

Early Childhood on the County Line and in Spruce

Frank, Kathryn and Honey had been talking on tape about the shipwreck their father, John Olson, had lived through in 1940. Then there talk switched to other early memories. At first these stories were told without recording

One story was about Sonny (Frank) and Kathryn when they lived "on the County line" in the drafty old house belonging to Daddy's mother, Grandma Allison. Mother and Dad had moved there after Daddy got out of the Coast Guard. They had no money to speak of and no real job for Daddy because of the Depression. At first when they came back from Port Huron, mother and Sonny and Kathryn lived with Grandma and Grandpa Piper and Daddy lived with his mother and stepfather down on Grandpa Alec's place near Hubbard Lake. Mother said that Grandma told her they could keep her and the children but couldn't afford to keep Daddy, too, and that she, our mother, found it hard at that time living in the more free-wheeling Norwegian household. After a few months, however, both she and Daddy began realizing that their marriage couldn't last if they weren't together. So they moved into the drafty old County Line place.

Dad did whatever odd jobs he could find, including picking raspberries for 3 cents a quart. I think he also worked two and half days a week for the county in the gravel pit during that time, the jobs being divided up so that more people could have a little work. The pit boss kept track of their hours in a little notebook and gave out chits to buy groceries. At one point the notebook was "lost" and had to be reconstructed out of the boss's memory, so no one got all of the money they had actually earned, pittance that it was.

Mother said that they were going to have no money at all for Christmas, so Daddy made a little red table and two benches for Sonny and Kathryn for Christmas. Just a few days before Christmas, Sonny announced that he wanted Santa to bring him a tractor. They were disheartened because that didn't seem possible and they didn't know how to handle it. Then just a day or two before Christmas, all of the gravel pit workers were given a small amount of their pay. Daddy went right out and bought Sonny his tractor, Kathryn a doll and Mom some shoes and a piece of dress fabric.

This story, however, is about the grocery truck that came around. Even long after we moved to our property on Spruce Road, Jack Cook, who owned a grocery store in Haynes, came around with his grocery truck, a sort of small traveling store. You could buy staples from him and he would buy your extra eggs and cream. Like most small country stores, most of these transactions were "on the book" and then you settled up once in awhile.

Anyway, the truck came by the County Line while the folks were picking berries and Sonny and Kathryn were taking their naps. The folks made their purchases in a hurry and left them on the kitchen table and hurried back out to finish the picking. When they came in, Sonny and Kathryn had gotten themselves up, opened all the Jello boxes, dumped the contents on the floor and stirred it up and were just sweeping it up and carefully pouring it back in the boxes.

K: We were trying to put it back in the boxes. I remember the story, but I don't remember...

F: I can see you doing it.

K: But I remember, I have a vivid picture of Unk scolding me, and looking way up...

F: For putting the silver down...¹

K: For putting the silver down through the... he was nailing tin plates over the holes in the floor, and I got a scolding I guess for putting the spoons down. I suppose that's why I remembered it because he didn't scold very often.

During the tape changing, Kathryn and Frank went on to talk about how Kathryn would wake up from her nap, get into her clothes drawer and put on a complete set of new clothes.

F: All the time, It's like you put out multiple layers.

K: She made the cute little dresses and pants to match

H: You know what I remember is watching her iron my sunsuits and the bonnets that went with them. Cause she always made, whatever she made us, she made a us bonnet that opened flat and then it buttoned there, because we were so sun sensitive that we always had some kind of little hat.

F: Yeah.

H: Well, it's funny.

K: Oh!

H: Anyway

The story skips here to our house on the farm the folks bought for \$750 in 1938. They got it on a tax foreclosure and part of the purchase was a promise to let it's owner, Mrs. White, live in one end of the house until she died. No one anticipated that would happen so soon. Mrs. White died of a hemorrhage from cancer just a few weeks after we moved in.

The house had neither electricity or water, though we got electricity soon after we moved in and a 168 foot well was dug within the year. Water was piped in not too long after the well went in. It was quite a few years before we had running hot water. Indoor plumbing didn't come until 1948 and the phone lines didn't go through until 1958.

F: The guys were supposed to come in the morning to wire the house. They were working at Gene Oliver's. They came ten o'clock at night.

K: Oh!

F: And they asked if they could wire the house. And the four of 'em went to work and at four o'clock in the morning -- we all stayed up.

K: Oh, sure!

F: At four o'clock in the morning the inspector came, checked out, checked everything, hit the switch and we had lights. (Laughter)

H: It must have felt like a miracle to you kids.

F: Oh, it was.

K: One thing I remember that was a miracle was when Dad turned the switch and pumped water into the sink in the house.

F: Drove the glass out of his hand. Remember that?

K: Yeah, there was really pressure.

H: Oh, cause it was air in the pipes probably?

F: No, no the pump, the pump actually put out so much pressure ...

K: Oh, yeah!

¹ Mother said that the silverware kept disappearing and they didn't realize what was happening until the day they found Kathryn's doll stuck in a hole in the floor behind the stove.

F: The faucet, he had the faucet open like this
 K: And it came ...
 F: and a glass...
 K: Oh, yeah!
 F: He turned this pump on up here...
 K: That's how it would come
 F: It would go "pa-fump" and it ...
 K: Swish, swish, swish ...I mean it came with the pump.
 F: All over the..
 K: Swish all over
 F: Drove the glass into the sink and the pieces...
 K: Oh, yeah, the pump
 F: Well, then he had to put a, he put a piece of big pipe that would cushion that pressure.
 K: Uh, huh, huh.
 F: Well, we used that for several years.
 K: Oh yeah, it was wonderful to have water.
 H: Did we have when we were... I know that the well went in shortly after we bought the house.
 Right?
 F: Next winter.
 H: Did we have a hand pump at the sink for a while?
 F: No. Never.
 K: No. We had to carry the water in.
 H: We carried it in. OK. I wonder where I remember the hand pump from.
 K: Well, there was one at Grandpa Alec's.
 F: Yeah, from the cistern.
 H: Maybe that's where I remember it from. Yeah.
 K: There was a pump at the sink at Grandpa Alec's.
 H: But, did Grandma and Grandpa Piper have one?
 K & F: No
 F: They had running water in their house from the...²
 H: Oh, that's right cause they had the gravity thing. Yeah
 F: Their house never had a cistern.
 H: Right.
 F: It used to make Aunt Helen mad because everybody else had soft water to wash their hair
 in...
 K: Heh, heh, heh ...
 F: And all they had was a barrel under the ...
 H: They had a barrel, that's right, that caught rain out on the porch. Yeah. My house in ...

Some on-line skaters go by.

² Grandma and Grandpa Piper's house was one of the first in the area to have indoor plumbing and running water. A big holding tank was installed in the attic and then water was pumped up into the tank with a gasoline engine. If you forgot to turn off the engine on time, water came spilling down the lower roof onto the porch. Even though they had a bathroom, there was a medicine cabinet by the kitchen sink where Grandpa Piper always shaved. We all remember him honing his straight razor on the strop that hung on the side of the cabinet and shaving with it.