

UNCLE OLIE

By Helen Olson

If the truth must be known, I didn't know him very well. The quietest of my father's five brothers in a family of extroverts, he was always just there when I was child, leaning back with his round body settled comfortably in a chair, one arm usually slung up over the back, stocking feet sprawled out, smiling slightly at all the stories and jokes, occasionally adding something in his gruff lilting Norwegian-accented voice.

There were a few things. He got a new Buick every year, which we were supposed to notice. The only one I remember is a bulky two-toned custom-colored job in the most god-awful green and tan I had ever seen. "I think Olie must have run out of color choices," my mother said. Strangely enough, he didn't like to drive and I cannot remember even once seeing him at the wheel. His cars were usually driven either by his wives (he outlived three) or his lovable, alcoholic, reckless son-in-law who liked to average 80 miles an hour on country roads. The first time I ever saw an automobile windshield washer was in one of Uncle Olie's fancy new cars while Aunt Lola, wife #1, was driving me to school. I remember the marvel of the spray of water across the windshield, and the fact that we missed the turn on the MacDonald School road while Aunt Lola fussed with the buttons.

Daddy's family seemed not to celebrate birthdays and holidays with gifts and cards in the way my mother's family did, but whenever the uncles came to visit, our banks were fuller when they left. With Uncle Olie, there was a certain little ritual. He'd be sitting in a comfortable chair in the living room or at the kitchen table drinking coffee and eating home-made bread covered with butter and cream. We'd be lurking around the edges. There would be a lull in the conversation. "Com'on over here," he'd say. Then he'd reach in his pocket and retrieve his thick roll of cash from which he'd peel a dollar bill for each of us. That was a lot of money when your dad's wages were under \$2,000 a year and your allowance was a quarter. I remember trying to save enough money for a pair of roller skates (\$3.47) and calculating in my plans when Uncle Olie would next come to visit.

He thought our mother was wonderful and after both she and Daddy were gone, often told us that. "Your mother was a good woman," he'd say. "She always was so good to us. Dere was always coffee and good bread. She made wonderful bread. And if Johnny said, 'Isabel, let's go do dis or dat,' she'd drop everyting and go. She'd leave the dishes sittin' right in the dishwasher and go." He loved to sit at our kitchen table drinking coffee and demolishing a loaf of hot homemade bread. He often left for home with a second loaf under his arm. I can still see him, turning in the middle of the yard as he headed for his car, with that little crooked wave that was indigenous to his family, "Tanks for everyting."

My mother always assumed that the reason Uncle Olie always went in his stocking feet, even on the beautiful carpets of his second wife's home, was that he had suffered frost bite in World War I. Looking back, I realize that all of Daddy's brothers and one sister usually went in stocking feet or wore "slipper socks" around the house. And since the family trunk contains a pair of much mended heavy socks my grandmother made for my brother as a little boy to wear as slippers, I suspect the sock habit went back a lot further than the War to End All Wars.

It is a fact that he suffered frost bite in the war. Not until very recently, though, did any of us have a clue that he might have suffered anything else. We grew up in a time when there was an unspoken prohibition about asking men about their war experiences. I don't know if that

was strictly a family thing because of another uncle's post-WWII problems that would now be described as Post Trauma Stress Syndrome or if no one discussed war experiences very much. All I know is that we simply didn't make much connection between what we read in history books and the individual who experienced that history more intimately.

One day, when I went to visit him after Aunt Goldie, his third wife had died, he brought up the subject of war. The context was President Reagan's "Star Wars" plan. Uncle Olie, who equated being a good person with being a patriot with being a Republican, said, "I try ta be a good American..and maybe this ain't right, but I tink that Star War ting is crazy. It ain't gonta work and it's a waste. And another ting..I tink we ain't got any business bein' in dat country down dere—Nigeria or whatever it is. We might not like what dere doin' but we ain't got any business interferin'" I was astonished. And I was even more astonished as he proceeded to tell me about the waste he witnessed during and after World War I.

One story I remember especially. He said he had stayed on after the war for nine months in the city of Koblenz as a "dog," a "gofer" for an officer. He was billeted in a private home with a German family who didn't have enough to eat. It bothered him especially that the children were hungry. He said that the US army was careless with food and once left a huge pile of bread outside in a fenced area to be ruined by rain when so many Germans were hungry and couldn't get at it. That made him angry. He said, "Maybe it wasn't right, but I usta sneak bread home to 'em."

Here is what I know of Uncle Olie's military service. He was called up in May 1918 to Fort Custer and then shipped out to England. That fall he entered the war in Verdun at the Battle of St. Michael. His unit entered the battle with 250 and finished with 58. I think he also fought at Argon and the Sudan.

After his own unit was depleted, the few who were left were attached to another unit. They were supposed to go to the South of France, but on November 5, they were told to join a Marine battalion to finish up the war. There wasn't much fighting because "they were running away so fast." A lieutenant who liked him ("I don't know why") told him "trow you gun and duffel on the caisson and help out." So he did.

"On November 7, the lieutenant says, 'They're gonna end this war.' I says, 'What toilet you hear that from?' But the war ended."

After the war he stayed on in Koblenz. He got out in 1919 and was in ticker-tape parades in New York City and Washington D.C.

Uncle Olie said, "I done one bad ting in da war. One day we took a bunch a German prisoners. Da officer had a nice pair a binoculars hangin' around his neck, see? And I jerked 'em off him. I broke the strap jerkin' em off. And the officer says ta me, 'I'm outta da war, but you're still in it.' He said it in German, but I understood because 'a Norwegian. I tink that was a wrong ting for me ta do."

In reality, I think Uncle Olie's "wrong ting" was his overwhelming love of money. For a long time, I didn't realize this. I don't find talk about money very interesting, so I suspect I tuned out or wandered off when the subject came up. After a while, we all got pretty good at imitating Uncle Olie saying "GM's been good ta me," and then reciting his litany about General Motors and his General Motors stocks and how he helped get my brother Frank and second cousin Glen into the apprenticeship program which was reserved for relatives of supervisory personnel.

The only time that I can recall him talking directly to me about his plans for his money was when he was hospitalized with dehydration about a year (I think) before Aunt Goldie died. When my brother first called, doctors thought Uncle Olie's kidneys were failing and were making ominous noises about his prognosis. I hopped in the car the next day after work to go see him. I stopped at my brother John's and the two of us went over to the hospital together. By that time he had been on IV's for a day and was thoroughly enjoying all the attention he was getting. The original prognosis resulted from the doctors trying to measure his urine and missing the fact that Uncle Olie was sliding out of bed, taking IV pole in hand, and going into the bathroom to pee instead of peeing in the handheld urinal next to his bed. All that was really wrong was fatigue brought on by a 90+ year old man trying to care for a wife who had become too senile for him to keep up with.

Aunt Goldie was with Uncle Olie when we arrived. When she decided to leave, my brother, at Uncle Olie's bidding, walked with her down to the lobby to meet her son so that she wouldn't get lost in route. That was when Uncle Olie decided to talk to me about his GM stocks. The conversation started in the familiar way. "General Motors has been good 'ta me. They're payin for all a this. I ain't payin' a dime. They're payin it all." Then Uncle Olie told me how many GM stocks he had and what they were worth. He told me that his daughter Virginia's second husband had asked him for some money, that he was a leach, all he wanted was Uncle Olie's money, so Uncle Olie wasn't talking to him anymore. He also told me that Maxine, his niece and the daughter of his second wife, had asked him for some money after Virginia died, but that he had given Maxine some stocks after her mother died and "she just cashed 'em in and spent the money," so she wasn't getting any more either.

He then said, and this was also a familiar strain, that we (his six nieces and nephews) were all he had left and that we were going to get the GM stocks. I should add here that Uncle Olie's hearing had failed considerably by then, so he told me all this at the top of his lungs and I had to pretty much shout my answers. My biggest concern at that point was the very sick man in the next bed and his loving teenage son who was sitting close and holding his hand. I was concerned about disturbing them with loud talk of something as trivial as stocks when they seemed to be dealing with pain and life and death. I was also worried that I might appear to be the greedy niece who comes roaring in when the stock-holding uncle got ill.

I said, because I meant it, that I appreciated the thought, but that Uncle Olie might also want to consider his church and the Masonic order which he had enjoyed. I tried to suggest that it would be best if he got all of his wishes into a will. Uncle Olie didn't seem to think that was necessary. He said that his stocks were in his name, so we, as his only relatives, would get them, and Aunt Goldie's family would get hers. He also suggested that if Aunt Goldie died before him, we would eventually get everything because that was his right as her husband. I was mostly interested in changing the subject, so simply reiterated that if he wanted us to have the stocks, he should put it in a will. My brother came back and I can't remember if he got drawn into the stock conversation or not. I do know that I later talked about it with John and also told my sister, mostly in a humorous "Why me? Why did I have to be the one he decided to talk about this with?" vein.