

The Mogren Family



Founders of Carefree Senior Community



Boy oh boy (x12), what a mom!



Arlene Mogren still has the pretty yellow baby dress she received as a shower gift 57 years ago when she was pregnant for the first time. She didn't use it then because that first child's name is Tom.

She didn't need it for her second, third or fourth babies, either: Bruce, Steve and Keith. After the fourth boy, I was a little disappointed that it wasn't a girl, Arlene said. But then it really didn't matter.

Good thing, because babies five through 12 were boys, too. Dennis, Jeff, Gregory, Patrick, Scott, Peter, Brian and Eric, the baby. Hes 35.

To this day, the yellow dress remains folded neatly, never used, in a cedar chest.

After church today, Arlene's boys will take her to brunch in Stillwater. Jerry, her husband died in 1998, but 11 sons and their families will be with her on Mother's Day. (Gregory, the seventh son, died of a brain tumor when he was 8 months old).

On most such outings, people seem amazed to hear about 11 grown children in one family. And when they realize that all 11 are boys, the response is nearly universal: Oh, your poor mother. She must be a saint. Her sons will tell you that she is.

Twelve boys in a row. What are the odds?

Its hard to gauge precisely, said Gary Oehlert, director of graduate studies in the University of Minnesota's School of Statistics, because there isn't an exact 50 percent chance of having a girl or a boy, and there may be biological tendencies in each parent that make it more likely that their offspring would be one sex or the other. But if you simplify the calculations and assume that for each birth theres an equal chance that it will be a boy or a girl, then if you have 12 children the odds are one in 4,096 that all would be boys, Oehlert said.

Jerry had three brothers, no sisters; Arlene had one sister. Five of their 14 grandchildren are girls.

Arlene and Jerry were sweethearts at North St. Paul High School. They were married in 1946, while Jerry served in the Navy. He called on a Thursday and said "Lets get married". He got home Sunday, we got married Tuesday and he left on Thursday, Arlene recalled.

She followed him to the West Coast for several months, until he was discharged and they returned to Maplewood. Tom was born the next year and the tiny family lived in a small house at White Bear Avenue and County Road C.

Jerry, who worked for the Soo Line Railroad, needed sod for the new yard, so he cut some from an uncle's nearby pasture. When that worked out, he began a sod business with his brother on nights and weekends. After 10 years, they went into the landscaping business full time. (At one time they grew sod on land that is now the Maplewood Mall, and the family operated Country View Golf Course in Maplewood for decades until it was closed this year).

Meanwhile, the family added a son pretty much every two years. Soon the house, with two bedrooms downstairs and a barracks on the upper level, was overflowing with eight boys. (The yellow house still stands and is now a barber shop.).

In 1965, Jerry built a new, five-bedroom house a half-mile north. For 11 months in 1969 after Eric was born and before Tom moved out, all 11 boys lived there with their parents. At times, up to five boys had shared a bedroom with bunk beds, a double bed and a single bed. (A joke in the family is that the boys never slept alone until they were married and got in the doghouse. The wives don't like that one so much.)

Family legend has it that in the early years, with mounds of dirty clothes piling up, Arlene was saving up for an automatic washing machine. Somehow, though, that money got diverted to buy a new sod cutter.

The boys swear its true, but Arlene said she doesn't remember it. She does remember hours of washing, drying and sorting enough clothes to dress a football team. To keep track, she wrote initials in the underwear and sewed color-coded threads into the socks. For the longest time my wife wondered why I had a white thread in all my socks, Tom said. All the boys went to St. Peter's Catholic Grade School in North St. Paul, then Hill-Murray High School in Maplewood. Each was called Mogs or Mogy all the way through school, as teachers and friends worked to keep them straight. Even Arlene admits that at times when calling for a child, she would run through the list of names before hitting on the right one, or give up and just say: "Whoever you are!".

Three of the boys have nicknames within the family: Steve is Stick, Keith is Whitey and Dennis is Spike. No one is sure exactly how they started, but the names have lasted for decades.

The boys recently built a new home for their mother, next door to the old one. Its one level, with lots of gathering space. Arlene has had a little trouble getting around since breaking a hip in Florida two years ago. She goes down to Florida to get away from the snow and ice and she slips on an ice cube from her diet cola. Can you believe it? Bruce said.

For 20 years before she broke the hip, Arlene hosted a Thursday night dinner for any or all of the boys and their families. A daughter-in-law would help with the shopping and cooking, and usually at least seven or eight sons, with assorted others, would show up for the feast. This week, some of the boys, who all live within 10 or 12 miles of their mom, talked about starting up the Thursday night dinners again. Arlene said it would be fine. Shes always been a quiet, patient mom, her sons report. She wasn't too keen on being in the newspaper, but her family felt she deserved the attention.