

The following vignette is from the oral history of Catherine Munson, who grew up in the Dust Bowl during the Depression and is now a prominent real estate developer and philanthropist in Marin County, California. Many times in her life, she has found herself in unlikely and thrilling circumstances, always by a fluke. Catherine describes in this story how she solved a murder mystery at the age of six, quite by accident. "I wasn't trying to be Nancy Drew," she laughs. "I hadn't started to read her books yet. I was just there!"

—Trena Cleland

Sand Hills Murder Mystery

Catherine Munson, Narrator

I was born in 1928 and grew up in Albion, Nebraska, a tiny little town of about 1,200 at the end of the railroad spur. Immediately beyond the town, the Sand Hills began. To this day, they are not very populated, and the train still turns around when it gets to Albion. There's no need for it to go into the Sand Hills.

It was the height of the Great Depression, and my father was basically unemployed. A certified public accountant, he once owned the local Chevrolet agency, which had long since gone down the tubes. But when I was a child, he ran a bicycle shop. He would come home at

night and put the change from his pocket on the table. That was the family income. It might be fifty-four cents; it might be seventy-nine cents for the day.

The Depression was the constant talk of the town, but as a child, I really found it boring. I couldn't see that we were in the worst of dire straits. We were in straits, all right, but I didn't think it was all that bad. Our parents may have been traumatized; we children weren't.

The dust storms, though, were frightening, terrifying. They were dirty and nasty, and they ruined our crops. I was interested in the crops around us and passionate about the weather. We prayed for rain. Except that whenever we got it, it was usually too much, and we had torrential floods.

I had a lot of freedom to roam. I was no more than six, maybe five, when I bought a bicycle with the seven dollars I had earned by selling string beans from our garden door-to-door. It was a great boy's bike, which I painted raspberry, and it transported me wherever I wanted to go.

The little Carnegie Library was about two blocks from our house. There were limited things to do in Albion, so I'd go to the library and check out a book or stay there and read for twenty or thirty minutes. Then I'd get on my bike and go some other place. Although I read quickly and read a lot, I didn't hang around the library. I went there because I had my route with my bike, and it was simply one more place to stop. Madge Graden, the librarian, was a friend of my mother, and she put up with me. We had a casual "hello, goodbye" relationship.

I was six when my father came home from the bicycle shop one day and said, "Sheriff Smoyer is missing." Smoyer was Albion's sheriff. My father was a deputy sheriff, one of



Sand Hills near Catherine Munson's childhood home in Albion, Nebraska

the few paying jobs for local able-bodied men in those days. Everybody was very concerned, and the deputies all fanned out to look for the sheriff.

The next day, I went out on my bike, just making the rounds. Albion was a little town; it didn't take very long to make the rounds. I went into the library, read a little, and came back out. Three men and two women were sitting on the lawn. To my eyes, they were certainly adults, but they were probably in their twenties. I didn't know them and thought, *They don't belong on the grass*. So I went up to them and said, "You mustn't sit on the lawn because Madge Graden will be mad at you if she finds out that you're sitting here."

"Oh, yeah, really?"

"Yes, you really mustn't sit on this grass. You should get up and go someplace else." That was the extent of my concern—to get them off Madge Graden's grass.

After leaving the library, I heard the noon whistle and went home. The whole town lived by the noon whistle, which reminded us to go home for dinner, and the five o'clock whistle, our signal to go home for supper.

At dinner, my father was very upset because they couldn't find Sheriff Smoyer or his car. It had been about

eighteen hours since he disappeared. It was our custom during dinner to listen to the radio station out of Norfolk, which was about a hundred miles away. The noon news was broadcast by Don Bridge, the "Hootmahn." A Scottish fellow, he was always offering prizes for all kinds of trivial things. In those days, any prize—even one box of Cracker Jacks popcorn—was a big deal.

The Hootmahn announced that they couldn't find Sheriff Smoyer in Albion, Nebraska. "Everyone should be on the lookout," he said and described some possible suspects in the sheriff's disappearance.

I was sitting at the table, eating my mashed potatoes and gravy. My ears perked right up. I told Dad, "Those are the people that were on Madge Graden's grass! That's exactly who they were!"

"Oh, my God," he said.

Dad immediately called the sheriff's office. Then we called the Hootmahn in Norfolk. That was a big deal because it was a long distance telephone call. On the air, I told Don about the people I had seen and described what they were wearing in a little more detail. I could hear myself on the radio, talking with him!

Well, by golly, they apprehended those young people in the Sand Hills three or four days later, and they had indeed murdered Sheriff Smoyer.

Oh, I was a hero to Don Bridge, the Hootmahn. And to think, I even won a deck of playing cards as a prize! Can you stand it? What more could you ask? I don't know why they murdered the sheriff. My own excitement in identifying the killers was as far as I went!