

Jane Maher

A FULL AND GOOD WORLD

This is the first chapter of Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work, published in March, 1997 by The National Council of Teachers of English. Mina P. Shaughnessy was one of the founders of the Journal of Basic Writing; therefore the editors thought it would be fitting that an excerpt of her biography appear in these pages.

Mina Pendo Shaughnessy seemed to be the quintessential New Yorker: tall and beautiful, sophisticated, well spoken, well read, well dressed, interested in literature, art, music, and politics. One of Mina's colleagues at City College remembers thinking when he first met her in 1967 that she must have been teaching writing to disadvantaged students "out of a sense of *noblesse oblige*. She was a typical Upper East Sider, well dressed, stately, very well bred. One imagined that she left campus and went off to a dinner party with the most influential people, or to a theater opening. I was just flabbergasted when she told me she had been born and raised somewhere in the Midwest; I can't remember precisely where."

In fact, Mina Pendo Shaughnessy was born in Lead, South Dakota, to Ruby Alma Johnson Pendo and Albert Pendo on March 13, 1924. Her brother, George, her best friend throughout her childhood, had been born a year and five days earlier. Lead (rhymes with deed) was, at the time of Mina's birth (and still is), a gold mining town with a population of eight thousand, located about fifty miles west of Rapid City, less than three miles from its twin city, Deadwood, where Wild Bill Hickok was shot in a saloon in 1876, and less than ten miles from Spearfish, a town named by the Lakota Sioux Indians long before they were herded onto reservations. *Dances With Wolves* was filmed in the Black Hills that surround and rise majestically above these towns, and Native Americans live on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, the site

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of the Wounded Knee Massacre, located approximately sixty miles southeast of Lead. However, Mina's brother, George, recalls that while they were growing up, "we hadn't yet come to terms with the fact that we had taken away the Native Americans' lands, and we had little or no contact with them."

Lead is a classic mining town. The Homestake Mine, founded by William Randolph Hearst, employed more than one thousand miners at the time Mina was born, and it dominated every aspect of the townspeople's lives: they attended the Hearst Free Public School; borrowed books at the Hearst Free Library; shopped at the Hearst Mercantile Company, referred to by everyone as the company store. There were no labor unions in Lead; George Pendo recalls that the mere mention of the word could "cost a man his job." He recalls hearing, as a young child, of the time early in the century when the Homestake owners brought in strikebreakers from Missouri to quash an attempt to form a union—several men died, and there was a general animosity toward Missourians for many years after the incident.

Although one can see the magnificent Black Hills from anywhere in Lead, the town itself is an exquisite example of man-made ugliness. When the mine first began operation in 1876, it was not the practice to backfill mined out areas. As a result, large tracts of land began to cave in. By the late 1920s, the brick and stone buildings of Lead's commercial area, sitting on ground that was sinking as much as thirty-five feet, began to crack and heave. The situation became so serious that residences and commercial buildings had to be moved, leaving an enormous area that came to be known as the "subsidence zone." It was eventually converted into a public park that is known locally as the "Sinking Gardens." In addition, one of the mountains in the center of Lead proved to contain a particularly rich lode. In this case, surface-mining methods were used to extract more than forty million tons of gold from the mountain, leaving a deep oval-shaped open cut in the top of the mountain, as if a giant had taken a huge bite out of it. Brochures advertising tours of the mines try to make the best of this situation by noting that in 1916 a tightrope walker crossed the 4,500-foot wide, 960-foot deep gouge, but the fact remains that gold mining, at least as it has always been practiced in Lead, South Dakota, wreaks havoc with the environment. The citizens of Lead were not concerned with the appearance of their surroundings, however. Without the mines, there would be no work. In Lead, everyone either worked in the mines or provided services to those who did.

Albert Pendo, Mina's father, was a miner. He was born in Lead in 1900, the third of eight children, two of whom died shortly after birth. His father, Rado Pendo, had emigrated to Lead from a town called Mocici in Croatia in 1887. Soon after he arrived, he established the Mule Deer Saloon, a particularly propitious choice of occupation, given

the number of men who were “mucking” for gold in the mines more than a mile below ground all day. He met and fell in love with Elin Peyron, who had emigrated from Sweden with her family, but she refused to marry him unless he sold the saloon. He did as she wished but probably regretted it for the rest of his life as one job or enterprise after another failed: he worked in the mines, then in a mill, started a butcher shop, and later started a construction business building roads. (After his children were grown, he moved to Wyoming to raise his own cattle.) Rado Pendo was a devout Catholic, but his wife was an even more devout Lutheran, so the children (except for the oldest, Ralph, who remained a Catholic all of his life) were raised as Lutherans. Mina’s father, Albert, completed the eighth grade, as required by law, but he had no further education when he began to work in the Homestake Mine at the age of seventeen.

Mina’s mother, Ruby Johnson, was born in San Francisco in 1896. She was one of seven children born to Peter and Susanna Jane Peterson Johnson, both of whom had emigrated to the United States from Sweden and settled in California. The Johnsons moved from San Francisco, California to Douglas, Alaska in 1890 when gold was first discovered there, and Peter Johnson quickly rose to the position of foreman in the Treadwell Mine. However, the ocean broke through the mine, causing it to collapse (an event that made headlines throughout Alaska because of the loss of lives and the irreversible damage to the mine). As a result, Peter and Susanna Johnson and three of their children, including Ruby, moved to South Dakota in 1919, along with many other Treadwell mine families. Jobs were plentiful in the Homestake mine, so these men were able to find work immediately. Ruby had already completed a two-year teaching certificate program at the State Normal School in Bellingham, Washington in 1917 and had begun to teach grade school in Alaska before the move. Ruby’s older brother, Charles, her favorite, had graduated from the University of Washington in Seattle with a degree in mining. Soon after the Johnson family arrived in Alaska, he met and married a woman named Mina (pronounced with a long i), a shortening of the name Wilhelmina, after Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands. When Charles contracted pneumonia and died, Ruby was devastated. After Charles’s death, Ruby maintained close contact with her sister-in-law, even after she relocated to California and remarried. Thus, when Ruby’s second child and first daughter was born in 1924, she named her Mina.

When the Johnsons arrived in Lead, South Dakota, they moved into the Swedish section of town. Lead was a town whose neighborhoods were determined by nationality and religion. Mina’s brother, George, remembers that there was a Finnish Lutheran section of town, a Swedish Lutheran section of town that included Norwegians, an Italian Catholic section, a Yugoslavian section, and a Serbian section; there

was even an area that was referred to by everyone as Slavonian Alley. The largest group of residents was comprised of the English Episcopals. Many of these groups had their own clubs and churches. George remembers that as a child he overheard two women talking about a man who had recently died. When one of the women said she would have a Catholic mass said for the man, the other woman responded that she "might just as well pray for an old, dead cow." George also remembers that Albert Pendo thought it was important to describe himself as Austrian to further distinguish himself from the Yugoslavians, and he showed some annoyance when people assumed that his name was Italian. However, these distinctions did not prevent the children of Lead from mixing and socializing with each other, particularly in school.

Although the Johnsons adapted quickly to life in Lead, having come from another mining town and already knowing many of the miners and their families who had also traveled to South Dakota from Alaska, the "Treadwell miners" who took jobs at the Homestake were never fully accepted. Peter Johnson had been a foreman in the Alaskan mine, but because he was a latecomer, he was never able to rise above the position of shift boss at the Homestake. In fact, in 1929, after ten years of working at the Homestake, at the age of sixty, he decided to give up mining and start a chicken farm in Oregon. (Despite the Depression, he was able to eke out a living and at least be free of the brutal conditions in the mines. He was lucky to have escaped the fate of so many miners: silicosis, or miners' consumption, caused by silica dust constantly coating the lungs. Many miners did not live past the age of fifty.)

Albert Pendo and Peter Johnson, Ruby's father, worked side by side in the Homestake Mine as shift bosses. Ruby first became interested in Albert Pendo when her father came home from work one day and talked about "an awfully nice young man at the mine." They were married two years later, on June 21, 1922. While there were the inevitable strains of finances, raising children, differences in temperament (Albert was brusque, impatient, and hot tempered; George remembers that he would often utter the phrase, "Jesus suffering Christ," while Ruby was gentle and patient), it was a marriage that endured for more than fifty years until Ruby's death in 1975. The first strain may well have been the quick and close arrival of their two children: George was born in March 1923 and Mina was born in March 1924, but there were many other family members living close by to provide help and support.

A month before Mina was born, Albert Pendo wrote a note to his wife. It belies his eighth-grade education; despite the grammatical and spelling errors, it is clever and humorous, probably an intentional parody of the sermons he and Ruby heard every Sunday morning at

the Augustana Lutheran Church. In addition, it reflects the playfulness and intimacy of the household where Mina and her brother George grew up.

Lead, S.D.
Feb. 7th, 1924

My Dear Little Wife

Since eating my supper last nite the thought come's back to me that two years ago, lacking a few months, we pledged ourselves to be as one always considerate of each other, it occurred to me that as time goes on we may become lax in certain of our duties which so far you have so nobly performed. Far be it from my intensions to reflect in any way upon your past performance of these duties but it behooves us all to be constantly on the lookout for little tasks which if neglected work discord while if willingly performed create & maintain harmony which is issential to happiness. Not wishing in any way to impose upon you and making allowance for past favors there still remains one thing. Please when you put a hamburger sandwich in my lunch put an onion in it. Trusting you will take this in the right spirit. I remain your devoted husband.

Ruby Pendo so valued this note, printed in pencil in small, crowded letters on the back of a Homestake Mining Company time sheet the size of an index card, that she saved it with the family's birth and baptismal certificates.

Ruby also saved Mina's baby book recording "baby's first days" in which she made sporadic entries relating to Mina's first year. Both this book and her birth certificate indicate that Mina was actually named Ruby Mina Pendo. No one knows precisely when the transposition took place, but no one can recall her ever being referred to by any other name but Mina, and when she was enrolled in the Hearst Free Kindergarten in 1929, she was registered as Mina Ruby Pendo. The book contains a lock of Mina's blond hair, and in the entry for her first Christmas, Ruby wrote: "Part of the day was spent with Grandma and Granddad Johnson. Went to Grandma Pendo for dinner and received many useful gifts." The book provides a space to indicate the date on which baby began to crawl, but Ruby wrote above the space that Mina never crept, "she just slid around." Her first pair of shoes was purchased in November 1924 "at the Hearst," and Mina's behavior at her christening "was very good." One of Albert Pendo's sisters and one of Ruby Pendo's brothers were her godparents. Ruby Pendo also recorded Mina's first prayer, recited when she was two years old, along with a notation: "God bless Daddy, God bless Mamma, God bless Goggie (George), God bless everybody, make me good boy (as she always in-

sisted on saying).” George recalls that Mina imitated everything he said and did, thus the male noun.

The Pensos bought a very small house at 308 Bleeker Street, a steep road near the center of town. (All of the roads were steep; Janet Emig once described Lead as “that astonishing perpendicular mining town.”) While the house was modest by most standards—a narrow, wooden-framed two-story structure with a small porch and a tiny front yard—it was much like the other houses in town. Although Albert and Ruby were extremely thrifty by necessity, the children never felt deprived. George remembers that, even during the Depression, neither they nor the other townspeople suffered economically because the Homestake mine continued to operate. During Mina’s childhood, the Pensos remodeled the second floor of their house and rented it to two English teachers from the Lead elementary school, Miss Amelia Perman and Miss Edith Johnson. The two women lived with the Pensos for fifteen years. They used the Pendo kitchen and joined them for most meals, and they would look after George and Mina when their parents were out. George remembers that they often played word games at the dinner table and corrected everyone’s grammar. He and Mina were extremely fond of the two women. “They were almost like aunts to us,” George recalls. “They loved us very much and we loved them.”

Many years later, Mina would describe her childhood as one that was “filled with teachers whom I admired.” She was referring not only to her mother and to these two women, but to two of her aunts as well. Two of Albert Pendo’s sisters were teachers. Florence had completed her teacher training in South Dakota and taught in Rapid City. In 1940, she moved to California, and she would often write letters to Albert and his family, describing her favorite students. Esther taught in a one-room schoolhouse in the town of Belle Fourche, north of Spearfish. Although Ruby did not return to teaching until Mina and George were much older, she talked about her students in Alaska, and George and Mina often looked at a snapshot she had brought with her. She and her eleven students are standing outside a small schoolhouse in a fishing village called Chichagof on the coast of Alaska. The students ranged in age from five to eleven or twelve.

One of Mina’s closest childhood friends, Georgia Jensen, remembers that “everybody knew everybody” in Lead, and because Lead was a town where people were generally aware of what others did for a living and what they earned; wealth and social status were simply not factors that were considered or discussed very often. The Pensos, Georgia Jensen recalls, were regarded as warm and friendly people, particularly Ruby. “She was a beautiful person, very giving, generous, and extremely intelligent. She was college educated; this was relatively rare in those days. Mina adored her and was proud of her. It

was evident that they were best friends." Georgia recalls that before World War II, Ruby could not have taught even if she wanted to. Married women were simply not hired as teachers; they were expected to stay at home.

Mina and George grew up with their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins nearby, and there were visits throughout their childhood to relatives in California and Alaska. During the late 1930s, their maternal grandparents moved to Oregon to raise chickens and their paternal grandparents moved to Wyoming to raise cattle. Neither enterprise was particularly successful, but the unspoiled, sparsely populated areas in which they settled were a welcome contrast to the many years spent in a dusty mining town. Mina and George would often spend several weeks during their summer vacations visiting their grandparents and, as George recalls, "being spoiled."

There were frequent visits from family members and neighbors, and George remembers that evenings were always spent reading and listening to the radio. Although Albert Pendo could read and write proficiently, he never read aloud to the children. When Ruby read to them each evening, however, he would sit and listen. George remembers that there seemed to be hundreds of books in the house, particularly books and magazines for children. Mina loved school, and she was an excellent student. Records from kindergarten through eighth grade indicate that she earned grades of A and B in every subject, with the exception of gym, in which she earned mostly Cs. George remembers that, although Mina received a plaque from the Girls' Athletic Association, "there were no athletic activities for girls in those days." He also remembers that Mina would read under the covers long after her parents had told them to turn the lights off. Among the papers that Ruby saved is a certificate of merit that Mina received from the World Book Look-it-up-Club. "We never say 'I don't know,'" it reads, "we never guess; we look it up." George remembers that Mina started to take piano and cello lessons at the age of eleven, and she practiced regularly, without having to be told. (Although she played the cello in her high school orchestra, her love for the piano stayed with her for her entire life.)

George worked hard as well, but although he was a grade ahead of his sister, his teachers inevitably compared him with Mina and accused him of being lazy. Mina took great pity on George, and during the tenth grade she wrote many of his essays for him. "I got good grades that year," George recalls. George also remembers copying all of Mina's answers out of a workbook they were both assigned, but while she would receive As for her answers, he would get Cs.

Although George was a year older than Mina, she quickly surpassed him in height. By the time Mina was in the eighth grade, she was already as tall as her father, who was five feet eleven inches. As a

result, she was terribly self-conscious and often walked around with her knees bent. Mina was thin; she had large blue eyes, long, thick blond hair, and a radiant smile. She wore her hair parted on the side, falling in a silky pageboy around her shoulders. In her high school yearbook photograph, despite the eight-line description of activities that appears under her name, she seems out of place—she looks so much more mature and sophisticated than her peers. Although she was strikingly beautiful, however, her friends recall that she seemed utterly unaware of the effect her appearance had on others. Many years later, Mina told a friend that she used to hound her mother with the question, “Am I pretty?” Invariably, her mother would answer, “Now don’t you worry, you’re a fine looking girl.” Mina was always more serious and mature than most girls her age, Georgia Jensen recalls. They talked about books a great deal and always knew that they would go to college. Although Mina was, according to Georgia, “perfectly comfortable with boys and loved to listen to music and dance,” it was her brother and best friend, George, who took her to her junior prom.

Mina’s high school course load was rigorous; in addition to the core subjects, she took vocal music, instrumental music, declamation, drama, dancing, French, Latin, and Spanish, and economics. She graduated fourth in her class of 124 and was given the “Goldenlode” award for character and personality, an honor just below that of valedictorian. George remembers that although Mina seemed to learn quickly and effortlessly, she always worked very hard and never fully appreciated or understood how impressive her accomplishments seemed to others.

However, it was outside of school, particularly during the summers, when George and Mina were happiest. In 1933, when George was ten and Mina was nine, the family drove for three days to visit the Chicago World’s Fair. In 1935, Albert Pendo took a month-long vacation and traveled with Ruby and the children as far as San Diego to attend the exposition there, stopping at Denver and Las Vegas. At the end of the month, Albert returned home by train while Ruby and the children continued up the coast to Oregon, Washington, and Alaska to visit her brothers and sisters. Ruby saved a letter that she wrote to Albert, describing their route through Portland and Billings. The children were a little restless and cross, she noted, and they told all the other adults on the train that they missed their daddy “because he had to take another train.” George remembers that he, Mina, and his mother were away from Albert for almost three months during that trip, a separation that was based as much on Ruby’s need for some “peace and quiet and a respite from Albert’s temper” as a desire to see her relatives. Despite these occasions, George recalls, his parents worked at their marriage and loved each other deeply. Divorce in the 1930s,

particularly in South Dakota, simply was not an option that anyone considered. In fact, George cannot recall even hearing of a divorce in Lead during his childhood.

In 1939, the family drove to California and Seattle and then took a boat to Alaska to visit Ruby's relatives. George still remembers that he and Mina went panning with their Uncle John, but they found no gold that day. The family referred to these adventures for years afterward, recalling specific events, people they met, places they saw; George has saved scores of pictures from these trips. More than thirty years later, Mina recalled one of those trips in a Father's Day note she wrote to Albert from California, where she was attending a conference. "Being in California has somehow reminded me of our family trips to California, especially the year we went to Sawyer's Bar. Those days come back to me now so clearly. The world seemed to me then so secure. And you and Mom made it such a full and good world." And in a journal that Mina was required to keep for a college acting course, she wrote an account of one of the few times she had been on the ocean to satisfy an assignment describing an event when she could "see sound":

My contacts with the ocean have been rare, and since my ancestors have been rather earthy people, I have no instinct to aid me. I do remember one special time, however, where there was a good fog and all the trimmings. It was in Juneau, Alaska. We had been up on the damp, wooded parts of the island hunting for two days, and on our way back had run into a bad storm. We were all wet, hungry, and tired. By the time we reached Juneau, the weather had settled into its usual slow, penetrating rain, but by the time we had unloaded a heavy fog had settled. It reminded me of a blotter. When the fog horns would blow, it seemed that if you could watch the sound waves, they would travel like the ink when it touches a blotter. The lantern that one of the men held kept swinging, and I watched the weak light travel back and forth. When we bumped against the side of the tug, it sounded soft because the wood was soft from being soaked in water.

Religion played an important role in the family's life, and George believes that Mina was strongly influenced and affected by the religious training they received as children. They attended Lutheran services every Sunday. When they were in grade school, they attended classes before Sunday services, and when they were in high school, they attended mandatory confirmation classes every Saturday. George recalls that as a result of these classes they were "very familiar with and convinced of the value of the Bible and the Ten Commandments." Both Mina and George were confirmed, and many of the social events

that the family attended were sponsored by the Lutheran Church. Mina loved to sing hymns and had, Georgia Jensen recalls, "a lovely contralto voice." Mina was deeply religious at this time, according to her brother, George, and at various periods throughout her life she would exhibit such a deep spirituality that it confounded her friends.

Stronger than religion, however, was the influence of their parents' values and behavior. Mina and George grew up in the house of a miner, in a mining town. As a result, they had a deeply ingrained consciousness of the earth and its formation. Along with the books and encyclopedias that Ruby provided for them, they were surrounded by geological maps and surveys. They knew that they lived near the center of the continent. Albert and his friends talked about lodes and veins and formations and shale. Each evening, he would tell his family how much muck had been "carried up" that day out of the Homestake. They understood the damage that water could do to an underground shaft, having heard the stories and seen the pictures of the destruction of the Treadwell Mine in Alaska.

Mina and George knew how hard the men worked, and under what conditions. They knew that their livelihood and the livelihood of most of their friends depended upon the amount of gold that was extracted from the Homestake Mine. They knew that, when they were infants, their father worked the night shift and that he would have to "muck his sixteen" in order to get paid. This expression, made famous by the song "Sixteen Tons," meant that each man had to fill sixteen one-ton ore cars by shoveling with a scoop, at depths of 2,400 feet, the material that had been loosened by blasting and drilling during the previous shift. They celebrated in 1929 when their father was promoted to mine foreman and would no longer be required to "muck" underground. They knew that during the winter months, while working the day shift, their father entered the mine when it was cold and dark and left when it was cold and dark.

As a result of this deep sense of the way the mine operated and its relationship to their well being, Mina and George were instilled with what George describes as an "appreciation of and respect for the resources nature gives us, along with the knowledge that you work for everything you have." More than anything else, George recalls, "we came to understand that the quality of the work we performed would most likely determine our future and our happiness. As a result, hard work was very important to us, possibly more important than our relationships. It was something we didn't mind doing. In fact, we enjoyed it."

On January 8, 1938, when Mina was fourteen, she wrote a letter to her parents, who had traveled to New Orleans for a (rare) vacation without the children. It reflects the activities she and George enjoyed, the habits of thrift and hard work that her parents were imbuing in her

and her brother, and most important, the affection and security that Albert and Ruby provided for their children.

Dear Mother and Daddy,

I got my permanent today and like it very much. The girls sure like it.

I got that dress you sent away for today and it is a very nice one.

I decided to take Algebra, English, Science, and Occupation for High School. Miss Knowlton thought that would be best.

Aunt Helen asked me to go skating with her and Bob out at our cabin but then we decided not to go because it would be to [sic] far to walk.

I bet you are having a nice time.

Tomorrow we are going out with Gosses to the cabin to skate or maybe to some lake. They are very good to us.

We let Queen up tonight and I can hear her chewing a bone.

I took a bath last night. I am sleeping in your bedroom and it doesn't seem as skarry [sic].

We have to get up tomorrow to go to Sunday School so I guess I better close.

Lots of love, Mina

P.S. George took the washing up.

After writing a row of Xs and Os, Mina wrote on the third side of the four-sided stationery, "Too bad I couldn't fill this page because I'm wasting some good paper." (Although Mina's mention of the arrival of her new dress seems to be an attempt to fill her letter with news of home, it is also an indication of a passion for beautiful clothes that remained with her for her entire life.)

The cabin to which Mina referred in her letter was a one-room, unheated shack with no indoor plumbing, located in Hannah (about ten miles from Lead), a town so small that it is not listed on maps of South Dakota. According to South Dakota law at the time, if an individual staked out and maintained a mining claim at least four feet deep, ten feet wide, and twelve feet long on federally owned land for five years, he or she could take possession of two acres of land surrounding the dig by paying five hundred dollars. More and more people, recognizing a loophole when they saw one, began to "mine" the area in and around Hannah, and hundreds of South Dakotans were able to build summer cabins on these plots of land. Albert always referred to the family's mining claim as "the Ruby Load." With the help of friends, he constructed a one-room cabin and eventually added indoor plumb-

ing. There was no electricity, however, so they relied on kerosene lamps, used a coal and wood stove, and heated their water by running it through pipes connected to the stove and then channelling it into the water tank.

Ruby and Albert would take the children to the cabin as soon as school ended for the summer, and Albert would commute back and forth by car on weekends. George recalls that the "two aunt teachers," Edith Johnson and Amelia Perman, would often spend weekends at the cabin. It became a family tradition for Albert to set off a stick of dynamite early in the morning on the Fourth of July. Occasionally, Mina and George would invite friends from town (Georgia Jensen remembers "wonderful weekend visits when we spent the evenings playing big-band music on a wind-up phonograph"), but for the most part, they spent their summers together swimming, fishing, hiking in the hills, and horseback riding. The Pendos kept and cared for several horses, and George remembers that Mina practically "grew up on a horse. She was a fine and graceful rider. We rode horses more than we walked during the summers at the cabin."

The surroundings in which Mina and George spent their summers were magnificent. The Black Hills form a dome rising 4,000 to 7,000 feet above the surrounding northern Great Plains. The highest point has an elevation of 7,242 feet. Often the snow in the mountains did not melt until June, and Mina and George would "pile on sweaters" in the early mornings. George remembers that he and Mina could identify all of the trees that grew near the cabin: quaking aspen, ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine, white spruce, and mountain ash. They watched the flowering plants and bushes bloom in sequence as the summer progressed and would often pick flowers for their mother. They would pack a lunch and hike for hours, reaching elevations of 5,000 or 6,000 feet before heading back home. More than forty species of birds nested in the hills during the summer. Despite her familiarity with nature, however, Mina never overcame her aversion to snakes, particularly the garter snakes that inhabit the rocky soil.

The cabin was so isolated that there was no mail delivery, and George remembers that there was no official address. They simply told people they were located on Ward's Draw near Cyclone Hill and Horse-shoe Curve. At the cabin, as at home, Mina and George were required to do chores and help with expenses. They earned money by locating and capturing lambs that had strayed from a nearby sheep camp. They earned five dollars per head, but it could often take an entire day to run down one lamb, and George remembers that on many occasions Ruby had to spend an entire evening removing wood ticks from Mina's thick, long hair.

Both at the cabin and at home, the Pendos had frequent visitors, some of them quite eccentric. Mina's favorite character was Old Johnny

Perrit. He was very short, had an English accent, and wore a beard down to his waist. He was billed in local festivals and rodeos as the man who had found the biggest gold nugget in the South Dakota Hills. He often came to Sunday dinner and told fantastic tales about the Black Hills. In an attempt to reciprocate, he invited Mina and George to his cabin for breakfast. They went occasionally, but George remembers that Mina was never comfortable eating the food, because her father had once mentioned that Johnny would spit on the grill to determine if it was hot enough to make the pancakes.

In December of 1939, when Mina was a high school sophomore, she was chosen to represent her class at a regional "declamation contest" being held in Philip, South Dakota. She wrote a letter to her parents on Senechal Hotel stationery explaining how she felt about the contest. Despite her best efforts to mask her strong sense of competition, her desire to do well and to succeed—a desire that grew stronger throughout her life—is evident. It is almost painful to see her try to contain, or at least control, the struggle she was enduring. The first page of the three-page letter is missing, but one suspects that Ruby, who wrote Mina's name and the date on one of the surviving pages, kept only these pages because she was so moved by the determination reflected in the letter.

I am writing this before the Declamatory contest: I have just said my piece over and feel more self assured.

If only I can keep calm through the piece I am sure I can do fairly well.

I do want to win terribly bad.

I hope I can get a definite mood and hold the audience through that mood.

It is such a beautiful story, I hope the audience sees it the way I want them to. I will be so happy if I can go home victorious and if I don't I must remember I am only 15 years old and a sophomore. I still have time to do more. There have been others before me who have not won in these contests and as Miss Braum says it is not a life or death matter, but oh how I do want to win!

Perhaps Mina's conflicting emotions can be explained by the influences of the Midwest and of her Lutheran upbringing. In fact, there is even a Norwegian word for this ambivalence, *janteloven*: individuals are not supposed to think they are special or act as if they are more capable or more talented than anyone else. Mina carried this belief with her throughout her life, this sense that her accomplishments should not reflect on her talents or on her abilities, and it was most evident when she communicated with her parents, masking her ambition with a desire to please them and to repay them for all the things they had

done for her. In one of the letters she wrote to them several years after graduating from college, she closed with the following paragraph: "You both have done so much for me—more than most parents it seems—and it makes me want to please you and to work hard. I hope I never disappoint you too much." And in a letter written to her parents in 1954, after quoting a glowing recommendation she had received from a professor for whom she had done research, she wrote: "I'm just bragging to you. Don't tell any others about this, but I know you like to hear things like this and I always feel you are more responsible for whatever I have accomplished than I am."

No one can remember if Mina won that declamation contest in 1939, but during her high school career, it was becoming evident to everyone that, in addition to her fine academic ability, she possessed great acting, speaking, and singing talent. Even as a sophomore, she was given the lead roles in the high school plays. Although they were school productions, drama was emphasized so strongly in Lead High School during this period that many people described the plays as the equivalent of regional theater productions. It was Mina's performances in these productions that would later earn her admission to Northwestern's prestigious and competitive theater and speech department.

According to an entry in her high school yearbook in 1942, Mina earned first ranking in the poetry division of the Kiwanis Speech Derby while her friend Vivian Brown won for humorous prose. The yearbook entry continues, "Mina and Vivian earned the rank of superior, entitling them to go on to the divisional contest. At the divisional, Mina Pendo again was ranked superior, and represented this division at the state tournament." In addition, Georgia Jensen remembers that her mother drove Mina and her to a declamation competition in Chadron, Nebraska, during their senior year. Although Georgia Jensen no longer remembers precise details, she does recall that Mina had overcome any trace of nervousness by this time. "Mina never exhibited any competitiveness, but by then she knew what she was doing, she was self-assured, and she liked doing it."

Mina also earned the lead dramatic role in the high school senior play, a production of *Three-Cornered Moon*, and the choral lead in *The Pirates of Penzance*. It was almost unheard of for the same student to earn the lead roles in both senior productions. George remembers these productions as wonderful opportunities for the family, including aunts, uncles, and cousins, to get together. They were well attended, and they were an enormous source of pride and enjoyment for Ruby and Albert Pendo. People complimented them on Mina's performance for months afterward. Georgia Jensen remembers that Ruby "was as proud of Mina as modesty permitted." Mina is also pictured in the yearbook as a member of the yearbook staff and the camera club. (In both cases,

she is in the back row – she was still one of the tallest students in the school.)

Although Mina graduated from Lead High School six months after the United States entered World War II, the war did not affect her college plans. Georgia Jensen remembers that there was never any question about whether she and Mina would attend college. Their mothers had attended college; they were both excellent students, and although neither family was wealthy, “they would find the money.” It was common for those Lead High School graduates who planned to attend college to enroll in local schools: the girls attended Spearfish Normal (now Black Hills State University), and the boys (those who did not enlist) attended either the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology in Rapid City or the University of South Dakota in Vermilion. (George enrolled in the University of Nevada and later attended Washington University School of Dentistry in St. Louis, Missouri.) Most students who left the state usually attended the University of Minnesota or the University of Nebraska. Mina considered both of these schools because they had good drama and English departments. However, her acting talent was so extraordinary that Miss Braum, her drama teacher, encouraged her to “go east,” and provided her with glowing recommendations. Mina applied to the School of Speech at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. At the time, Alvina Krause was an assistant professor in the department, and she was famous not only for her rigorous training methods but for her valuable contacts with writers, directors, and producers. (Other graduates of this program include Charlton Heston, Cloris Leachman, and Patricia Neal.)

Mina’s two-page application contains the usual information; however, in the space provided for parents’ education, she indicated that her father, who had not attended school beyond the eighth grade, had completed four years of high school. In the spaces provided for “vocational preference,” Mina indicated “stage” as her first choice, “radio” as her second choice, and “teaching” as her third choice.

Tuition at Northwestern for the 1942-43 academic year was three hundred dollars, a relatively huge sum for Albert Pendo who at the time was earning two thousand dollars a year. Fortunately, there was no tuition at the University of Nevada, where George was completing his undergraduate work, so Albert and Ruby had to pay only one tuition. George remembers that his mother would manage from time to time “to scrape together a very few dollars and send them to Mina for pocket money.” Very few letters from this period have survived, but one indication of the financial strain the Pendos were under is evident in a note that Mina sent home in March 1943. “I’ve written three letters tonight,” she explained to her parents, “and now I have to use another stamp.”

Mina enclosed in the letter a package of tiny picture postcards representing the various buildings of the campus, noting that she purchased them because they had cost only twenty-five cents. She made notations on the back of some of them, indicating, for example, that her English class was held in University Hall. In addition, she enclosed a snapshot of herself. In the photograph, she is walking toward the (unknown) photographer, smiling confidently, cradling newspapers and gloves in her arms, a purse slung over her shoulder. Her demeanor is relaxed; she is looking directly at the camera—still utterly unaware, it seems, of her remarkable beauty. These pictures were Ruby and Albert's only exposure to Northwestern until Mina's graduation. The train ride from Rapid City to Chicago took two days, and it was expensive.

During the first week of classes at Northwestern, each speech major was required to choose a sonnet and read it in front of an assembly of students and faculty. Shortly after the readings, Mina approached another first-year student, Priscilla Weaver, and told her that she had liked her reading very much. This meeting was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. Priscilla, and later her husband Alan Brandt, would become Mina's closest friends: when Mina got married, they held the wedding dinner in their home; when they had children, Mina was named their guardian; and when Mina died, Priscilla and Alan were with her.

Priscilla cannot even remember the name of the poem that she recited, much less the name of Mina's poem, but she does remember how unusual it was for someone to take the time to approach another student and pay her a compliment. Most speech and theater majors already knew, even on the first day of classes, that they would be competing with each other for roles and later for auditions in professional productions. And of course, Priscilla noticed Mina's appearance, "an unaffected Midwestern beauty that simply took you by surprise—a movie star with no make-up."

Priscilla had come to Northwestern from California, drawn as Mina had been by Alvina Krause's reputation. Mina and Priscilla roomed in the same dorm during their first two years at Northwestern. During their junior and senior years, tired of dorm life, they rented a room together in a private home, where Mina took piano lessons with the children who lived there. Mina pledged and was accepted into a sorority during her first year, but within weeks the workload in the School of Speech became so heavy that she dropped out.

The friendship between Mina and Priscilla continued to flourish; Priscilla remembers that she and Mina earned desperately needed spending money by performing for women's clubs. "We got a lot of bookings," Priscilla recalls. "We went as far as Peoria, doing scenes from *I Remember Mama*. Alvina Krause admired our ambition and re-

minded us often of the value of performing in public – no matter how small the audience.”

Mina’s academic career at Northwestern was as successful as her high school career had been. She maintained a grade-point average of 3.7 or above during all four years, and for each of her last three years, she was awarded partial scholarships, including a particularly prestigious one known as the Edgar Bergen scholarship, based on merit. Many years later, when she was being asked to address larger and larger audiences on the issues of Open Admissions and basic writing, people were mesmerized by Mina’s bearing and beauty, her voice, her diction, her carriage, her conviction. E. D. Hirsch described it as “that electrifying effect that Mina always had on those who heard her speak” (1). Some suspected that it was the result of her dedication to her students and to the cause of Open Admissions. Although it most certainly was, it was also the result of four years of rigorous training in articulation and projection at one of the most prestigious schools of speech in the country.

Most of Mina’s required courses reflect her speech major and theater minor: in addition to more than thirty credits in literature (including a course that introduced her to Henry James, one of her lifelong literary passions), she took Training of Speaking Voice, Introduction to Theater, Public Speaking, Introduction to Radio, Acting, Interpretation of Drama, Theater Backgrounds, Creative Oral Interpretation, English Phonetics, and Persuasion. During her sophomore year, she was required to take one semester of physical education, and just as she had in high school, she received the lowest grade of her college career, a C.

Priscilla Brandt remembers the long hours that she and Mina spent in the library doing research; she remembers in particular a history course they took – they enjoyed reading and discussing (for hours) the works of Jonathan Edwards. Priscilla remembers that Mina would attend religious services “occasionally” while she was at Northwestern, but was put off by the “Evanston religious scene”: she described it to Priscilla as a congregation of people who “practice religion with their fur coats on.”

Among the documents that Ruby Pendo saved, there is a folder that Mina had labeled “Acting Notebook” for her course with Alvina Krause. Although it contains only forty handwritten pages, it provides a record of the thorough immersion in acting, speech, and theater that Mina received. There are “enunciation” exercises containing columns of words containing, for example, the “A as in palm” sound, definitions, passages from plays and poems, illustrations of “tactile” representation of the senses (for olfactory, Mina pasted into her notebook a picture of onions).

Mina was becoming aware of regional speech patterns – and how

to avoid them. In a section entitled "Midwest Menace," she wrote the letter R and listed the habits to avoid: The Midwest R is "made in front of the mouth with the tip of the tongue"; one should "avoid a tense tongue and retracted tongue." Instead, one should "begin with 'ah' then make it 'dra'." One could practice by reciting the following verse:

Hark, hark, the merry hearted lark,
Singing the song of the holy seven
Aping the angels' harmonies
On the golden harps of heaven.

One of the assignments was to visit a museum and observe carefully one exhibit. Mina chose the statue of an African female dancer and wrote a four-page description. The essay is highly descriptive and analytical, thus making the concluding paragraph seem inappropriate, even out of place. "I walked out feeling large and clumsy, but by the time I stood by those huge pillars at the entrance, I had dwindled considerably." Professor Krause gave the entire exercise a grade of A- and then wrote: "There is no need for you to feel large and clumsy! Improve your carriage and posture, stop slumping and you are the ideal figure."

One suspects that this folder was valuable to Mina because of the positive comments made by Professor Krause, whose reputation as a difficult and demanding teacher and coach was well known. "Good observations and appreciation," she wrote at the end of one of Mina's descriptions. "Good thinking" she wrote on another. And on a piece entitled "Art," a piece that Mina had revised, she wrote "Superior." The descriptions and memories of home and family that Mina recorded in this journal, however, provide an account of events and incidents that would otherwise remain unknown. In trying to justify her claim that art is not possible without three basic essentials, the artist, the medium, and the audience, Mina offered the following example. "Throughout my childhood, I listened to the simple melodies of Slavic songs sung by old 'Slavs' who usually congregated in some kitchen to sing songs and drink wine. I never thought of these songs as art until I heard a concert pianist play some of Mozart, whose themes are built around these melodies."

Mina drew on her summers at the cabin at Hannah and her visits to her grandparents in Oregon for an exercise she was required to write on "Tactual Response":

I guess I can only tell you of my tactual response by describing some of the things I remember. I think first of animals—the nose of a horse, soft and rather moist. I usually rub the palm of my hand against it although the tip of the fingers

gives the most accurate account; chickens feel smooth and slippery, and there's something about a new, warm egg that makes you touch it lightly; the rough scaly skin of a pig's back covered with coarse stiff hairs makes even your fingers feel dry; a cow has a lovely skin if she's healthy – something like a horse only more mellow, and you can wrinkle it in your fingers; sheep have a soft but firm feeling like a thick mattress; squirrels have fine thin hairs that are almost too fine to feel. Then I remember the smoothly uneven rows of corn and the slight resistance [sic] when your finger presses a kernel; the gritty, flouncy feeling of chard right after it has been picked; the firm stiff head on cabbage as compared with the softer, leafier head on lettuce. I'm thinking now of a tactual response I get through my feet – when we irrigate, I feel the ground get soft and gradually give to my weight and creamy wet soil oozes around my feet and between my toes.

The typewriter keys are getting hard and slippery so I guess I'll stop.

One other reference to Lead in the journal described the night of Mina's high school graduation – a rite of passage that seems not to have changed very much since 1942. "On the night of my high school graduation," she wrote in a "Visual-Auditory response" to Strinberg's character, Anna Christie,

about four of the college kids decided to give us a party. Since they were much more informed upon the ways of the world, the entertainment was left to their discretion, and it took the form of alcohol in varying concentrations. I unfortunately got enough to make me act like a fool and still know it. I couldn't sleep much that night, and finally at 5:30 in the morning I got up, dressed, and started for a walk. By 6:30 I had gone outside the town, past the graveyard and stood on the edge of a road that looked down on rows and rows of hills. It was cool with just a slight breeze; the hills were a dark greenish black. Several pines close by were just barely wisping from the breeze. Then I felt something of what Anna must have felt. I felt healthy and clean.

During summer and holiday breaks, Mina usually returned home to Lead. George remembers that she did not seem to change very much from one visit to the next, or if she did, "she kept it from us. She was devoted to Mother and Father and never wanted to worry or displease them in any way." It was at about this time that Albert and Ruby Pendo purchased five acres of land in Spearfish, a tiny town surrounded

by ranches approximately ten miles from Lead. Albert would not retire from the mine for another fourteen years, yet he was beginning to plan for the time when he would no longer have to live in town. Although the family continued to live in Lead, in the house on Bleeker Street, they visited what came to be called "the five acres" as often as they could. They hiked, hunted, and fished. They cleared the land and grew vegetables that Ruby would later preserve.

George had met a young woman named Norma, whom he married in 1945, and they purchased a home in Rapid City, where he had started a dental practice. Mina and Norma quickly established such a good relationship that George and Norma named their first daughter Mina.

During the summer between her junior and senior years, however, Mina did not return home. She had been invited by Alvina Krause to join an acting company that would travel to Eagles Mere, Pennsylvania. The actress Patricia Neal, who was a sophomore at the time, was also invited to join the troupe, along with Mina and Priscilla, and she wrote about that summer in her autobiography, *As I Am*. The tall "crazy" girl who did not want to go to New York to whom Neal refers is Mina.

For years Alvina Krause had nurtured a dream of starting a theater of her own. She found an old building standing empty near the mountain resort of Eagles Mere, Pennsylvania. The opening season's company would be limited. I was last in rank, but I knew Alvina liked my work. I was elated to see my name on the list.

That summer was fun. I spent a lot of time running around town getting furniture for props and making tuna casserole as a member of the kitchen team, but those duties did not keep me from acting. I worked like a dog to lose my southern accent for Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*.

Talent scouts found their way to Eagles Mere and flashed temptations of Hollywood, but I wanted only the real thing, the theater. I was more interested in an offer made to a girl in the company who was even taller than I was. She must have been about six feet. One of the scouts said he would suggest her name to the Theater Guild for Eugene O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. The main character was just her size, and there would be auditions soon. I couldn't believe it when she said she didn't want to go to New York. She had to be crazy. Wouldn't I love to show up for that audition in her place! (55)

Ultimately, Patricia Neal did get to try out for the part in O'Neill's play; Mina had decided that it was more important that she return to

Northwestern to get her degree. During the summer season at Eagles Mere, however, she earned the lead role in Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, and her performance was spectacular. During the closing scene in which Regina withholds her husband's life-saving medication, Mina appeared on stage wearing a floor-length, low-cut black velvet gown and opera-length black gloves, her long blond hair pulled up on the back and top of her head in loose waves. Her carriage and beauty were so striking that members of the audience sensed that they were witnessing something very special. Mina had turned down an opportunity to perform on Broadway; instead, Priscilla recalls, she brought Broadway to Pennsylvania.

Although Mina had indicated on her college application that her first choice of a vocation was the theater, and although she and Priscilla decided to move to New York directly after graduation to pursue acting careers, Priscilla remembers that Mina remained surprisingly "unstagestruck." Perhaps her professors had also sensed this; in the letters of recommendation that Alvina Krause and James McBurney, the dean of the School of Speech, wrote, there is mention not only of Mina's acting ability but her scholastic achievements as well. "We think of her as one of our best products," McBurney noted. Krause, who perhaps knew her better than any other professor wrote:

I have known Mina Pendo for five years. In my own courses, she consistently ranked first in scholarship. As for general academic standing in the university, she was throughout her career here, the regular recipient of honor scholarship awards on the basis of outstanding scholarship and achievement. While her academic record here is superior, it does not indicate her creative ability, her wide range of interests, her unlimited capacity for work, her maturity and understanding. As a scholar and as an individual, she is held in high esteem by all who know her here at Northwestern.

Priscilla Brandt remembers that Mina had "other dimensions." Although she loved to laugh and have fun, and although she dated several men during college, she was also scholarly and serious. "While most aspiring actresses headed for New York determined to succeed on the Broadway stage no matter what it took," Priscilla recalled, "Mina seemed to already know that many other things could make her happy."

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