

World War II at Home
by Helen Olson
from transcripts of 2010 conversations
with Frank and Nancy Olson and Kathryn and Lloyd Cubalo

Sometime in the summer of 1941, Kathryn (age 8 ½) and I (almost 4) went to Alpena with our mother on our bi-weekly shopping trip to buy grocery staples and to visit any other stores on our list like Montgomery Ward or J.C. Penny, where the money was sent by a little cable car to the bookkeeper in the balcony. Sonny¹ (age 10) can't remember this incident, so we presume he was visiting Grandma and Grandpa Piper, which he preferred to shopping trips.

While we were there, we all wandered into the Gambles Store. This wonderful place sold bikes, appliances, dishes, canning supplies and multiple other items used to run a household. Our first set of matching dishes, white with a small gold rim and dainty little sauce dishes, came from Gambles, as did Sonny's sturdy green Hiawatha bike.

I don't know if we had a specific purpose for the visit, or if we just wandered in to look around. In any event, Mother spent some time looking at a Frigidaire refrigerator. At that time we kept our food cold in our Michigan basement and in a green enameled icebox. For years, Grandpa Piper cut ice from Lake Huron that he stored in an ice house on his farm and from which he supplied both his and our ice boxes, and probably Uncle Elmer and Aunt Mazie's, as well. However, he quit cutting ice when they acquired a refrigerator driven by a gas motor, and ice was increasingly difficult to get as others were also converting to refrigeration. Mother and Dad had discussed purchasing a refrigerator but all major decisions such as this took a lot of conversation and planning, because money was always tight in our family and electric appliances were expensive.

The owner of Gambles came right over to point out all of the merits of refrigeration and of this Frigidaire model in particular. Kathryn thinks that the owner may have known our parents slightly, or at least knew that Daddy had a job, not something true of many families in the area. In any event, Mother was polite, but said she was only looking and that they were not in the position to buy at that time.

The next day, a Gambles Store truck drove into the driveway of our little farm, seventeen miles south of Alpena. It was the storeowner with the Frigidaire. We went out on the porch with Mother. She was somewhat taken aback and said that we had not ordered the refrigerator. "I know," he said, "but, there's a war coming and, once it's here, you won't be able to get appliances until it's over. Try it for a month. You'll like it. Then, if you want to keep it, we'll work out a way for you to pay for it." Daddy was sailing on the lake ship the Conneaut at that time, so discussion had to wait until he was in port. I'm sure there was a lot, though I don't remember it. We kept the refrigerator and had it until I was in college.

War was declared on December 7, 1941, one day after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Uncle Art (Unk) Piper enlisted in the Navy on December 8, knowing that, as a single man, he would be drafted into the army right away. He said he preferred water to mud. Uncle Elmer Piper was an officer in the Coast Guard, which became part of the Navy during the War.

At the time, Daddy was working as an "oiler"² for the Wyandotte shipping line on the Great Lakes ship, the Conneaut. According to Frank, there was a lot of talk between Daddy and his

¹ Sonny's real name is Francis. However, he's been called either Sonny or Frank for his entire life. In this piece, I tend to use the two names interchangeably.

² He ran the engine room. As near as I can tell, this position was similar to that of a military warrant officer, where the officer has a specific duty rather than that of leading troops. I do know that he ate in the Officers' Mess, a matter of great importance to his children.

friends and Daddy and our mother about whether he should stay on the boat or try to get "war work" on shore. Either way, he was vulnerable to the draft, even though he had three children.

Daddy continued to work on the Conneaut for another two years. But there were other considerations: after the Conneaut was wrecked in the Armistice Day storm of 1940, Daddy found it increasingly difficult to go back to the boat after a time at home³; then he and mother discovered that another baby was expected in March 1943. Frank reports that Daddy came home at the end of the 1942 shipping season with his footlocker full of sugar and coffee; so while we always heard that he didn't quit, but just didn't go back to the boats in the spring, he must have planned to get an on-shore job. His friends on the boat all thought he was crazy and would be drafted immediately.

As Frank points out, you could get a job if you could walk or talk because all able-bodied men were being drafted. Dad found work at Besser Manufacturing in Alpena, which had already converted to manufacturing war materials. Daddy was deferred 30 days at a time until he was 36, because he was hand-polishing breechblocks⁴ for 40 millimeter guns for the Navy. He must have come close to being drafted at one time, because I remember that Mother brought home the flag from church that had stars on it for all of the men serving in the War from our congregation and sewed a star on for Dad, I suppose in anticipation. He never went, however, but spent the rest of the war years at Besser. Meanwhile, nearly all of his friends from the Conneaut were drafted.

Some years ago, Kathryn and I were in the Besser Museum looking at a little exhibit about Besser Manufacturing and saw a picture of our Dad working on breechblocks with several of his friends.⁵ One of the workers was Clarence Anderson, who would remain a good friend until Daddy died; another was a blind man who could find the rough spots by touch. The rest of the men found the high or low spots by putting a compound called "Blue Vitral" on the surface. It can't be washed off, so Daddy's hands were always blue. The work was very exacting, but Daddy was good at it even though he was a fairly nervous person in other situations.

With Daddy permanently home for the first time in their marriage, the rhythm of our family life changed dramatically. Because they had never wanted to argue about small things when they had so little time together, Mom and Dad found themselves having to resolve a lot of the little issues that most couples deal with in the early years of marriage. Doing this with children aged 12, 10, 6 and a baby who cried with colic⁶ from six to nine every night must have been stressful. Added to that, our house and the farm were in dire need of repair and work, so decisions about how to proceed had to be made. Kathryn remembers that her stomach was always tied in knots and that every disagreement made her think they were on the verge of divorce. One night she went running from the dinner table in tears when they argued about whether or not it was OK to pour wash water down the sewer drain into the septic tank. Both parents felt bad about this and tried to reassure us that it was OK for people to disagree. Kathryn thinks they must have discussed this later because dinner time became "off limits" for arguments.

³ Daddy's struggles with leaving us and with what we now think must have been anxiety attacks are talked about in the story "The Wreck."

⁴ This is the Wikipedia definition of a breechblock: A breechblock (or "breech block") is the part of the firearm action that closes the breech of a weapon (whether small arms or artillery) at the moment of firing.

⁵ Kathryn had copies of the picture made for us. Mine hangs in my hallway. A friend remarked that very few people have pictures of their dads at work.

⁶ In an extended family where everyone had an opinion, a lot of the blame for Johnny's colic got laid on Daddy, since the older three of us had been relatively calm babies. Daddy's sister Lena, herself a nervous person, was convinced that Johnny's evening crying had to do with Daddy's nervousness, since it started after Daddy arrived home from work. We now know that colic is caused by acid reflux and has nothing to do with the emotional state of his caregivers. Daddy had a hard enough time hearing any of us cry without having the blame placed on him.

Meanwhile, the War Effort occupied the entire nation and most factories were converted to making war materials. Not only were appliances impossible to get, but so were cars and most machinery. Farmers could apply to buy a tractor only because farm produce was needed to promote the war effort.⁷ Rationing began in the spring of 1942; sugar rationing began in 1943. Shoes, meat, sugar, coffee, gas and tires were all among the rationed items. Families were issued ration booklets with stamps that were redeemed at the time of purchase. The number and kinds of stamps were allotted by the number of adults and children in a household and the employment status of the wage-earner.

Meat rationing was a big issue for people living in the city. That was not an issue for us because we raised chickens, pigs and cattle.⁸ Franks says that farmers were supposed to declare the animals and poultry they raised so that we wouldn't sell meat illegally, but we never did and he doesn't think anyone else in the area did either.

Frank tells this story about the meat we raised: "One year, when money was short, Dad decided to butcher the steer ourselves. A neighbor volunteered to help. Saturday morning about 9:00 o'clock, we started by shooting the steer in the head. Dad, at that point, leaned into the corner and threw up. All day during the day, he stood in the corner gagging and couldn't do anything, but he wouldn't go into the house, as suggested. The neighbor (I can't remember his name) spent the rest of the day dressing out, skinning and cutting the beef into quarters. Mother and I (Frank) spent day two cutting up, brazing and canning all the meat, grinding up all the lung, heart and scrap meat. We didn't try that again!"

Our Aunt Margaret Piper loved to tell funny stories and told this one about meat rationing. She and Unk had married in January 1944 while Unk was home on leave. Later, when Unk was again home on leave, they invited his cousin Irene Rasmussen and her most recent "beau" over for dinner. Irene was a beautiful woman, but a bit on the haughty side and kind of picky. In fact, there were a lot of "beaus" who didn't measure up before she finally married in her early fifty's. Neither Aunt Margaret nor Unk had much cooking experience. Since meat was so scarce, menus couldn't be planned until the day of an event. Aunt Margaret went out to see what she could find. She saw a big line outside of a butcher store, so did what everyone did; she got on line and took what she could get. She got a chicken. She didn't know that she was going to get the chicken with its feathers, guts, head and feet intact; it was dead and that was it. She took it home, but she didn't know what to do with it. Unk, who had grown up a farmer's child, thought he remembered watching his mother dress a chicken, so he helped. They took the feathers off, gutted it, and roasted it with a stuffing. Irene and the boyfriend were already in the living room when the newlyweds went to the kitchen to get the roasted chicken ready to serve. Unk began to take the stuffing out and said to Aunt Marg, "Did you put corn in this dressing?" She said "NO." They had forgotten to take out the crop, which was filled with mostly stones and corn. They picked out as much out as they could and then served the chicken. The boyfriend said, "This is interesting; really tasty. I've never had stuffing with corn in it before. Good idea." Of course Unk and Aunt Margaret couldn't wait to come up north and tell everybody.

Spam (the canned meat) and Hormel meat spreads were developed, or at least came into popular use, during this time.⁹ All children of WWII remember having fried Spam for dinner and Hormel ham from a tiny can spread thinly on sandwiches for lunch. I don't think we want to know what they were made of. Lloyd reminded us that a lot of the lunch meat, like baloney, had macaroni and cheese and other little bits of stuff in it. As he pointed out, lunch meat contained the scraps.

⁷ The story, "The Team," tells about our Grandpa Piper's purchase of a Farmall A during the war.

⁸ This didn't mean we always had fresh meat. Freezers were not yet available, so we had fresh meat only when we slaughtered an animal or chicken. Our pigs were butchered by a German butcher who smoked the hams and bacon than hung in our Michigan basement and our mother canned stew meat from the beef.

⁹ A Google search says that Spam was developed in 1937.

For most of the year, our family was not affected by butter rationing because we churned our own butter with cream that we separated from the cow milk. But there is always a "dry" season, just before the cows calve in the spring, and then we used oleo. Oleo was developed in the mid-30's and became a staple butter substitute during the War. Nancy reminded us that oleo was white. In fact, it looked like lard. It came with a little packet of food coloring that had to be mixed in with a fork. After the War, it came in a plastic bag with a color capsule that you pinched to break and then kneaded in. Colored oleo (margarine) wasn't available in most states until well into the 50's because of a strong lobby from the dairy industry that didn't want it to resemble butter. Sonny remembers making a "fool" of himself over oleo. He was spouting off at the table about how horrible oleo was and how he could taste the difference between it and butter. Mother let him rant on, and then said, "you've been eating it for two weeks."

Other rationing did affect our daily lives. Sugar was in very short supply. The artificial sweetener Saccharine was available, but it had a bitter after-taste. I remember Mother bringing me a cup of tea sweetened with milk and Saccharine one time when I was home in bed with the flu. She was apologetic that there was no sugar for it; and the tea did taste pretty bad. She tried baking with honey, but I don't remember what that tasted like. I'm not sure how easy honey was to obtain. People who did home canning could get a special ration of a hundred pounds of sugar each summer. Mother and Dad did not think kindly of the people who got their ration and then used it for the table or baking rather than canning. I remember looking longingly at the big sack of sugar sitting in the corner of the kitchen. Mother usually let us have one treat made with sugar when the extra ration arrived. One year we made lemonade (with real lemons). Daddy was doing something in the yard at the time and I took his glass out to him. He said, "Oh, thanks, Honey," and downed it in one long gulp. I was appalled. By taking tiny sips, I made my glass last most of the afternoon. Frank recalls that Dean McKinnon got into his mother Grace's canning sugar ration without her knowing it and made fudge to give to all his friends. Grace was justifiably furious.

Like most families of that era, we were accustomed to having dessert at the end of our evening meal, often pudding or canned fruit, and taking homemade cookies in our lunch boxes. I don't know what we did about the cookies for lunch. One solution to the dessert problem was another wartime product, a packaged pudding mix called Junket that made a pinkish strawberry-flavored dessert. Kathryn says there was also a yellow flavor, probably lemon. I remember it as tasting wonderful; so did my former husband, Peter, who grew up at the same time as I, but on Long Island, New York. Once, around 1970, we found some in a specialty store and brought it home, thinking it would be great treat for our young Annette and Danny. We couldn't believe how terrible it tasted and had no trouble throwing it out!

Artificial sweeteners for pop had not yet been developed. Once Daddy came home from work with a bottled concentrate mix for making root beer and other flavors of pop that someone had given him. We were excited about the prospect of our own pop, but were disappointed at the flat taste, which was more like Kool Aid, with no fizz. Kathryn thinks we drank it anyway, because we really craved treats.

Christmas candy was also an issue. We had very few decorations for our tree and usually bought a bag of long garlands of candy and candy canes for tree trimmings. Sometimes, we also made popcorn balls that we wrapped in colored cellophane and hung on the tree. With sugar rationing, those options disappeared. Mother said we would all make some decorations from shiny colored paper. Frank made several multi-dimensional items. I don't remember what Kathryn made and she can't remember this at all. I was worried, because at about age 6, I knew I couldn't make anything as fancy as Frank's. Mother came to my rescue with an idea. I cut some ovals out of red shiny paper, sewed them most of the way around on the treadle sewing machine, stuffed some cotton batting in them and then put a Santa face sticker with a fuzzy cotton beard on the top; they looked kind of like roly-polly Santa Clauses. I thought they

were beautiful. Mother would also order candy, an assortment of hard candies, ribbon candy, and a few chocolate drops, from the Sears Christmas Catalog early in the fall to be sure they didn't sell out. We were allowed one candy when they arrived, but then they were hidden away until Christmas. Despite the fact that we had a really small house, our Mother was a genius at hiding things. At least, I never found them.

Coffee rationing began in November 1942. At first, each adult in the household was allowed one pound of coffee every five weeks; that later was extended to six weeks. In a Norwegian household, where the coffee pot is on the stove all day long, that was a real crisis. Daddy brought coffee with him when he left the boat in 1942, but that didn't last long. There were coffee substitutes available, such as chicory and roasted grains. I think Mother tried them by mixing part coffee and part substitute. And, I think Uncle Myrt sometimes came north with coffee he obtained from the Black Market.¹⁰ I seem to recall that we also drank more tea, especially for supper.

Cigarettes were not rationed¹¹, but they were hard to find because most of the cigarettes produced were sent to the troops overseas. This was a big problem for Daddy, who, like most men of his generation, was a heavy smoker. He smoked cigarettes when he could get them, but also rolled cigarettes from loose tobacco, which was easier to get, or smoked a pipe. There was always a can of Prince Albert tobacco around, which had a nice smell. Some of the Olson uncles, Uncle Myrt and Uncle Elmer as I recall, tended to take a few puffs on their cigarettes and stub them out, leaving a rather long butt. I would collect these in a band-aid can. Then, when Daddy was out of "smokes," I'd get out my can of butts for him. He always smoked them, I don't know whether out of desperation or to please me. None of these substitutes, however, were a pleasing to him as a nice pack of unfiltered Camels. Years later, sometime in the 1950s, Daddy quit smoking.

Gas rationing was imposed on September 1, 1942.¹² Factory workers were allowed 8 gallons a week. I don't know if car-pooling was mandated, or was done simply to save gas, but Daddy began car-pooling when he took the job at Besser and continued until his death in 1964 when he was hit by a drunk driver while the way to work. Daddy was driving and had three passengers, all riding with him to work.¹³

Tires were a huge issue, with tire rationing put in place on December 30, 1941, only a few weeks after war was declared. Rubber was scarce and mostly used for military equipment. Civilians had to apply for tire rations and were given them based on need. This was probably another reason for car-pooling. One tire story is vivid in all of our memories. You could have tires "re-capped" to make them last longer. Daddy was leery about how well the caps would work, but our tires were in bad shape and we didn't have tire coupons for new ones, so he had two tires capped. Shortly after that, Johnny, who was eleven months old, developed the first of his many bouts with pneumonia. His temperature rose rapidly to 105 and Daddy and Mom raced with him to Alpena General Hospital, twenty miles away. A national speed limit of 35 mph had been imposed in October 1942, but Daddy was not about to obey it with his dangerously ill baby, by now convulsing, in the car. They saved our baby Johnny, but "threw" the caps and shredded the tires in the process. Daddy went to the rationing board to request tire coupons, but the process was slow. Our good friend and neighbor, Everett Alstrom, lent us the tires off his combine to tide us over. The combine had 10-ply tires on steel rims, so they were hard and the ride during the two months we had them was, as Frank put it, "awful." Frank pointed out

¹⁰ I wonder how our Mother felt about this. She was incredibly honest and must have felt uncomfortable about it, at least. Frank says he doesn't think it bothered her.

¹¹ We all thought they were rationed, but a web check says they were not, just hard to obtain.

¹² A web search indicated that there was not a big gas shortage, but there was a serious rubber shortage. Gas was rationed to limit driving to save tires.

¹³ See the story "Johnnie Beatty" for a glimpse of a long-time carpool friendship.

that, during WWII, the War Effort was such an all-pervasive movement that this generosity on Everett's part was not unusual.

With both leather and rubber in short supply and good boots needed for the troops, shoe rationing began in February 1943. In addition to rationing, the war board decreed that only six leather dyes could be used, to facilitate easy production. Each adult and child was allowed three pairs of leather shoes a year. The next year, in March 1944, the number of pairs per person was reduced to two. Man-made materials for shoes had not yet been developed. We could buy canvas shoes, which we called "tennis shoes," but they were poorly made with a kind of cardboard sole and didn't hold up well. One year, Sonny and I outgrew our shoes before we were eligible for the next pair. I remember going with Mom to an office, I think the Court House, where she petitioned for additional shoe rations for us. I don't remember the outcome.

Other items were not rationed, but simply difficult to get. Fabric mills retooled to make military fabric, so nice cottons and wools were unavailable. Rayon was developed earlier in the century, but came into popular use for clothing during the War. Mother thought of it as "cheap" fabric. I remember that she felt bad one year that my Easter dress had to be made of rayon. It was pink with little heart-shaped pockets and I loved it. She also bought some uniform fabric remnants. None of the pieces was big enough to make a whole garment, but she combined them to make me two two-toned slack suits in military styles, one with a jungle jacket and one with an Eisenhower jacket. I only later figured out that she had appealed to my sense of patriotism to get me to wear something reasonably warm to our drafty one-room school.¹⁴ She was also a genius at taking apart old woolen coats, washing and reversing the wool, and making us new coats and snowsuits. Our Aunt Louise, married to Daddy's oldest brother Harold, was a buyer in a Seattle department store. One Christmas, she sent a beautiful piece of green plaid twill and Mother made Kathryn and me pleated skirts with jerkin tops that buttoned down the side. Frank says that his clothing mostly came from Uncle Myrt, who would buy something and then bring it up north, saying he had decided he didn't want it. The items were always in Frank's size and not Myrt's. Frank's points out that this was Myrt's way of helping the family. He also says that he got pretty tired of green and brown, the only two colors Myrt seemed to buy.

Another source of fabric was chicken feed bags. Chicken mash had always been packaged in tightly woven, soft cotton fabric that made great dishtowels. During the War, the feedbags were printed so that they could be used for clothing – mostly dresses, aprons and pajamas. We called it "Chicken Linen." It took about three bags to make a dress, so a trip to the feed store also became a trip to the fabric store. We would spend a long time finding matching bags in a print that we liked, looking the bag over carefully to be sure there were no flaws or dye runs. This practice must have continued for some time after the war because I remember a pair of pink pajamas printed with airplanes that Johnny had, and I made a jumper from a pair of green printed bags as one of my early sewing projects when I was eleven or twelve.

With patriotism running high, people tended to dress their children in military-looking clothing. One year Mother made Kathryn and me matching navy blue sailor dresses with lots of sailor trim. I can still see Daddy pacing the floor as Mother was frantically putting in the hems before the McDonald School Christmas program. She had also managed to find us red long stockings to wear with the dresses. Kathryn points out that we were the first little girls in the community to have long stockings that weren't white (for dress) or brown (for school). Johnny's first year baby picture has him in a sailor suit. I think it may have been a present from Unk. I do know that Unk bought the matching sailor suits that our cousins Willie, Dick and Art are wearing in a series family pictures taken the Thanksgiving they were one.

All of us wore "hand-me-downs," with clothing going from one child to another among cousins and neighbors. One set of plaid wool snowsuits that originated with Sonny and Kathryn was

¹⁴ This was also a kind of gutsy, liberated move, because little girls were not usually dressed in pants.

worn by so many children in our family that we have to look closely at the face in pictures to tell who it is. I also remember a pair of tall black boots that made the rounds.

Kathryn points out that the shortages we endured during the War were probably not as difficult for us as they would be now. The country was just recovering from the Great Depression, so people were accustomed to doing without.

Not everyone felt the pinch of War shortages. Our sister-in-law, Nancy Mills Olson, doesn't remember lacking for anything. Her clothing continued to come from a nice department store in Flint and she got a new bike in 1943 when she was 10 and in 1945, when she was 12, her Dad bought her a piano. He also bought a Buick car. Nancy's father, Jim Mills, was a photo finisher who developed pictures from the War. He also worked at AC Sparkplug making 50-caliber machine guns, though he didn't know at the time what he was making. He may have had some connections and they certainly had more money than the Olsons.

Kathryn got a bike sometime during the war; she thinks she was eleven or twelve. She had learned to ride earlier on Sonny's bike while he was in bed recovering from tonsillectomy. His green Hawthorne bike was heavy and sturdy. Kathryn's blue painted bike was definitely a "war bike," with a slight frame, narrow tires, and no basket or other accessories. She points out, however, that she could ride it to our cousin Donna's because we had good roads.

Nancy does remember saving bacon grease. Bacon and eggs were the staples of most family breakfasts when people worked at physical labor. All families had a coffee can on the back of their stove into which they poured the bacon grease, used later for frying other foods. The excess was taken to the grocery store where it was poured into drums and sent for use in the manufacture of gunpowder. This was typical of the War Effort that encompassed the nation.

People were encouraged to grow Victory Gardens, so many city people dug up parts of the yards to grow vegetables. The ones of us who lived in the country were pretty self-sufficient, but we tried to use everything. We canned all summer long, including the wild strawberries, raspberries and huckleberries that we picked in our woods or nearby marshes. Lloyd points out that we could trade labor on the berry farms for raspberries. Once, our Mother, who was always trying new ways to make things and save, tried making soap from lye and lard left from butchering. I remember that she poured the concoction into a baking sheet and cut it into squares when it hardened, but I can't remember her doing it again.

Every thing that could possibly be re-used or re-cycled was. Children peeled the metal foil off the inside of gum and cigarette packages and made it into balls for recycling. We also flattened and recycled tin cans. Lloyd, who grew up in Lincoln, remembers that tires were collected at Rolly's Mobile Station and metal at LeCure's Shell Station. Before the war, we were already giving tanks and other equipment to the British and Russians. Kathryn points out that we learned after the war that, previous to 1941, the US had been selling scrap metal to Japan, which was using it to make war equipment.

We also saved newspaper. Once the Maltz Theater in Alpena advertised that children could get into the children's matinee free with a pound of newspapers. We didn't have enough paper at home, so stopped at Grandma Piper's for her spare paper before going to Alpena. That's when I discovered that the movie was a cowboy movie. I was afraid of almost everything, including the Metro Golden Mayer Lion, so I refused to go to the movie and instead spent the afternoon sitting in the dentist's office while Mother had her teeth worked on and Sonny and Kathryn went to the movie. Kathryn pointed out that most movies for children were musicals, cowboy movies or movies like "Jungle Boy" or "Tarzan," which she especially liked because she liked boys.

With almost all manufacturing devoted to the War Effort, people had to make what they had last longer. Classes were held in the Lutheran Parrish House on how to repair and rebuild furniture and appliances. In an early project, women brought in their mattresses and with help from a teacher would strip them down, straighten and retie the springs, and then rebuild the mattress. Only recently I asked Philip Ghaita how he and my "first" friend Harold Clark had become such good friends as small children when they didn't go to the same church or the same one-room school. They got acquainted going with their mothers to the mattress re-building classes. Frank points out that sometimes these projects would take two or three months because the women couldn't work on them all the time.

In the first few years of her marriage, our Mother made Sonny and Kathryn's clothing literally by hand, taking tiny stitches with a needle and thread. Then she got our Grandmother Karen's treadle machine. By the time these classes were organized, it had, as Sonny put it, "a lot of miles on it" and wasn't running well. Mother hauled it to the Parrish Hall and took it all apart, covering a table with all the parts. Sonny and Daddy went to see what she was doing, and Daddy laughed, saying she would never get it together again. But she did, and we continued to do all our sewing on that machine until the early 50's. It was finally replaced with a Sears electric portable after we could no longer get needles or bobbins for it.

School children were always encouraged to do their bit. We could buy war stamps for 10 cents each, which we put in a little book. When you filled your book, you could redeem it for a war bond that earned interest. We also collected milkweed pods to use in life preservers. That was a fun day because the whole school would go out with gunnysacks¹⁵ and pick milkweeds pods just as they were ripening and beginning to split. The "silk" inside would be dried and used to stuff life jackets.¹⁶ Frank thinks we also wrote letters to servicemen.

While in school, children made do with supplies that weren't quite as nice as pre-wartime items. Rather than the traditional six-sided yellow #2 pencils with an eraser held on by a metal ring, we had round brown pencils with a pointed cap-shaped eraser glued on the top. The eraser usually fell off on the first or second use. Notebook and tablet paper was made of recycled newspaper so was very soft and tore easily. Kathryn and Sonny's pre-war lunch boxes had printed designs on them and rounded edges. My lunch box, bought in 1942, was more crudely made with squared corners and was painted blue. I thought it was beautiful anyway.

Most parents tried to keep their children from knowing a lot about what was going on in the war. In fact, I didn't know about the Holocaust until I studied it in High School. I remember coming home to tell Mother all about it. I was mad to find out that she already knew. She explained that during WWI, Grandpa's friend Mr. McKillop would come over and talk about all the atrocities taking place and then Mother would have nightmares. She and Daddy just decided to spare us the details as much as they could.

Nonetheless, the War and the tensions that surrounded it were very much in the air. We all practiced drawing swastikas and drew caricatures of "Japs" that would shock the modern parent. I remember the day that our teacher, Mrs. Landon, told us that we would no longer hold our upraised arm out the flag when we said the pledge, but would simply hold our hands over our hearts, but I didn't associate it with the "Heil Hitlers" that we all loved to say as we strutted around playing war games.¹⁷ Brother Frank and his friends drew endless pictures of Allied planes shooting down planes with swastikas and Japanese rising suns.¹⁸ All full-length movies

¹⁵ Gunnysacks were made from coarse burlap and used for hauling grain, etc.

¹⁶ A Google search says that two gunnysacks of milkweed would fill one life jacket and that the silk was also used to insulate pilots' suits.

¹⁷ See "The Old Fordson" for the story about our wonderful fox hole.

¹⁸ That practice became so embedded in American schools that my son Dan and his friends, born in the late 1960s, also drew them, probably not knowing what they represented.

were preceded by a newsreel that was inevitably about the War and especially the London bombings. We all remember the movies of little girl Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret saying goodnight and urging the people of London to be strong. Kathryn remarked that these films didn't seem real to her. Cartoons portrayed Germans and Japanese in the most caricatured and mocking way, making fun of the Furer's face, Germans goose-step marching, and Japanese with huge teeth. And there was no avoiding the worry present in the adults around us, no matter how much they might try to conceal it.

The highlights of Frank's life during the War were the airplanes. He had always loved planes, as had our Dad. Our farm sat about 30 miles north of Wurtsmith Air Force Base in Oscoda and 20 miles south of Alpena Army Airfield (also known as Phelps Collins Airfield). The 332nd Fighter Group, the Tuskegee Airmen, were training in Oscoda and a group of French airmen were training in Alpena. Pilots were "golden" in those days and could do almost anything they wanted. There were no restrictions on how low they could fly, so even though their B-47s could fly at 25 or 30 thousand feet, they'd do all their "playing around" at about a thousand feet. We would hear plane engines and run out to see them chasing each other out of sight down the ravine that divided out property and then would watch to see where they would emerge. As Frank put it, "they would just tear it up," and he loved it. He also points out that the Tuskegee airman were "super-duper" pilots and all crazy and out to prove that they could fly as good as anybody. In WWII, when they were escorting bombers, they never lost a bomber, though they lost quite a few of their own pilots.

All of the pilots from both bases sometimes had fun taking risks that would not be allowed today. Besides the "dog fights" we often witnessed over our farm, we heard stories of pilots buzzing fishermen on the lakes and flying under high wires. I haven't been able to confirm one story that went around about a fisherman getting caught in a propeller. It may be that people just thought that something like that could happen. Both Frank and Lloyd confirm that a pilot flew a plane under the bridge on the AuSable River on a dare with only a few inches to spare on each side. They think he was disciplined for that. I remember table talk about that escapade and think most men admired that feat more than disapproved.

Lloyd said that the first airmen to train in Oscoda were the Flying Tigers, who went off to China. Then came B-39s which were a little more streamlined and then B-38s and B-47s. One of Lloyd's main worries during the War was that he lived so close to Wurtsmith Air Force Base. Even though we were told that the cities would be the target of any bombing attack, he was old enough to realize that Wurtsmith was a major base and a likely target. It later became a Strategic Air Command (SAC) base.

Frank pointed out that the B-47 was a rather large "prop job," s a sturdy, reliable plane that did a good job for years. Mother's cousin, Don Rasmussen, flew one. At that time, pilots had to be small and meet quite stringent weight requirements. Don had to lose 12 pounds to fly.¹⁹ I asked Don's sister Dora about his service and death during the War. She wrote: "Here is some info on my brother Don. He was born Charles Donald Rasmusson 10/30/1918 in Spruce Mi. Baptized at the home of his parents on Feb 13, 1919. Graduated from DeVilbiss HighSchool, June 11, 1937. Entered active military duty Feb. 11, 1942. He was stationed in Hawaii Dec.1943. From there he was sent to Port Moresby in New Guinea. [On] Dec 10, 1944, [he] was wounded in action in the battle of Leyte in the Philippines. From there he was sent to Hawaii to recover. His right leg was seriously wounded and he had to use a cane to walk. On

¹⁹ Frank pointed out that for a long time, pilots had to be small and that there are still size restrictions for shuttle pilots. He remembers when the Chamberlain son, Bob, flew a Corsair for the Navy at the end of the War. He was stationed in Maine and would fly the Corsair home on weekends, flying down our road with the canopy slid back, his goggles on, and waving at the kids. Then he'd fly over his parents' house to let them know he was there and head back to land at Wurtsmith where they would pick him up. Unhappily, he was killed in a training accident in the early 50's.

March 3, 1945, he was returned to active duty. At that time the War was coming to a close and they needed supplies to be dropped to the Pacific Islands. He was in an airplane dropping supplies at the time when the plane crashed near Manila in the Philippines. Mom and Dad received the telegram the morning of July 4, 1945. Needless to say the 4th of July was never the same after that. At that time, Floyd was preparing to go overseas in the B29 squadron he was in and was stationed at Pine Castle Air Base in Fl. Norm was in Germany at that time with Patton's army. Roy was on a ship repair outfit somewhere in the Pacific." This means that all four of Nellie and Rangwold Rasmussen's sons were in the service. Nellie was Grandma Piper's younger sister and the worries spread over to our family. Donny had been one of our mother's favorite cousins. Getting the news of his death is one of the few times that I can remember seeing our Mother cry.

Another of Mother's cousins, this one from Grandpa Piper's family, Jack Tackeberry, was also a WWII pilot. Frank remembers him as "real glamorous" with bright red hair, a leather pilot's jacket and a white silk scarf. I met him many years later, when he was in his 70's. He had an airstrip on his property in Harbor Beach and still flew his Piper Cub nearly every weekend. He still carried himself like the glamorous pilot he had once been.

Frank tells this story: "One day, still during the War when fighter planes were needed, Dad and I were out in the hayfield next to our house when we heard a bunch of airplanes headed toward us. We looked up to see what looked like about fifty planes, flying south toward Wurtsmith in staggered formation. A little while later, we heard them coming back, except that it sounded like even more planes, and it was. There were all the Alpena planes and the Oscoda planes headed north toward Alpena. Right in the middle was a pair of planes that we didn't recognize at all. They turned out to be B-38s in early development, and silver because they hadn't been painted. Dad looked up and said, 'Do you know what those are?' I said, 'Nope.' So Dad said, 'Let's go find out.' So we all got in the car and drove to Alpena. We all went to the Alpena base and parked right by the driveway. They were fighter planes, twin engines, and people were crawling all over them. They were putting kids in the seats. You know, it was a celebration of the planes and people were coming from every direction. They brought these two planes to Alpena to show the world. The planes had gone to escort them. By the time we got there, they had landed and there were black and white pilots all over the place, looking at them, too. There were those two little airplanes right in the middle of this big gaggle of planes. They weren't so little; they were big planes, but put in the middle of all the other planes, they looked little. I'll never forget that because two weeks later, you couldn't get within two miles of that airbase. Boy, they had fences up. Before that, it had been a wide open base."

The War ended on August 15, 1945.²⁰ Uncles Arthur and Elmer Piper came home shortly after that. I don't know how much the family knew about their war experiences before they came home and it would be a long time before Uncle Elmer would talk of the hell he had been through as a naval officer on the LCI 83, which had been at beachheads starting in North Africa and ending at Normandy.²¹ We do know that he was a bundle of nerves and quick to come apart. Mother remarked that he was having a nervous breakdown. Now we would call it PTSD. Often we would drive past his farm late at night and see the lights of his tractor going up and down the fields. He probably didn't want to sleep. It wasn't until after the birth of their surprise baby Diane in 1950 that the world began to be a happy place again for him.

Arthur (Unk) had been a gunner on a freighter called a Liberty Ship, one of many mass-produced by Kaiser on the east coast to carry War supplies. Frank says that at the beginning of the War they were making about one a week; and by the end of the War, four a week. The Liberty ships were crudely made, fairly slow freighters with two 20-millimeter guns. Unk was in the Pacific for a short length of time, but his normal route was around Cape Horn to Burma.

²⁰ See "World War II Memories; the End of the War."

²¹ Brother John knows Elmer's story the best and will write it in a separate piece.

They also made a trip to Norway. They carried half a load of ammunition and half jeeps and trucks, and would travel in convoys of about 125. The Germans would get a bunch of submarines under them, hiding under the boats so that the destroyers couldn't find them. Sometimes they would poke the bottom of the boats. Unk told Frank that one night the Germans sank about half the convoy. He would be standing on the deck looking at a ship and it would disappear, sinking with crew and load.

Rationing was lifted in 1946 and manufacturing returned to normal, though there were waiting lists for many items. Grandpa Piper had put his name in at the Ford Dealership for a car. Although Uncle Arthur's Ford sedan had been stored at Grandpa's farm while he was away, Grandpa didn't drive it. He did go out once a week and start it to keep the battery charged, but he drove himself and Grandma on errands and to church on his Farmall tractor, with Grandma sitting in a little box he had built on the back. When Grandpa got the notice that his car was in, he went to pick it up and was dismayed to find out that it was dark ruby red. He thought that was a frivolous color for a car, but knew if he didn't take it, it would be a long wait for another. We thought the red car was pretty classy. I remember going to Harbor Beach in it with my parents, brother Johnny, and Grandma and Grandpa when it was quite new and hoping people would notice me sitting in such a great car.²² Our uncle Olaf Olson was a supervisor at Buick and could buy a car on discount. The car shortage was such that for a number of years, he could buy a car on discount and then sell it the next year for more than he paid for it. He was always trying to get a car that looked different from his previous one, resulting at times in some pretty ugly two-toned color combinations.²³

While the immediacy of WWII and its attendant tensions were over, the Cold War soon became a source of concern. All children of our era remember the Bomb Drills where we were to get under our desks and cover our heads to prepare for an Atom Bomb strike. Of course, that frightened me. Our parents didn't exactly lie, but they did tell me that we were a long way from the big cities that would be likely targets, omitting the fact that Wurtsmith Airforce Base was now a SAC base, designated to protect the Soo Locks and other vital installments. Lloyd says there was a spot on the base where a B-52 Stratofortress sat ready to launch at a moment's notice. This jet-propelled plane replaced the Corvair B-36 in 1955 and was built to carry nuclear weapons. With the introduction of jet planes, we all learned to look ahead of the sound when we heard planes overhead. The notion of a plane flying faster than sound was a novelty to us. Kathryn reminded us that for a short time, there was a proposal to put nuclear weapons on rail cars and vary their locations by moving them from site to site. People were justifiably alarmed at that foolish idea, which was fortunately dropped.

The Korean Conflict began in 1950. Lloyd served in Korea, as did a number of our friends. Frank's draft call came in the mail the same day that a call came to Wakeman's store in Spruce from Uncle Olie saying that Frank was in the hospital with Rheumatic Fever. He was dangerously ill, but survived due to massive dosages of a new miracle drug, Cortisone, but that made his draft status 4-F, disqualified for military service due to a medical condition.

While we talked about the Korean Conflict and most of us remember the day General Douglas MacArthur was relieved of duty, the patriotism and devotion to the War Effort that had been so prevalent in WWII was not present.

²² Our parents continued to drive their 1937 Ford until it finally died in 1948.

²³ Uncle Olie loved owning new cars, but he didn't like to drive, almost always leaving that to his wife. Aunt Lola drove right past the road driving me to school while demonstrating the novel new windshield washers on one of those cars.