ABBY TOWNSHIP, 1960s

Abby Estlick and Jay Johnson met when they were seniors in high school. Abby lived in Basswood, near the general store her grandparents owned, and Jay lived with his family on a farm in Amor. “Nearest we can recall,” Abby says, “we met at an Amor Lutheran Church youth group.” Jay adds with a grin, “My great grandfather had been a charter member, so I found myself there often.”

The year was 1965. Their schools were miles apart – Abby went to Perham High School and Jay to high school in Battle Lake – but they liked each other and started dating.

Graduation marked the end of the relationship, though. Abby moved to Denver for nurses’ training, and Jay headed off to the community college in Fergus Falls for an Associate of Arts degree. The two would see each other only briefly over many years.

WORLDS APART, 1966 to 2009

Jay’s path led from community college to Moorhead State University and then to the University of Minnesota. In Minneapolis, he took a job as a design draftsman. By now, Jay was not only far from Abby in miles, he was married. He met a young woman his second year of community college, who he married in 1971. They had four children.

Meanwhile, Abby was making her way through life. She completed nurses training at Porter Adventist Hospital in Denver and moved to Minneapolis to find work. She liked ER where nursing was fast-paced and patients came and went, but ended up in pediatrics. “I got too attached to the kids,” Abby says. “I just couldn’t keep it up.” She worked different jobs in nursing, but never found her niche. Instead, a chance encounter led her along a new path.

Abby met Fred Bizzett in Minneapolis. They married and moved to his home town, Sioux City, Iowa. In 1976, though, he died in an accident, and Abby was left with a 6-year old daughter to raise.

Abby began again. She went to college in Sioux City and completed a degree in history and political science. She had found her niche – Abby became involved in local politics and eventually ran for office. But by 1992, she was ready for a change. Her daughter, now grown, lived in Denver, and Abby wanted to be closer to her.

So Abby started over once more. This time, however, she was able to build on what had come before. Her experience in politics prepared her for a career in fundraising. She’d nearly come full circle: her primary fundraising efforts were on behalf of her nursing Alma Mater – Porter Adventist Hospital in Denver.

BASSWOOD BAPTIST CHURCH, 2009

By 2009, Jay had had as many “beginnings” as Abby. During the back-to-the-land movement in the early 1970s, he and his wife bought farm land and, for a while, lived off the “fat of the land.” “But it wasn’t too fat,” Jay recalls. “We struggled to grow food, heat with wood, melt snow for water.”

Later in the decade, Jay worked a couple of years with the Wadena-Otter Tail Community Action Council, but he felt the pull of the West. Jay had learned as a draftsman in Minneapolis that employment in a concrete block building under fluorescent lights wasn’t for him. A job with the Forest Service in the Rockies on the Great Divide was more to his liking. Although he didn’t work long in the west, the experience left its mark. Mountains will forever live in his memory, Jay says, and he tries to take a trip back each year. The experience left him with more than memories, however. In 1979, Jay started his own tree business in Otter Tail County, which he operated for 30 years.

About the time Jay retired from the tree business, he happened to be visiting Basswood Baptist Church. He fell into conversation with Darlene and Floyd Estlick, Abby’s parents. He had fond memories of the time he and Abby dated and asked how she was doing.

The conversation prompted Jay to call Abby’s brother to ask for her address. Abby planned on dropping a note to say hello – no big deal, no forewarning, just a note. But before Jay could put pen to paper, Abby received a call from her mother. “Guess who’s going to write?”

Abby wasn’t too sure how she felt about the news. She was happy, enjoying life and work and time with her daughter. But Jay did write, and Abby replied. They hadn’t seen each other in years and years, so Abby asked for a photograph. “He sent a picture of himself standing next to a gigantic dump truck,” she laughs. “He was minuscule – I couldn’t tell a thing.”
But they wrote - Jay in longhand, Abby on the computer - from early summer until late 2009. Around the holidays, Abby recalls, she decided she would phone. “We talked and talked,” she said. “It was like a dam broke.” Jay said he wanted to visit. “When?” she asked. “New Year’s,” came the reply.

DENVER, New Year’s Eve, 2009

Jay set off for Denver on a cold December day and arrived at Abby’s in time for New Year’s Eve. It didn’t take her long to realize Jay was exactly like he’d been in high school. “Old feelings weren’t new feelings,” Jay says. “They were the same feelings years later.”

By now, Abby knew of the huge undertaking Jay had embarked upon in Battle Lake – opening a Civil War Museum at the Prospect House, his family home. Jay inherited the house when his mother, Kay Wilkins Johnson, passed away August 2008.

“Cap” Colehour, Jay’s great grandfather, built the house in the 1880s. He moved to Battle Lake because a childhood friend from his home town, Mount Carroll, Illinois, was there. E.A. Everts, the friend, greeted “Cap” at the train depot on a wintery spring day in 1882. They caught up on old times - in addition to being from the same home town, they were both in the Civil War - and E.A. helped “Cap” settle in.

Later that year, “Cap” started building. He built a house based on architectural drawings from his home in Chicago and added a hotel four years later. The Prospect Inn, which closed in 1924, was open almost four decades. “Cap’s” daughter, Kathrina, and her husband, Ernest Wilkins, remodeled the property five years later, in 1929.

Jay moved into the house when his mother’s memory began to fail. He looked after her the last five to six years of her life and, while doing so, ended up with a lot of time on his hands. Jay started exploring...and found treasure.

Room after room was filled with antiques, collections and paraphernalia from days gone by. Hats, dolls, toys, books, paintings, furniture, china, silver, antique rugs, dresses, campaign buttons, tools - all was just as it had been in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

What most excited Jay was the Civil War memorabilia. He found nearly 200 letters in an old chest, many “Cap” had written to his family during the war. He found a Spencer rifle, the sleeves of the jacket “Cap” had worn when he’d been shot, posters of Abe Lincoln, and so many other things one can hardly imagine.

Jay determined to preserve the house and collections. To raise funds for the preservation, he started giving tours of the Prospect House and the Civil War collection, and he set in motion the process of starting a non-profit organization.

So for Christmas Abby gave Jay a shirt patterned on one worn during the Civil War. Jay says, “That cinched it for me - I knew then and there.”

On April 24, 2010, Jay surprised Abby with the engagement ring his great grandfather gave his great grandmother exactly 100 years earlier.

BATTLE LAKE, April 24, 2010

Abby came to visit Jay in April. She was tired after the flight from Colorado and Jay suggested she go upstairs and take a nap. Abby had never seen the inside of the Prospect House, and she was amazed at all the “stuff.” When she woke, she went to find Jay. They settled in a comfortable spot in the living room.

After a moment, Jay handed Abby an antique wooden box that his grandfather had crafted. “What’s this?” she asked, surprised at the ring she saw when she opened it. “My grandfather gave this ring to my grandmother April 24, 1910 - 100 years ago today,” Jay said.

Abby looked up...is this a proposal? It was. “Yes,” Abby said.

Reba Gilliland is a freelance writer living Battle Lake. She says, “On the November day I called about writing a story, Jay was sorting Valentine cards he’d found in the house - I knew the story was meant to be.” Kathrina and Ernest Wilkins married February 14, 2011. Abby and Jay hadn’t set a date at the time of the interview.