Kay’s dress, memories of yesterday

By KATHY TANDERG

Eighty-two years ago, two young sisters, adorned in similar clothing from head to toe, stood looking at one another. As one can imagine, they could hardly contain their joy of the day ahead that would become the first day of the rest of their lives.

Both were dressed in the most beautiful and important dress they would ever wear—brides—to be in soft, white satin head to toe, their heads crowned with rings of pearls and tiny paper flowers, tulle flowing down their backs. It was the biggest day of their lives for Buechel sisters, Kay, 23, and Alma, 17; the day they would marry the men they loved. The ceremony would take place later that afternoon at the Zap Congregational Church.

Kay’s gown was Paul Kusler, 23: Alma’s gown was Paul’s older brother, John, 26. The couples met at church, and surrounded by family, friends and neighbors, at 4 p.m. on a sunny but crisp fall day, Sunday, Nov. 5, 1933, the two couples walked down the aisle to the alter, Kay and Paul behind Alma and John. The Rev. Carl Remich officiated at the ceremony, his wife played the organ. Then two Buechel sisters married two Kusler brothers in a double wedding ceremony, pledging their lifelong love.

Their love was indeed lifelong for these couples. However, as the years fly by, life intervenes at some point.

Paul was 86 when he passed away October 1996 after nearly 63 years of wedded bliss. John followed his brother a few years later, September 2002 just short of 69 years of beloved marriage. Alma joined her groom just three years later December 2005 at the age of 88, leaving Kay behind to share their precious wedding memories.

Kay, now 101, her memory sharp as a tack for the most part, said their joint wedding day was glorious.

“'I've still got a good brain and I remember most things. People wonder how I remember but my mother was that way, too,' Kay explained.

The journey to the altar of course began with a courtship of rural “neighborhood” couples meeting one another. At the time, Kay worked on the family farm and also for some neighbors to help with crops and earn a little money. It was 1933, the years of the Great Depression and the Dirty Thirties. Life was difficult even on farms where families were still trying to grow crops and feed cattle if they had any left.

“I was making $18 a month then, I saved $45 every month and my parents allowed me to keep back $3 each month,” Kay said.

After Paul proposed, Kay went to her parents about a wedding. At the same time, Alma and John were serious and also wanted to marry. Two weddings were out of the question, but a compromise was needed.

“I had to buy all of Alma’s wedding clothes and my own, I had $45 saved for the two of us,” Kay recalled.

To further save money, Kay would buy fabric and the girls (Alma and Bertha (Buechel) would make the wedding veils and would help them make paper flowers for their bouquets.

“We made paper flowers for a long time. We had different colors. Mine were pink and red, I don’t remember what Alma’s were,” she added.

Because Kay had saved her money, they could afford store-bought wedding dresses. They then began to make plans to shop at the A.W. Lucas Co., a department store in downtown Bismarck.

One day sometime after harvest, John and Paul picked up the “brides” and the couple headed to Bismarck for a day of shopping, wedding planning and shopping for their wedding dress, and farming shopping for the men.

“They dropped us off downtown at Lucas’s and let us do our own thing. Lucas’s had everything, every kind of food that clothing you could think of,” Kay said.

The sister found a clerk, or a clerk found them, and planned that they were there to shop for wedding ensembles. They began to try on dresses, keeping in mind how much money Kay had.

“Because I didn’t know if my money would last, but it did,” she said.

The sisters were small, Kay said, adding that she was skinny then. But soon they found their dresses as if it happened.

The dresses were tube simi-
lar in style. “We didn’t plan that way, it just happened to be what we liked,” Kay explained.

The dresses were form fitting with long sleeves. Kay said hers had a white lace, crooked bolero jacket that dipped into a soft cowl neckline and tied with satin bows. She thinks Alma’s might have as well, but isn’t sure.

“Our dresses were $7.98 each. We were bargain shopping and it was something beautiful,” Kay said.

The sisters bought everything at Lucas’s including white stockings and white shoes. They kept the gloves because we were lucky to get what we got. By the time I bought Alma’s and mine I was pretty much broke,” Kay said.

In the middle of the day Kay and Alma stopped shopping for lunch. Later that afternoon, Jim and Paul picked them up and they went to Buechel farm in Bismarck before returning home. “It was a very happy day for me and Alma,” Kay said with a smile.

Back home wedding plans continued. Kay made her own dress and one bridesmaid. Alma had one of their sisters, Lydia (the Buechel had three bridesmaids and seven sons in the family).

Kusler touches the long end of her wedding veil as she begins to inspect her wedding dress.

Kay Buechel Kusler, 101, holds the original wedding bouquet and wedding dress in 1933 at her wedding to her beloved Paul and Kay returned to Mercer County and Beulah after Paul became ill.

Wide wedding reunion began in the Buechel family and continued the weather turned cold and wet, so there was no rice throwing outside as planned the church. Instead, following the "I do," Kay said all stood just inside the door so people could congratulate them as they left. "The time we got home after the church it was snowing seriously," Kay said.

No dance was planned. However, Kay said there was a big dinner for everyone at the Buechel farm family 5 miles south of Zap. "Our mother made a big dinner. We didn’t have special wedding cakes like they do now, but mother made each of us a big, special angel food cake," Kay said.

The snow storm continued to worsen and many of their house guests had to stay the night. “We didn’t go to bed at all that night with a houseful of people. We had Dad’s relatives from Montana and I stayed up to cook all night," Kay said.

The next morning Paul hauled people up the hill out of the barnyard to the road so they could go home. John and Alma settled into life on farmland, part given by his father and purchased. They raised a family of four children; Jerry, Milda, Jim, and Betty. John and Alma were also blessed with several grandchildren.

The years for Paul and Kay were good years, but children weren’t in the future. They lost their only child, Jerome, shortly after childbirth. "It was just the two of us most of our life, but we had a good life. And we raised more kids than we had our own," Kay said.

Kay said they tried farm life at the beginning, but it wasn’t for either of them. "We worked together and traveled to other states where we had businesses," Kay said.

After living out of North Dakota for several years, Paul’s relative,” Kay said.

Kay recalled that Paul made sure they owned a beautiful brown suit for the occasion and the flowers on John’s suit were noticeable. Both grooms wore a white shirt and new shoes.

John had a friend, Bill Binder, stand up for him. However, she’s not sure if the rest of the family was to be included, especially if they were to be a family member.

Not long before the ceremony, the dress was to be signed. "There was no sign of John," Kay said.

John was almost ready for the wedding because he had a cattle emergency right before the farm. But he got there just in time for the wedding and all went well," Kay said.

During the service, snow began, and the weather turned cold and wet, so there was no rice throwing outside as planned the church. Instead, following the "I do," Kay said all stood just inside the door so people could congratulate them as they left. "The time we got home after the church it was snowing seriously," Kay said.

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After living out of North Dakota for several years, Paul and Kay returned to Mercer County and Beulah after Paul became ill.

Wade wedding reunion began in the Buechel family, a double wedding in February, after it was donated to the Mercer County Museum. It was cleaned, pressed and placed on a mantle as they saw as Kay was the day she married. The Mercer County Museum, located in Beulah, is a collection of wedding dresses and suits on display for the public.

Museum director Lani Meyhoff loaded the mantauk with Kay’s dress into her vehicle one day and took it for a ride to visit the bride it belonged to.

As the mantauk rolled into the Knife River Care Center, it created quite a stir to everyone who saw it.

But one no more was moved by its sight than its former wearer.

“Oh, yeah, I can see it all now," Kay said. "It’s unbelievable. I can’t believe it still looks this nice. I wish Alma were here to see it." Kay’s hands moved over the long, worn and yellowed tulle veil as she commented on how the moths must have gotten it.

Then her hands touched the bottom hem as she rubbed the satin. Moving her hands up the slim hips of the mantauk, she commented again on how skinny she once was.

Then her hands moved to the sleeves that touched at the shoulder. Her eyes glared perhaps with the memories that played out in her mind.

“Oh, my mother would just flip if she saw this, but then she would say it’s just a dress.”

Yes, it’s just a dress, but oh what a dress. Of what a day Nov. 5, 1933, must have been. Just ask Kay. She’ll tell you it was the best day of her life.