

Woody



The WordchipperSM

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He was given the middle name of “Woodrow” in honor of the 28th President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, but I know him as “Woody,” as do many others across North Dakota. I’m happy to report that George Woodrow Gagnon is very much alive at age 95 and as interested as ever in his favorite hobby: people.

Woody did a lot for the people of our state and nation through his service in government, the military, civic organizations and charities. He’s recounted many of his experiences in *The Woody I Know*, a new autobiography written with the able assistance of Bonna R. Cunningham.

He was born in 1912 in Page, N. Dak., located in the northwest corner of Cass County. The family moved to Fargo in 1926, and the following year, Woody began 7th grade at Agassiz Junior High School. He went on to graduate from Fargo Central in 1929, and studied at North Dakota Agricultural College (now NDSU) prior to joining the U.S. Army in 1942. Woody experienced combat in Europe during WWII and then came home to a career in business, in leadership roles in the North Dakota National Guard and in state government. During the 1970s, Woody was Chief of Staff to then-Governor Art Link and served as the first chairman of the national Certification Board of the Easter Seal Society, a charitable cause dear to his heart.



George “Woody” Gagnon (1950s)

In this feast of anecdotes, you’ll come across many familiar North Dakota and Minnesota names, and some not-so-prominent. All were part of the amazing quilt of human warmth that is “the North Dakota way.” I particularly remember when Woody owned and operated a restaurant on Main Street in Valley City, N. Dak. My grandmother, Minnie Musselman (they called her “Muzzy”), worked as a short-order cook at Woody’s Cafe, as did a number of other older ladies who felt fortunate to have a job during some very difficult times. Most were widows trying to qualify for Social Security. Although there was no Medicare, a new non-profit hospital plan had just started and premiums were about \$5 a month; wages for employees such as my grandmother were only 60 cents an hour. Every Thursday, as Woody recalls, Muzzy filled in for the pastry chef and made a very popular “poppy seed cake with caramel frosting.” It sold for 15 cents per piece, and Woody says those cakes always sold out.

When I was about seven or eight years old, my grandmother made sure I stayed near her at the cafe when I wasn’t in school. She was raising me with help from my aunt Marian. (My mother had died of cancer when I was three; my father remarried and lived in the western part of the state.) Because I was blessed with a rich imagination, it was not difficult for me to occupy my time during those evenings and weekends at the restaurant. The local radio station was across the alley from the cafe, prompting me to create make-believe control boards out of cardboard boxes. I talked into play microphones in the establishment’s basement, near the big meat coolers. To those who saw me doing this, I must have appeared quite strange indeed. Some say that “strangeness” hasn’t left me.

Quite often, Woody and his wife, the former Renee Patterson of Fargo, would take me to their home where I would hang out with their two sons, George Jr. and Ed. This exposed me to childhood activities that were a little more normal than those imaginative ventures I dreamed up by myself. Later on, when I was a senior in high school, Renee tutored me in speechwriting. Her coaching made it possible for me to enter and win the statewide Veterans of Foreign Wars-sponsored Voice of Democracy Competition. For a lad who hadn’t really been anywhere, it was a fantastic thrill to be sent off on an all-expense-paid airline trip to represent North Dakota in Washington, D.C. Renee died in 1993, but I will always be grateful to her—and Woody—for the guidance they gave me when I was a youngster.

If you have an interest in North Dakota’s history and how its people make the state work in our challenging Northern Plains environment, you’ll enjoy—and learn from—this book. *The Woody I Know*, 198 pages, can be ordered by sending a check for \$20 (postage/handling included) payable to George W. Gagnon, Baptist Home, Room #253, 1100 East Boulevard Avenue, Bismarck, ND 58501.