

Robert E. Lyons
December 29, 1909-November 19, 1995

Greetings: Dear family and friends. The Lyons family comes together once again to perform the ancient rites of passage. In our tradition these gatherings are the last occasion for the living and the recently departed to enjoy each other's company. It is especially fitting that we who have enjoyed life with him for so long gather to give Bob a suitable send off. For Alice, Charles, and all of us nephews and nieces and our spouses, we thank you for joining us and invite you to a luncheon after this morning's services.

Quitting time has finally come for Bob. Aging was long at work on him. Time continued to run when it need not continue at all (Yeats). Last Sunday eve, in his 86th year, the quietness ended in silence. No doubt at day's end, he was overtired of the great harvest a farmer desired. (R. Frost). Today we celebrate his life with us in a final reunion. I am Bob Lyons, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, one of several nephews proud to share his name.

Bob lived here in Wagner since his birth four days after Christmas in 1909, the son of William F. Lyons and Katherine Cosgrove, and sole remaining grandchild of Irish immigrant parents, Jeremiah and Ellen Lyons. You could not stand for five minutes with Bob Lyons beneath a shed while it rained, but you must be convinced you had been standing with the best storyteller in Charles Mix County. He was the youngest in a family of twelve children; I am the youngest in a family of seven--that we shared in common. In a big family the first child is kind of like the first pancake; if it's not perfect, that's okay, there are a lot more coming along.

As a farmer all his life, raising hogs, cattle and grain, Bob knew that farming is a way to spend money, not make it. He took public business, not as a duty which he was to fulfill, but as a pleasure he was to enjoy. Bob was elected State Representative for three terms, 1970 to 1976, representing 19,000 residents of the 16th district which includes Charles Mix, Bon Homme and Northwest Douglas counties. He said: *"I never campaigned for election, and never made speeches. My friend, Sheriff Frank 'Mr. Democrat' McCabe of Charles Mix County told me: 'Bob, you're going to run. And so I did.'"* He did not seek re-election to the House when his term expired in 1976, saying, *"Let the young ones take over"*. However, in 1977, Governor Richard Kneip appointed Bob to finish the term of his ailing friend, Republican Senator Jess Tjeerdsma of Springfield, at the Senator's request, representing district 16 in the Senate.

Bob's portfolio of public service displays a wide menu of interests: from protecting domestic water well owners and tax relief for the elderly and disabled (passed in 1974), to fighting efforts to lower milk standards, informing his constituents, *"Before the Dairy Marketing Acts, if a dead cat fell in it (the milk), we pulled it out and sold it anyway"*. An environmentalist before it was fashionable, he filed a bill to ban non-biodegradable disposable diapers after they clogged his swather in the grain field.

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He worked to get a state income tax and to repeal the personal property tax, writing in his newspaper column, *"Its time we start taxing new Cadillacs and quit taxing old living room chairs."* When opponents circulated a story that he had died, Bob issued a statement that like Mark Twain, *"reports of my death are greatly exaggerated,"* and won re-election.

Bob continued a long Lyons family tradition of civic and political involvement in the community and State. He told a reporter, *"I've always been interested in politics; when I was a boy, my father had me traveling the county on horseback to spread the word for Tom Berry, the cowboy Governor."* His immigrant grandfather in Chicago, Jeremiah Lyons, was politically active in the presidential campaign of Stephen A. Douglas in 1860 when the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln was elected. His uncle, Richard F. Lyons, who led the Lyons family to Dakota Territory in the early 1880s, was a member of the Constitutional Convention of the State of South Dakota (1889) and chairman of the State Democratic Party. Bob would point with pride to his uncle's name inscribed in the rotunda of the Capitol at Pierre. Another uncle, Dennis Lyons, served in the Iowa State legislature. A cousin, Thomas D. Lyons, was a candidate for the elected position of State Superintendent of Schools in South Dakota and later a distinguished lawyer and judge on the Supreme Court bench in Oklahoma. Bob's mother, Katherine Cosgrove, a former school teacher, was active on the local school board.

It is no secret to this congregation that Bob Lyons was a devout practicing Democrat. He once told the story of a young man who was driving his mother to the polls on election day. Mrs. O'Rielly always voted straight Democrat. But her upwardly mobile son always split his ticket and was drifting toward the other party. Impatiently, the son asked his mother how she was going to vote that day. Mrs. O'Rielly replied, *"Straight Democratic."* *"Mom,"* said the son, *"If Jesus came back to earth and ran as a Republican you'd vote against him".* *"Aw hush!"* his mother snapped back. *"Why should he change his party after all these years."*

Like much else about us, most things in our life are decided by the accidents of birth, the fall of the dice which gave us our homes, our parents and the moment of history when we first became aware of the world around us (J. Mortimer). A wise man always keeps a piece of his childhood in his pocket. Bob told us stories heard in his childhood of the perilous journey made by his grandparents, Jeremiah Lyons and Ellen Whelan, when they fled the Great Famine, sailing to Boston and on to New York in 1845. After working on the railroads, the growing Lyons family established a farm in the Bridgeport section of Chicago where his father, William, was born in 1861.

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He would tell once again the foundation story of the Lyons family migration from Iowa to Lake Badus near Madison, where they joined a Swiss farming colony, and how at the turn of this century, his father and mother and his older brothers and sisters moved to the ^{a farm near} Pat O'Hara farm near Wagner. Eventually they bought 4/40s of Indian land which made a square quarter section for \$10 per acre, which was \$1,600. Bob was born there. He told us his boyhood home was *"not a castle or a palace, but three claim shanties shoved together, and that's where we lived. But it was always home, and everybody was welcome there."*

He often recounted the cycle of life and death in those early pioneer days. When sister Katherine, died of scarlet fever, Bob's parents hitched up the horses and drove ten miles to the Wagner cemetery on a moonlight night. Returning home at sunrise, his mother found son Richard dead with the same fever, and retraced the journey to place him next to his sister's fresh grave. With great affection for his mother, Bob said *"to the day she died, mother never wanted to see a moonlit night again."* No family gathering was ever complete until he re-told the story of little Johnny, who would have been his older brother. Johnny crawled up on a cabinet, got his hands on a bottle of carbolic acid and drank it. Bob said that *"being thirteen miles from the nearest doctor--a twenty six mile round trip by horseback--Mother held Johnny in her arms and fanned him with a newspaper until he died."* Bob last told us that story just a few years ago as we stood at the shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary which his parents put up years later as a memorial to little Johnny in the quiet country cemetery of St. Ann's on the edge of Lake Badus.

Bob's life spanned the generation from homesteaders and sodbusters to farmers and ranchers. Through his stories of the early days in South Dakota he answered the question: *"what is a pioneer"?* A pioneer is a beginner. He told us that pioneers in any country are those who make its beginnings as did his father and mother, his Irish grandparents, and uncles and aunts, and older brothers who began the trails that later became roads, staked out land claims, put in crops and started farming. They broke sod that men and women to come might live. Once located on the quarter-section claim, which would be their own land and home if they stayed a few years and farmed it, there was strife and struggle. ("The American Songbag", Carl Sandburg, 1927). Bob *"remembered well the curse of brassy summer skies, withered crops, and yellow prairied grasses"* (Harvey Dunne "Just A Few Drops of Rain" 1940) and told us the final chapter of the Lyons family farm. *"My parents paid off the farm and as farmers have always done, re-mortgaged the farm to buy other land. Thirty years after they bought it, they lost it (1936) to the Federal Land Bank for lack of \$1,600, the same amount they paid for it."*

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After they lost the farm, our grandparents lived with aunt Mary and uncle Vince in Rapid City. When grandpa had a stroke in 1943, my dad, our uncles Jerry, Dennis and Bob went out for a farewell visit to their father. Through his crippled and speechless body, grandpa tried to say something but his sons could not understand what it was. After he died, the undertaker found a \$20 bill stuffed in grandpa's pants pocket. Finally, Bob realized his father had been trying to tell them to remove the \$20 bill before he was laid to rest.-----Did anyone check Bob's pockets recently?

Bob also shared with us a spirit of adventure and zest for life; the fun of Firemen's conventions and dances where Bob's older brother, Bill, met a school teacher, Miss Mary Donohoe, who would become my mother,--and the excitement of Wagner's annual Labor Day celebrations. Some of you present this morning must have been present the day Bob was campaigning on top of a table in a certain establishment in Wagner and lost his hat in the ceiling fan. And all those Irish wakes, and family gatherings of Lyonses and Coughlins, with his stream of stories and anecdotes of family history. He told us the case of the multiplying gunny sack. It seems he attempted to dispose of unwanted cats in a gunny sack, depositing them behind his neighbor's barn after dark; they mysteriously got loose and appeared to have doubled in number upon their return to Bob's farm from whence they had come.

Well, that's the end of Bob's stories. From this day forward, we'll have to make and tell our own. Now is the hour for a final drive to the field to make one last furrow for Bob in the Dakota sod. Until quitting time comes 'round for us, his spirit will remain with us to:

Walk tall as the trees,

Live strong as the mountains,

Be gentle as the spring and keep the warmth of summer in our hearts. (Old Indian Prayer)

Bob, we send you on "your journey to the land where there is no night nor sorrow nor death" (St. Patrick) with this final Irish blessing:

May the blessings of the earth, the good, rich earth--be with you. May the earth be soft and rest lightly over you when at last you rest upon it, so that your spirit may be out from under it quickly, and up, and off, and on its way to God.

Farewell, good uncle and friend, we'll meet up again at the next campaign rally.

St. John the Baptist Church, Wagner, South Dakota - November 25, 1995

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207-967-2014