

She sat in an old wooden chair, which swiveled, so she swiveled it, ever so slightly from side to side. It was how her dad, Theodore “Ted” Hemmelgarn, had sat in the same chair during his long years of teaching at St. Rose School.

Marjorie Hemmelgarn Diller, the fourth of his five children and the only one still living, sat in her father’s chair with good posture, clear eyes, and her mother’s smile. She was ready to talk about her father, but also a little worried. How do you sum up in one conversation someone who was not only a gifted educator of many, many children, but quite possibly the greatest dad of all time?

Teacher Hemmelgarn, who taught at the St. Rose Schoolhouse for decades, was the spirit of the school. He fired its furnace early in the morning, set the course for each day and made sure the children followed it. He was the teacher and leader and recess monitor, the keeper of discipline and the one who held high the lamp of learning. Oh, and he drove the bus route in the afternoon.

In a one-room schoolhouse, he towered above everyone else—literally. Over six feet tall, he carried himself well. The discipline that he imposed upon the children he also required of himself: he got up at 5 every morning, walked down to the schoolhouse to collect the coal that would heat both school and St. Rose Church next door. Get the furnaces going in the church and school, then return to his nearby house for breakfast, then back to church to take his seat on the organ bench, for he was also the parish organist and its choir director. Then on to school.

Marjorie and her brothers and sisters, Elmer, Alton, Wilma and Janice, watched all this, and learned about hard work and responsibility from him and their mother, Marie, an excellent cook, baker and seamstress who kept an immaculate house.

The family’s days fell into a rhythm set by the church and school, even on Sundays. “After 9 a.m. Mass, we would eat and do the dishes, then go out and play ball in our pasture. When it got to be 1 p.m., we dropped everything and went to the church for afternoon services (benediction). After that, we went back out and played ball again. It was just a natural thing to do.”

On school days, the children got up and ate the breakfast their mother prepared, then set off for school. It was just a natural thing that the man in behind the desk was their dad, because that’s all they ever knew. Marjorie said she knew even then that he was good at his job; everybody said so.

There were six students in Marjorie’s class, three boys and three girls. In the early grades, they had “a lady teacher,” she said, but her father taught them in grades 4-8. “He was just our teacher, and he treated us the same as anybody else,” she said.

Teaching was all that Ted Hemmelgarn had ever wanted to do. Born in 1898 into a large family in Burkettsville, he attended Bowling Green State University, working toward his two-year teaching certificate. But “World War I was on, and dad got on the train to go back to Burkettsville to go off to war,” Marjorie said. “Just when he got there, they announced the war was over. He turned around and went right back to school.”

Back to school was where he stayed for the rest of his life. He taught first at Sharpsburg School, where a friend invited him home for a meal. There, Ted met his friend’s sister, Marie Timmerman. When the rest of the family went out to the barn for chores after dinner, Ted stayed in the kitchen to help Marie do

dishes. "I think he even got a little kiss," Marjorie said. For Ted, another piece of his forever life fell into place.

Having found his dream girl, he then landed his dream job, teaching at St. Rose. Being the organist at church was part of the arrangement. "He had only ever had one music lesson in his life," Marjorie said. "It just came naturally to him. And he directed the choir, too, a men's choir, and they were good!"

At school he taught all eight grades of students in the early years; in later years, when the schoolhouse was divided into two rooms, Mr. Hemmelgarn taught the older children. His own children tagged along whenever he wasn't teaching, and helped when they could. "At 6 a.m., he had to ring the church bells—he was the bell-ringer," Marjorie said. There were three ropes in those days, and the bell ringer had to know the order and duration of the ringing.

"I had to do that later on when I got older. One Sunday, mom and dad had gone visiting and I was supposed to ring the bells at noon and 6 p.m. I messed up and rang them at 5 p.m., and the neighbor lady came out and said, 'Who died?'"

You can tell from the family's stories how the clock ruled their waking hours. But when Mr. Hemmelgarn's long day was finished, he knew how to set it aside. He never, ever helped his own children with their homework, Marjorie said—her mother stepped in and worked with Marjorie at the kitchen table, with her little sister Janice, two years younger, sitting nearby. Her mother must have been a good teacher too, because when Janice went to school, she already knew how to read and write.

Mr. Hemmelgarn had another talent: he was a woodworker. There was a shop behind the house that was half play area for the children, and half workshop for their father. One Christmas, Marjorie said, she and Janice got the best present they could ever have imagined. She was probably in third or fourth grade at the time. "He made a long table with a bench on each side, and the top of it was slate. He also gave us each our own container of colored chalk. I mean to tell you, to this day, I wonder how he did it. It was just perfect. We could sit there and draw for hours with our colored chalk."

When St. Rose School closed in 1957, Mr. Hemmelgarn's career was not over. He was a substitute teacher and then principal at St. John Elementary. His granddaughter, Marjorie's daughter June Heitbrink, remembers him as a kind man who knew how to take charge of a school room. "He just had control over everything," she said. "When he was the substitute teacher, things ran smoothly—even more smoothly than when the original teacher was there."

And he continued woodworking, building barns and kitchenettes and doll cradles for the grandkids and other children in town. "His basement was like Santa's workshop," said granddaughter Kim Habodasz. "Lots of people around here still have things that he made."

As for Marjorie, she is a proud 1956 graduate of St. John's High School, part of the last class to graduate from St. John's before it became Marion Local. She married Ralph Diller on June 5, 1958, "a nice day with just one little shower," she said. "Dad played the organ at our wedding," and a reception followed at the family home.

Ralph and Marjorie went on to have six children, part of Ted and Marie Hemmelgarn's 23 grandchildren.

Mr. Hemmelgarn died in 1996 at the age of 98. "I wish I could have gotten him to 100," Marjorie said. But when the bell rings, it rings.

She's left not only with her own memories but those of so many others, who talk to her about their favorite teacher, her father.

"I have to say I have the best dad in the world, and the best mother too," she said. "I had the perfect childhood. As you get older, you think about that. Oh, our family had problems, there are always problems. But they took things in stride. They accepted what came their way."