

GETTING TO KNOW OUR PARISH FAMILY



Could you imagine getting on a bus, heading out of state, looking for a job, with only 17 cents in your pocket? Well, that's what Irene Nicolai did 75 years ago.

Irene was born May 11, 1919 in Eden, South Dakota, the daughter of Frank and Mary Schlekewy. She had four siblings and attended grade school in Eden. She graduated from Webster High School and started Beauty School in Aberdeen, South Dakota but had to withdraw because of chemical allergies. So, through a State Employment Agency, she headed to Minnesota, looking for work.

Paul Gores went to the Agency to offer her a job as waitress in Hampton, at Cozy Corners. Irene and two other girls lived above the store, working as waitresses and pumping gas. Her new job brought her many new friendships and acquaintances. That's where she met her future husband, Herb Nicolai.

They married on Thanksgiving Day in 1940 and made their home on a farm in Hampton Township. As a homemaker, Irene also worked as a sales clerk for the Emporium in St. Paul and the Meyer Company in Hastings. She worked at Meyer Co. for 21 years, but quit to take care of her husband, after he was diagnosed with cancer. Herb died in 1981, after 40 years of marriage.

Irene was an active member of the St. Mathias Parish from the time she arrived in Hampton. Irene has chaired many committees, cleaned church, worked funerals, cooked for weddings, and donated to many church and community fundraisers. She is well known for her fabulous pies and jellies she makes to give to friends or donate to various functions. Irene also cooked hot lunch at the St. Mathias School for many years, until retiring in 2004, at the age of 85.

Besides baking, she also enjoys sewing. For many years she mended the uniforms for the Hampton Cardinal Baseball Team. Anytime you drop by her house, you will find her working on her latest embroidery project. Her beautiful tablecloths or dishtowels are usually given as gifts or donated to the annual Fun Fest.

The Nicolai's have three daughters. Mary Kay (Jerry Irrthum-deceased) a member of St. Pius in Cannon Falls, Nancy (Dave Radman) and Sallie (Kevin Scott), both members of the St. Mathias Parish. She has six grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. All her children and grandchildren attended St. Mathias School. Their family is also very active in the Catholic United Financial (Formerly Catholic Aid).

Many who know Irene have considered her their "adopted" mother. She is a role model for many and shares her love and compassion with those who know her.