

## The Piper Grandparents

By Kathryn Cubalo

My maternal grandparents, Sam and Mae Abbott Piper, were part of our lives from the beginning. My older brother and I were born in their big stone house. As a child, I thought my grandparents must be very important people in the community as they had such a nice house. It had a bathroom and a front parlor that was used only on special occasions. The parlor had a fancy rug, a couch, several nice chairs, an organ and a bookcase with books. Sometimes we children were allowed to go in to get one of the children's books or to look at pictures through the stereopticon. Later as we got older, we could try to play the organ.

My memories of my grandmother were of a short, plump woman always bustling around. Grandpa was rather small for a man with a slender build. Their work was farming, so they had a set schedule: up before dawn; grandpa got the cows milked while grandma got breakfast. Then, get at the other chores. In the summer, Grandpa went to the fields; Grandma fed the chickens and kept the garden. Basically, they lived from the land, selling butter and eggs for cash for the other things they needed. They were considered quite prosperous for their time and they accomplished it by hard work. Both were church-going Presbyterians, the rather strict variety. They devoted themselves to their family (six children) and their church, Caledonia Presbyterian (now Spruce Presbyterian). I can't think of anything they did just for fun except to go to church dinners, or maybe to my uncle's place on Hubbard Lake on a Sunday afternoon, or on a drive with my parents. Mother says Grandma used to walk across the fields to visit the neighbors, Mrs. Rose Snowden or Mrs. Nellie Sayers. I guess I would say they were pioneers.

Grandma came from Canada to live with the family of her mother's cousin, Will Sellers, when she was nine years old.<sup>1</sup> Her life there was rather without affection and she remembered some hard times.

My grandfather's family had also come from Canada. There is a place near Goderich, Ontario called Piper's Mill and my great-great-grandfather had come there from England. I'm not sure why or how my great-grandfather, William Piper, his wife, Isabel McKenzie, and their family came to the Thumb area of Michigan, but he was a farmer and had ten children.<sup>2</sup> Grandpa, the second oldest, was twelve at the time of the move. I remember my great-grandfather and most of Grandpa's siblings.

My grandfather did not set out to be a farmer. When he was old enough to work, he set out for Calumet, Michigan to work in the copper mines. His older brother John was already mining there. While in Calumet, Grandpa proposed to my grandmother by letter. He had met her in school and told his family that he intended to marry that pretty girl, Mae Abbott. In the meantime, Mae had found out what she supposed was a bad secret about her parentage, so she wrote to my grandfather, Sam, telling him about her shame and excusing him from their engagement. He wrote back that he wanted to marry her and not her family. She got on the next train to Calumet. They were married the day she arrived.

Grandpa was a mine foreman. He said that the qualification was that he could speak English. Nonetheless, work in the mines was hard and Sam developed a lung condition known as Miners' Consumption. With what little money they had, Sam and Mae bought some land in Minnesota to farm. When the snow melted, they discovered that the land was mostly covered with stones. That and the short growing season discouraged them. George Snowden, who Sam knew from Calumet, had moved to Spruce and wrote to Sam and Mae about cheap land available next to his. They left Minnesota<sup>3</sup> and came to Spruce. By that time, they had four boys, Francis, John, Elmer and Arthur.

<sup>1</sup> See "Mae Abbott Piper" by Helen Olson, Nov. 1993.

<sup>2</sup> John, Samuel, Mary, William, Isabel, Donald (Dan), Sarah, Frank, Ella and Elizabeth (twins)

<sup>3</sup> We don't know if they sold the Minnesota land or simply deserted it, though our aunt, Helen Piper Vicary, thought it was the latter.

Grandma miscarried a fifth boy at about the fifth month during the move. She told our mother that she assumed she could have only boys, which was a disappointment to her. They always joked that she had to get on an odd year<sup>1</sup> to have her two girls, Helen and Isabel, who were born in Spruce.

The land had been burned over, so some clearing was done. They started at the beginning by building a small house and barn. We have a picture of that first place. The house that I remember came after lots of hard work. There were troubles, also. They took in Grandma's stepmother, Anna Abbott, from Canada, and had her for twelve years as she developed dementia. At the end, they had to lock her in a room, because she kept running away, sometimes in her nightclothes. She also became quite violent at times and would rip even the most sturdy of sheets to shreds.

When their oldest boy, Frank, was eighteen, he decided to go to the city (Detroit) to find work. While there, his foot was run over by a streetcar. He was taken to the hospital, but developed blood poisoning and died. It was a tragedy for the whole family. My mother, the youngest, remembered him as being very smart and musical. She remembered that the family organ had a plant stand on either side. Frank would put mother on one stand and Aunt Helen on the other while he played. He also hooked up a harness so that he could play a mouth organ while playing the organ.

My Aunt Helen, two years older than Mother, developed epilepsy after the flu pandemic of 1919. At that time, the only remedy was Phenobarbital, which kept her somewhat sedated. Consequently, my mother was her caretaker when they went places and it was thought that Aunt Helen would not marry. Later, with better medication, she was almost symptom free. She married, had two children, lived to be ninety-three, and was a very dear aunt to all of us.

I remember my grandmother as being very kind, but busy. When we were there, which was often, we knew that there was no running in the house and we had to be quiet if it was Grandpa's naptime or when he was listening to the news or the ball game on the radio. I don't remember them being cross with us but we (my older brother and I) were the oldest grandchildren and the other grandchildren thought we were favored. They remember being scolded at times. Grandma always had cookies for us when we left to go home after a visit. She knew I had a sweet tooth so if she didn't have cookies, she gave me a lump of brown sugar. I still love brown sugar lumps. She also taught me to eat fresh tomato slices with sugar on them.

We lived with our grandparents three times. The first I don't remember since we moved there from Harbor Beach when Daddy left the Coast Guard. The second time was when Grandpa fell on the stairs and broke his collarbone. I think we were there about six weeks until he recovered. The third time was when he had an operation for colon cancer. He fully recovered from that and remained quite healthy for some time. In his last years, the family thought he worked too hard so convinced him to sell the cows. The story is that he started dying when they took his cows away. He died in 1959 at the age of eighty-one.

Grandma continued living on the farm after Grandpa died, but she began to have falls and was often confused. Unk and Aunt Margaret lived across the road and checked on her every day, but when Aunt Helen came to visit, she thought Grandma needed more care and took her home to Brooklyn. Her dementia became worse and the last I remember, she could not communicate. I'm not sure she knew us (Mother and me). Finally, Aunt Helen had to put her in a nursing home where she died after several weeks at the age of eighty-seven. Her funeral was just one week before my mother's.

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<sup>1</sup> The children's birth years were 1902, 1904, 1906, 1908, 1911 and 1913.