



CHARTER MEMBER

RUTH STARLING

Ruth Starling: sister, school teacher, wife, mother, business woman, humanitarian, civic leader, pillar of her church, friend, hometown celebrity, thimble collector. All of these describe Ruth Starling, a vivacious, charming lady from Iowa.

Born February 27, 1919 in Buffalo Center, Iowa, as the fifth child of John Andrew Johnson and his wife Minnie Rickord -- Ruth was the second youngest of seven children. She had five older brothers and one younger sister Margaret. Ruth's Mother's parents were both born in Iowa but she never got to know them as they had died before Ruth was born. Ruth's Father, John was born in Denmark and with his parents and brothers and sisters immigrated to America in 1883. Grandpa Martin Anderson Johnson was known as "Tailor" Johnson in his early years in Buffalo Center. Ruth's Grandmother Marie Johnson was a fine seamstress and assisted in the family tailoring business. Ruth recalls that her grandparents business was one of the first businesses in Buffalo Center.

Her interest in her grandfather Martin's business as a tailor and her own enthusiasm for sewing has turned Ruth into a thimble collector. Ruth recalls that her aunt Annie, her Father's invalid sister, taught her the art of embroidery. She cannot recall whether she started to use a thimble as a small child -- but has now used one for years. From her mother she learned how to sew on a machine. She continued to be interested in sewing during her High School days and even thereafter. Ruth graduated in 1936 from the Buffalo Center Consolidated School, which was the first consolidated school west of the Mississippi River -- one of the first three in the USA -- she proudly recalls. From there she went on to the Iowa State Teachers College in Cedar Falls. After graduation, Ruth taught for nine years in three different Iowa towns during the 1940's.

1940 and 1943 are sad times in Ruth's memory as they represent the years when her Father and Mother passed away suddenly.

1950 was the year that Ruth taught school at Jefferson Iowa and met handsome Ralph James Starling and married him on June 4th. They moved to Bayard where they live happily ever since. On their 25th wedding anniversary, Ralph gave Ruth a gold thimble engraved **1950 Ruth - 1975 Ralph 2000** -- The year they hope to celebrate their 50th anniversary! We all hope and pray that Ruth and Ralph will celebrate their 50th and will have a cake large enough so that any Collectors Circle member who happens to be in Bayard, Iowa on June 4, 2000 can have a bite from their cake!

Ruth's thimble collecting hobby actually began in May 1971 when she helped plan a mother-daughter program with a sewing theme. At the program in the Methodist Church they played the game "hide the thimble"! The plastic thimble used in that game became the first in Ruth's collection. More thimbles were added to her collection as she received gifts from friends and relatives, bought as vacation souvenirs, and found

at flea markets and in antique stores. She catalogs each thimble and keeps some in an old J & P Coats Co. three-drawer metal spool cabinet and others in a wooden case her husband made for her first 200 thimbles.

A thimble helped celebrate the fiftieth business anniversary of a funeral home! Ruth's husband Ralph was the owner of E.A. Starling & Son Funeral Home in Bayard, Iowa. When the firm celebrated its 50th anniversary on September 16, 1972 with an Appreciation Day, a memento of the day given to all who visited was a plastic thimble inscribed "**1922-50th Anniversary-1972 E.A. STARLING AND SON Furniture and Funeral Home.**"

The Starlings -- her husband is very much a partner in Ruth's thimble collecting hobby -- have a good number of thimbles and sewing kits advertising funeral homes. One thimble is inscribed "Wilbert Burial Vault"; another "J.W. Dean & Sons, Undertakers"; yet another: "Walton's Funeral Home, Chapel of the Valley, Carson City, Nevada". A sewing kit, inscribed "Gordon C. Crabb Funeral home LA 1-0995"; another "Arthur G. Taepke/Funeral Director/Lady Attendant/Phone Lenox 0354-1447 Harding/Detroit MICH." Ruth explains that she has helped at her husband's Funeral Home as a "Lady Attendant" in that she answered the telephone and doorbell and attended to the flowers.

Ruth is proud of her husband's interest in her thimble collection. It is now "their" hobby. "Ralph is my best press agent" Ruth says lovingly of her husband. Ralph's family has been in the funeral home business ever since 1922. Ralph joined it after returning from World War II.

Since January 1, 1979, Ruth and Ralph Starling are now "semi-retired" as they sold their funeral home and only carry on with their furniture store. They have more time to travel together -- no doubt looking for more thimbles to add to their collection -- which has reached the one thousand mark!

When asked about her favorite thimbles, Ruth is quick to answer "my latest find." But she has a great many that are especially dear to her. First and foremost of course is the gold thimble given to her by Ralph on their 25th anniversary. Then there is the plastic thimble she had printed for the 75th anniversary of her High School. Of course, she especially treasures tailor's thimbles -- those similar to the ones used by her grandfather. She also appreciates religious thimbles and those found on their South American trip in 1974, when they visited a foreign exchange student who lived with them in 1972. There is still another thimble she is fond of, inscribed "John A. Johnson -- so you remember to vote for US Senate" -- and while she has no idea who this candidate was, when he ran or whether he was elected -- she likes it because her Father was named John A. Johnson.

Of course Ruth especially loved her Mother's thimble, her favorite Aunt's thimble and her husband's Mother's thimble and that of her husband's grandmother. She is ever so sorry that she does not have even one of her tailor grandfather's thimbles.

Quite often she is asked to give a talk about her thimbles. Ruth finds it easy to "Show and Tell" about her collection. One of the many thimbles she shows and talks about is a *Fable de la Fontaine* thimble -- Little Red Riding Hood -- which is especially liked by children in the audience.

Ruth and Ralph Starling have one daughter, Sharon Marie, born February 2, 1955. Ruth says their daughter's interest in music must be part of her heritage. Ruth herself sang her way through Sunday School, choir, school activities, trios, programs of all kinds. Music has been a special joy for Ruth all her life. She is also a great contributor to civic and church organizations. She was president of American Legion Auxiliary 1954-55 and both Starlings helped with that junior organization. Ralph and Ruth were members of the Order of the Eastern Star and she still has a sewing kit with the OES emblem on it.



This photo has a display of various sewing kits given out by Funeral Homes. The kit in the upper right hand corner is Ralph's WW II issue sewing kit - no thimble. The round box belonged to Ralph's grandmother and she used it for quilting. It contained needles, thimble, leather-type thimble made from end of a glove, razor blades.



J & P Coats drawer full of various rows of different thimbles.

Ruth would use these for giving talks in 1975 to area woman's groups.

They actively give time and effort to their United Methodist Church. She was president of United Methodist Women in 1968-69 and was honored with a lifetime membership pin in 1963. In 1976 at a UMW sponsored May Craft Bicentennial Day, Ruth displayed her collection. In 1976 she knitted a pincushion in the form of a wild rose -- the State Flower of Iowa. The center of it had room for a thimble. Ruth sent it to Better Homes and Gardens Magazine but does not know when it was published in the magazine. Since then Ruth has kept on making her "wild Iowa Roses".



"My Sewing Corner – Thimbles and Things" Honeymoon old treadle machine from Aunt Mary Rickord.

"Case at bottom has wood sliding glass panels and dowel pegs for thimbles. Ralph made this before we had the Coats metal spool cabinet."



Thimble collecting is a joy and great learning experience for both Ruth and Ralph Starling. It certainly made Ruth a hometown celebrity. National articles were written about her thimble collecting in a Funeral Directors publication. She and her thimbles were featured on KCC-TV in Des Moines, Iowa. Local newspapers – in Buffalo Center and Bayard – keep readers informed about the Starlings' ever growing thimble collection.

"Happiness is collecting thimbles" -- Ruth Starling is so certain she has it as a slogan on her personal thimble.