

# Rae Arliss (Reierson) Murray's Grand Adventures

*By Gloria Lebeda, Cornerstone Community Relations Coordinator*

I had the privilege of meeting Rae Arliss (Reierson) Murray this week while visiting Cornerstone Residence of Fosston, where she resides in her adorable 1-bedroom apartment. Rae is a delightful woman that has led the most extraordinary life! I am compelled to tell her story. A story of a girl born and raised in Fosston, Minnesota that spread her wings further than anyone else I have met.

## **Rae Arliss's Heritage**

To get a clear vision of who Rae Arliss is, we need some background history of the people who helped form her into such an amazing woman. The Reierson family planted their roots in Fosston in 1883 when Rae's great-uncles came to America from Norway. Three years later Rae's grandpa, Knud, would travel alone, by ship to New York City. From there he boarded a train that took him to a point 30 miles west of Fosston. He then continued his journey by foot, walking on a pioneer wagon trail to join his two older brothers. Once he had finally made it to his destination, he was exhausted and filthy. The story goes that his siter-in-law took no pity on the filthy traveler, making him strip down, buck naked as soon as he arrived. She did not want him in the house until he had been bathed, so right there in the yard he took a bath. His sister-in-law proceeded to burn all the clothing he wandered in with.

Knud quickly settled and began to establish his roots into his new American home, Fosston, Minnesota. He and an acquaintance, John Helland, entered business together. Opening a meat market that they ran together until John's death in 1892. Knud, being a kind and generous man, took responsibility for John's widowed wife Lena and two children. He would make sure they had what they needed. Affections grew and Knud & Lena were married in 1894. Together they would have 5 additional children, and in 1899 they purchased a farmstead on the outskirts of Fosston.

Knud did not stop his business adventures with the Reierson Meat Market. He also bought and auctioned horses from Montana that he had shipped in by train and was a fur trader. However, possibly his best business choice was seizing the opportunity to buy as much farmland as he could. Soon he had 1,500 acres of farming land, which is modest acreage by today's standards; however, it was a substantial operation for the time. Needing help to manage his newly acquired acreage, Knud enlists his sons help and Reierson & Sons Farms was born.

Being a butcher was in Knud's blood, a trade he had brought him from Norway. With the success of the meat market, the farm, and his other dealings, it would have been easy for him to push his children to stay put and forgo formal schooling, but he was a wise man and felt strongly that a good education was important. As a diversified businessman, he had the means to provide the opportunity for all his children to be educated. Not only did all 7 graduate high school, but they also all went on to receive a college education, which was quite remarkable for the time period.

Knud and Lena's youngest child, Arthur (Spot) O. Reierson was no exception to getting an education. Spot attended the University of North Dakota majoring in Engineering. No doubt the skills he



**Knud & Lena's  
wedding photo taken in 1894.**

learned would come in handy as he managed his father's farm.



**Spot & Esther Reierson  
Wedding photo taken in  
1931.**

Spot kept himself quite busy at the farm, but a local dance would call his name from time to time, which led him to meet Esther Ekeberg, a farm girl from south of McIntosh. Esther is said to have been quoted "dances are a place to find a husband," and that she did. Making quite the impression on Spot, despite their 8-year age difference, the two were married in 1931.

### **September 25, 1934 - Rae's Adventures Begin**

Three years after their marriage, Spot and Esther welcomed their one and only child, Rae Arliss Reierson, on September 25, 1934. Esther loved being a mom and settled into her role on the farm managing the household. She was said to have been the classic farmers wife, able to do anything!



**Rae Arliss  
Photo taken as she  
enters 1st Grade**

Rae Arliss remembers growing up in Fosston fondly. She feels growing up in a small, rural town was a great place to start out, with opportunities that kids in bigger cities would not have had. She tells me of

joy she took in stopping to visit her grandpa Knud at the meat market on her walk home from school. As a bonus, on cold days, it gave her time to warm up before heading the rest of the way home to the farm.

She worked side by side with her dad on the farm throughout her youth. Rae Arliss says with pride and a big smile "People say that only children are spoiled. Only children work harder! There is no one else to share the work with. I have been working from the age of three, washing eggs, one at a time! I've been driving trucks in the field since I was eleven. Hauling grain to the elevator at that age! ...I think that was basically the Norwegian work ethic, I really do."



**Rae Arliss & Spot Reierson  
Photo taken with Cessna 140.**

Attending school in Fosston afforded Rae with many friends and a love for cheerleading! Her smile brightened as she shares "Mr. Konover, my history teacher at Fosston, was the one that taught me how to do handsprings. He could do them with a suit on! Can you imagine, I could not" she laughs. She goes on to say of her mother "She was a good mom. I tell you what, she could sew. Oh, she was a seamstress. She made all my clothes when I was a kid, and in high school. I don't know how many cheerleading costumes she made. Not only for me, but for the others that didn't have somebody to sew for them. It was fun" she says. Rae Arliss continued to cheer until her graduation from FHS in 1952.

After graduation Spot encouraged her to attend Stephens College. Stephens was a college for women located in Columbia, Missouri. He hoped that Rae Arliss would study their aviation program and become a pilot. He dreamed of her flying him over their hunting property to spot deer. Rae Arliss, as a true daddy's girl, did not disappoint! She graduated in 1954 with an Associate of Science degree in aeronautics. She flew her dad, Spot, around to "deer watch" in a Cessna 140 that he

purchased. "He was a true hunter." Rae chuckles and adds, "once I asked "Dad, why in the world... for what reason did you send me to Stephens" and Spot replied to her, "To take off the rough edges." Rae laughs again, "Thanks dad" she says. While reminiscing of her early college days at Stephens she recalls, "at this time I became just Rae, it was easier."

Rae, in true Reiersen fashion, continued her education. Attending the University of Illinois where she got a Bachelor of Science degree in physical & health education and became a licensed flight instructor with a commercial pilot rating. She tells me, with glee in her voice, about when she heard of the call for tri-outs to be on the U of I cheer-leading squad. She says proudly "I made the top ten out of 100 people at the University of Illinois, coming from little Fosston! She regretfully had to decline the spot on the team because it interfered with her student teaching schedule.

Turns out, declining her position on the cheer team to continuing with her student teaching, would lead her meet her husband. James (Jim) Murray was a newly minted career U.S. Marine Corps officer and ordained Baptist minister. Rae recalls, "Mom got to meet Jim before dad did. In fact, dad said, "Esther you need to get down there and check this out, it sounds serious!" It was serious, and soon Spot got the chance to meet Jim as well. Rae lights up remembering a conversation between Jim & Spot. "Jim, I just don't know how you are going to make a preachers wife out of Rae," with Jim's response being, "Spot, I am just going to let Rae be Rae." "Jim did just that," says Rae. The two returned to Fosston to be married at Kingo Lutheran Church in Fosston on June 22, 1957. In the years to follow they welcome their son and daughter, Mike Murray, and Robyn (Murray) Speltz, who then became part of their amazing story.

When I ask Rae if her family was able to visit Fosston often with Jim's very active military career she says, "Oh yes, of course. As an only child I did." She recalls one visit when Jim hurried in to tell Spot, "Spot, grandpa [Knud] just loaded up about 10 pounds of meat for a lady that asked for \$1 worth." Spot replied with understanding, "It's okay Jim. We lose about \$100 each month [a substantial amount of money at the time] to keep the meat market open for grandpa. It makes him happy." Rae smiles and continues "Grandpa (Knud) was very generous. If a widow came in [to Reiersen Meat Market] for a pound of meat, he'd load them up" she holds her hands about 6" apart.



**U.S. Marine Corps Officer  
James Murray**



### **Being a military/preacher's wife**

Rae enjoyed being a preacher's wife. She always gravitated towards the children of the congregation feeling they enjoyed her company as much as she enjoyed theirs. She says being a tomboy came in handy as a preacher's wife. The kids loved that she would play all the games with them, including kick ball. She recalls taking many camping trips as well, "I always was in charge of building bonfires," stating "I don't think many Baptist preachers' wives did those things."

Being a preacher's wife may have seemed easier at times than being a military wife, but Rae says with her ever-positive attitude "It was never an issue for me, he had a job to do."

**Here is a picture of Rae's family taken in 1988 while aboard the Norwegian Cruise Line SS Norway on a Caribbean cruise. Back Row: Mike Murray (Son), James Murray (husband), Chris Speltz (son-in-law) Front Row: Doris Murray (daughter-in-law), Rae Arliss (Reiersen) Murray and Robyn (Murray) Speltz (Daughter)**



## **Establishing roots**

During one of Jim's deployments to Vietnam, Rae and their two children moved back to Fosston. At this time Rae taught physical education in area schools. One of her teaching positions was at the Fosston school as a long-term substitute teacher for Bernice Carlin. Bernice was pregnant and at that time teachers were not allowed to work much past their 4<sup>th</sup> month of pregnancy. Some feared a pregnant teacher would "warp the psyches" of boys. Rae says "I had so much respect for her (Bernice). We became such good friends, still are. I had never experienced anyone more organized, and easy for me to just step right in than her. Her lesson plans, everything about her was organized and I had so much respect for her. She deserved every accolade she ever got out of Fosston. She established the volleyball program" Rae gleams of her dear friend.

Rae's son, Mike, remembers the time they spent in Fosston with fondness. He cherishes that he was able to be rooted in one place from second to fifth grade. The friends he made became lifelong friends. He explains that as a "military brat" they had moved 12 times and had been enrolled in 7 different schools by the time he graduated. He remembers, with a sense of pride for both parents, his mom having to keep the fires burning at home while his dad served his country.

Jim retires after 26 years of dedicated service to his country in 1976. Ending his career in the United States Marine Corps as Lieutenant Colonel James W. Murray. He was a Korea and Vietnam combat veteran earning a Bronze Star with Combat "V" and three Purple Hearts. You might think that Jim would take it easy after his retirement, but instead he takes on the challenge of becoming the president of Oakland City University located in southern Indiana. During his presidency, Rae becomes the Oakland City University First Lady. She also teaches physical education, is a women's volleyball coach, and gymnastics coach all for the Oakland City University.

Also, in 1976, Mike graduates from Wood Memorial High School, in Oakland City, Indiana. With education being a big part of this family heritage, Mike heads off to further his education at the University of Evansville in Indiana. Remembering the moment that changed his life, the first glance at his future wife, he says, "when I saw her fall quarter of our freshman year, I thought to myself, wow, that is the one I wanted to marry." He laughs, "she didn't think that. We've been married 41 years and she still doesn't think that!" Knowing they wanted a family, he and Doris decide to plant their roots in the only place that ever felt like home to Mike, Fosston. They did just that! After Esther, Mike's grandma, passed away in 1994 he took over the original homestead that Knud & Lena bought in 1899. The property has been placed in a Life Estate to ensure that many more generations will bless the farmstead.

## **Rae's Travels**

Rae's list of credentials is long! She is the doting mother of two, was a Marine officer's wife, professor of aviation at the University of Illinois, collegiate gymnasts and volleyball coach, high school and collegiate physical education teacher, Oakland City University First Lady, congressional aide for Congresswoman Coya Knutson, who was Minnesota's first congresswomen, was awarded with an Honorary Doctorate of Humanities, and she still managed to travel to 60 countries!

One of her travel expeditions is shared by Rae's son, Mike. He tells me a story of a trip she made to the Soviet Union, which was under communist control at the time. He says "a customs officer was going through her baggage. She had hidden all these Russian language New Testaments in her clothes, and he found them! He took one, looked at it, looked at her, put one in his pocket, closed her bag and let her go!" Rae says frequently while I visit with her that God has blessed her. I think this story from Mike speaks to that truth.

God also blessed Rae with the ability to talk to anyone! Rae is, and always has been, very outgoing with a gift to gab. While in London, she toured Princess Diana's family home where she met the 9<sup>th</sup> Earl

Charles Spencer, who was Princess Diana's brother. Rae says, "Aww, yes, I had a conversation with Diana's brother. He was a handsome kid." She continues, "He was helping them sorting through books and things for the gift shop. Really, really nice. He said [Charles] "You'll have to excuse the house; I'm finally redecorating after my step-mother gilded everything"" says Rae laughing at the thought of everything being gilded. Rae points to her coffee table. There sits an autographed copy of one of Charles Spencer's books.

Rae loves books, but as a Christian the Bible is her favorite book! In the course of one of her 11 trips to Israel, while at a kibbutz [kibbutz - a communal settlement in Israel, typically a farm] on Golan Heights, Rae tells, "There was fighting going on between [Syria] and Israel and we were up at the fence line where they were lobing in rockets. We got a chance to visit with Israeli soldiers that were in for coffee. We had 4 or 5 little old ladies from a little town outside Oakland City that were on the trip. We were in a bus. We had been stopped halfway. We were told to stay on the bus, and they would transfer us to the airport, and we would fly out to Jordan. I am sort of in charge and the next thing I know these 4 ladies, that were in their late 70s early 80s, were outside the bus visiting with the armed guards, who had put their weapons down and were visiting with these 4 little old ladies that wouldn't harm a flea. They were told to stay on the bus, but like many of us at this age", she says gesturing to herself, "you do what you want to do!" She laughs, "and they wanted to visit. What a life I had. I was so blessed."

### **Rae makes friends wherever she goes**

Sometime after Jim's passing in 2012, Rae returned to her hometown, where her life's journey began, to summer close to Mike and his family in Fosston. In the winter she went to Texas, where her daughter Robyn and her family lives. During her winters in Texas, she shared a back yard with the actor, Matthew McConaughey. He called her Ms. Rae. If Matthew ever came across Rae gassing up at the nearby gas station, he would run over to pump her gas. Mike chuckles as he says "she called him Matt."

Rae is now a full time Fosston resident, living at Cornerstone Residence. Rae says with fondness speaking of Clara Albrecht, one of Cornerstone's amazing Personal Assistants, "They don't care that I am 86 going on 87 and all. They just don't care that I am old. Clara is one, if she is going off duty she will come in and say, "how are you doing" and I will say, I'm just fine. She will ask, "have you slept yet" and I'll say, there's something really good on TV and then [Clara] will say, "I'm going to have to get after you."

She is truly a sweet girl; she has a big heart." Rae continues, "I will pretend and say, I'm done, turn out the lights, I'm fine, and I will click off the TV. I'll wait until she is gone and click the TV back on, the lights back on and watch what I want." Rae laughs, "I wonder if she knows that, I bet she has it figured out."

Mike is happy that his mom is at Cornerstone. He says "We don't have to worry. We know she is in good hands. Clara, Aimee, and the nurses are rock stars! They walk on water as far as mom is concerned. Brandi [Cornerstone RN Coordinator] has been wonderful to work with. We need more people to go into this profession."

Rae is quite the lady, that has lived quite the life! After meeting and visiting Rae Arliss (Reierson)



**Great-Grandma Rae with all her "Greats" taken at the family lake cottage in northern Minnesota. Her great-grandchildren her "GG".**



Murray for a mere hour and half she assures me “If you ever need Rae, Rae will be here.” I left her cute apartment knowing I will be forever moved by her life, her grace, but mostly her love for all. Rae would tell you that none of her other achievements compare to being the mother of 2, grandmother of 4, great-grandmother of 6, and friend to all.

“If you are kind to others, they will be kind to you. That is what I’ve seen.” ~Rae Arliss (Reierson) Murray

**Rae Arliss (Reierson) Murray**  
**Photo taken on April 7th, 2021 in her Cornerstone Residence apartment in Fosston, Minnesota.**