earth? Those are questions about the afterlife. Rosie says that the day Don died was also the day of the Feast of the Guardian Angels on her liturgical calendar. She suspects, and I would agree, that the Guardian Angels escorted Don directly to a festive banquet hall, and a fine time was had by all.

Rosie also says we can turn to people who have gone before us in the same manner we can turn to the saints. Every once in a while, I sense Don grinning at me or giving me sound advice much like he used to give the many students he advised and who held him in high esteem. And occasionally, I can sense my grandfather walking with me or tousling my hair.

There are also questions about life here on earth, different ones for different folks. Mine boil down to questions about what gives us meaning and a sense of connection when people and places that have been significant in our lives vanish or are in the process of vanishing. How can I be as eager to know new places and people as I have been with those I have known in the past? Perhaps I could give myself credit for maturing into a few of the answers. For instance, who would have known when I was living in California, that in the future I would meet Don and Rosie, that I would feel close to them, and that they would be significant in helping me feel at home in my home state.

I've been told, and I get a glimpse of it, that the answers to many of life's difficult questions lie in living fully in the present moment and knowing the value of our individual selves while recognizing that something greater guides and sustains us. Don and Rosie have been models of doing just that. Thank you, my friends.



From John and Mary's collection.

Postscript: Don and Rosie Grant's youngest son, John, and his wife Mary gave birth to their first son, John Casper Grant, on December 28, 2001. The boy's name will be written officially as J. Casper Grant for legal purposes, but he will be known as Cap Grant, the same name as his dirt farmer grandfather who lived along the road where I grew up.

From the yet to be published book
The Road I Grew Up On: Requiem for a Vanishing Era
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