

## PRESERVING THE PAST

*by Phillip Keller*

When I was 14, I quit school and I got a job down at Jones & Laughlin Steel. I got 10 cents an hour and worked 12 hours a night. You got paid all gold and silver. You got 2-1/2 dollar, 5 dollar, 10 dollar gold pieces and silver, no paper money and no pennies. If you had 3 cents coming, you got the nickel, see. If you had under 3 cents, you didn't get nothing. They kept it. That's the way they used to do it down there, but you'd be surprised how you used to have to work for a nickel or a dime.

Yes, I started working when I was 14. I had to get a work certificate. My Dad worked for J & L. He fell down there in the soaking pit and he broke a couple of ribs. So there was no money coming in for Mother. So, I got a work certificate. Never finished school. I went to the seventh grade, then I quit school, and got a job there. There were a lot of jobs there. I was never out of a job. But they didn't pay nothing. I used to go up and down the incline (3 cents up and 3 cents down.) I used to walk to work down there up to 22nd Street Bridge to save 3 cents. But coming back, I walked back to the incline and rode up. I was too tired after working 12 hours every day.

I was born down in Allentown, that's below Mt. Washington, going toward Pittsburgh. When I was a kid, I couldn't talk English, see. No, we talked all German at home. My father would wack you one if you talked English. But my mother, I used to teach her the English after I got in school. Went to school, followed the kids, and learned how to talk English there. But my Dad, I wasn't allowed to talk to him in English. He would talk in broken English--he was something! My mother, she was good. We'd get together and talk. We lived in an all German neighborhood. The stores were all German, everything was all German. The midwives delivered all the babies. My mother had ten kids, two died at childbirth. There's only two of us living now, my brother and I. Only two out of the whole bunch. They're all gone. I was born in 1899. I'm 86 and will be 87 in March.

I worked at J & L in different departments. My dad got me in as a pattern maker--an apprentice boy. My dad went over the bosses head and got me in there. Soon as there was a lay off -- boom -- I got let go. I was done, I was sent home. I was only there 6 months to a year. Then things got bad and I was thrown out quick.

Then I got a job at Oliver's Iron & Steel, a job putting hoops on barrels. So, I got promoted to, you call it, Bradley-Hammer. I'd rivet pieces together. I got a penny a piece for them. I was out in the open all that winter time making corner keys for the railroad for the locomotive. The wind and snow blowing -- that was awful!

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One day I was there and my oldest brother said to me, "Boy, you've got to learn a trade. You'll be married some day and have a family and you won't be able to keep them if you don't. A laborer never gets paid nothing." So I said, "O.K." and we went down home with my mother. My mother had the German Newspaper that came. She said, "Philip, there's a job here for an apprentice boy. Go down and see if you can get it. It's down on Third Avenue in Pittsburgh at the Pittsburgh Instruments." So I went down. I had to talk German to the guys. There were three guys. I got the job and that was 50 cents a day to learn a trade. I stayed about three years or so. I finally decided to go out for myself and I did. I got all kinds of jobs at machinist shops. I did good. I learned that trade. I worked at B & O Locomotive on the North Side and other places. Even on underground cable. At that time jobs were plentiful for machinists. Foremen would come in the evening to your house and pay you 2 cents or a penny more than you were gettin'. They went by pennies then. You didn't get a nickel or a dime. If I got 38 cents an hour, they give me 40 or 39. That was before World War I.

That was something! I was 16 or 17 when the W.W.I. broke out over there. So I said I worked in a machine shop. They would exempt you for 50 cents if you were a machinist. So I had an exemption, and my brother had an exemption, too. He worked right across the street from me on Fifth Avenue, downtown. Anyways, I was working down there and I was putting a flat piece on the machine and the crane came down and hit my finger! Smashed it! Boy! That was awful, that finger. So I said to the boss, "I'm going to go home." I had nobody at the shop to take care of that. No doctors like they do now. The boss said, "If you go home, we'll put you in the army." Oh, I was stubborn. So, I went downtown and enlisted in the army. So, I enlisted and got a notice to leave. So, I got down to the train station. I had a little bag with my clothes and shaving stuff. The train pulls out and backs in again. I got out and I walked back home. They couldn't get into Camp Meade, Maryland--the flu was there then and they were quarantined. No one was allowed out or into camp. I went back up home again. I was paid a dollar a day for that. I was the property of the United States Army. Sworn in and all. So anyway, two or three days later, or whatever it was, I got another notice to go again. So I walked down there--a couple of miles down over the hills to the station. There were 30 or 40 of us young ones. We got a big thing with your name and your number on it. You got this guy to check you off and you went in like a bunch of cattle in this car. So, I gets in this car with the rest of my buddies. It starts out again and the train started back in again. The war was over! So, I got discharged from the First World War. Never got there!

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That was something! And then I wouldn't go back to work right away. These people where my brother worked said, "You'd better tell your brother to go back to work--the war's over." So they came and told my mother. I said, "Wait, Mom, I've got to celebrate this victory. I'm staying home." So, I stayed home. Yes, he was going to fire me but he didn't get to--I enlisted. Then I took my tool box back and started working at the same place again.

Then things were real bad down in Pittsburgh and everybody's laying off, so I got a job with Allegheny County. It was a political job. That was 75 dollars a month--good wages at that time. I drove a truck at first, then I got to drive private for them. Out to Atlantic City and every place as a chauffer. I drove thousands of miles without an accident. Not to this day--I've never had an accident. The county had a big Lincoln car. The man I was driving for said to me, "Did you ever fall asleep at the wheel?" I said, "No, not me." (I had never driven that far to find out.) So I took this Lincoln, him and his wife and started out. I got on Route 30 and was trying out the brakes--getting used to the car. He says, "You better step on it or you'll never get there." At that time the road had dips. I said, "O.K." and the telegraph poles went zip - zip - zip and they fly up and then I hear, "Cut her down, cut her down!" So, I cut her down. I got up to New Jersey and went along the pike before we go over the ferry across into Atlantic City. But gees! I was falling asleep. I couldn't keep my eyes open. They were asleep in the back of the car. So I was hitting and kicking myself and talking to myself. Then I'd doze off but I got to the ferry. We went to Atlantic City, the Knickerbocker Hotel (the best on the boardwalk). I had a nice room. So as soon as I got washed up he said, "Come down and we'll have something to eat." I was so nervous from all that driving. I got a big, deep sea dinner, but I couldn't eat none of it. I was shaking inside. I said, "I'm sorry, but I'm not hungry. So I went up to my room. That was some trip. That was during the Depression. I worked nine years as a chauffer. When Armstrong ran for election, he was beaten--I died with him--I got fired.

Things were bad--couldn't get a job. So I said to my sister, "Sis, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going over here to the Smithfield Street Bridge and jump over the bridge." I had a family to keep. I had a little job as a night watchman, but it didn't pay nothing. Welfare only gave \$5.40. Boy, that was something! So she said, "Aw Philip, wait! The guy across the street is a boss down at J & L." (I had gone down there and applied and never heard nothing from them.) She took me over to see him across the street from that place. He said, "I'll call up for you down there. You walk right down where the police are, and they'll take you around to the machine shop. Don't go to the employment office." So I got down there, asked the cops there, and they told me where to go. I walked around and there's a guy standing. He said, "How you doing Phil?" I said, "I'm doing all right." I wondered, "Who is that?" But he was the superintendent. He did the hiring. He said, "Come on, we'll sit in the office and talk." So we sat there and he talked to me. He said, "Where'd you work last? I said, "Oil Well Supply." He

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said, "What'd you do?" I told him "a joint turner." He said, "Just the man I want." He said, "You're hired. When do you want to start--right away?" So I went back to the machine shop down at J & L and stayed there for 31 years.

I got 75 cents an hour--top wages then. I made bonus work, that was double pay. I could make \$1.50 per hour if I made the bonus. Fast enough, I made the bonus. When I left there, I had the highest efficiency rating for production. I would give my wife the pay and I'd keep the bonus. Sometimes I made more than she did. I could make fishing and hunting trips, buy and maintain a car or take our vacation to the mountains.

In all them years married, I never had one serious argument. Never. We worked together with the kids and all. If the kids got smart, she'd say, "You go see your Pop." And I'd say you go see your mother and we'd get together. When we'd get together, the poor kinds would be in the middle. So we had five kids. They're all married with families. I was married in May 17, 1923. I was 24 years old. Her people were all Germans, too. She was a telephone operator--she was a little runt. They had seven kids in the family. The mother and father died during the flu epidemic.

I used to roller skate and ice skate. I liked all kinds of sports. I had a lot of fun in my days and a lot of grief.

I started turtle hunting when I had the job with the county. I was driving a truck down there -- hauling men to their jobs and hauling other stuff around. I hauled them around in a No. 72 County Truck. So Frank said to me one day, "Did you ever turtle hunt?" I said, "No, what's turtle hunting?" "Well let's try it and see if you like it or not."

When I started, I didn't get to hunt right away and I had to carry the sack. They called me the sack boy. They would go into these banks and hunt them by hand. I would lay down, I carried the sack. Then the darn thing bit you through the sack. That's when I decided that I didn't have a very good job. Before that two weeks was up, I said to Frank, "How 'bout breaking me in to turtle hunting?" Sure, I'll break you in. So he reaches up, he had a turtle, see. He reaches up in there and took my hand and put it on this turtle. Boy! This turtle bit me! I got scared, pulled my hand out, blood all over there. He said, "Reach around. You didn't do that!" What did I know about reaching around their shell to see where their tail is. On the back of the turtle there are 5 sharp marks. On the front is just like a heart where the head is. You're supposed to feel that and then find these then reach the tail. So he broke me in and I was all right and I started hunting turtles. He and I were pretty good turtle hunters. I hunted for years.

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My kids grew up and I started to take them out, see. I took the oldest one out there and he was good for outdoors. So I broke him in and I took the other ones out. They left me. They wouldn't do that. So, the oldest one stayed with me. He and I hunted up until four or five years ago--the last I hunted.

My wife told me she NEVER would be a sack girl. So this Henry and his wife, Vi, (Henry worked with me down at the mill) would go turtle hunting. Vi carried the sack for him. (She's still living.) So, anyway, my wife said, "I'll never do that." So we come up from a turtle hunt. We were out at Henry's place. Got all these turtles out and Vi got hold of a camera. I said to my wife, "Here, hold this sack." So, Vi took her picture. Ha! The Sack Girl! I got it on slides for my projector. I'd give it to her. "How 'bout this, hon?" "I'd say. Oh, she'd cut me up for doin' that to her.

After we caught the turtles, we'd sell them. People ordered them for soup. A lot were snapping turtles. We had 125 one trip coming home, different sizes. My car was loaded with turtles. Even my luggage rack was loaded up with turtles. All in sacks. We brought them home alive. We put them in water up there. Put them in sacks to keep them wet. After we got them, a friend of mine had a silo, and every day we'd catch them and throw them in the silo. We'd bring them home and divide them up, see. We had sales for them before we even went out. I'd give a lot away.

Cleaning these turtles was a job. I'd get them by the snoot. (There's a trick to that you know.) Then I'd get them in the back of the shell. There's a spinal cord there--a bone and I'd press that and it paralyzed them. Their mouth would open. I'd tell another guy to do it. They wouldn't do it. I didn't tell them about the trick.

When we hunted turtles, we'd reach under the bank. You didn't know, you might get a hold of a snake. Oh, my brother, Harry (he's dead now) was a sack boy for us. We went down to little Washington about 35 miles from home. We went down along the bank and I says, "Boy, I caught one here." It was a snake! I threw it up, and it wrapped around his neck. He pretty neared died. I thought he was going to die--no kiddin. He was shocked. I'd get fish or snakes when I would reach up in there. I felt so bad about the darn thing. I didn't think it would wrap around his neck. It was pretty long--at least 3 feet--a water snake.

Sometimes, when you reached in, you'd get muskrats. They bit you. This poor Henry, I took him hunting turtles. We went up near Warren. I said, "Whatever you do, if you get a turtle, just grab him any place, don't let go." So, he went up along the bank and I was on the other side. They had a lot of camps along there. People watching. First thing you know, I hear

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Henry holler, "Come over here!" He got into a muskrat. He had grabbed that, see. His poor finger was hurt and bloody. I tied it up with a handkerchief and stopped the bleeding. He threw that thing about 15 feet, it had a hold of his finger. He started in, he was a good turtle hunter.

Turtles are hard to get in ponds because there is no bank to hide under. They go to the bottom and stay down there. We'd have to get them along the banks of rivers and creeks above the water. All up in where the water washes the bank out. They call that a shelf. You can never tell how deep it is. So, reach up there and when you can't reach any further use a rod and tap. You can tell by the different sound on their shell. Then reach away back and pick 'em up. I got the sack out in my car and turtle rods yet. They're still there.

There never were too many turtle hunters around. No. But we'd do one year and hit the creek here. Then we'd hit another one next year. Each year a different one. Then we'd go back in 4-5 years and hit the first one again. The one's that you miss grow. You miss a lot of them. A lot of them are out laying their eggs, out of the water altogether, or in deep water where we couldn't go in too deep. I wasn't afraid of getting bitten by snakes. There were not any poisonous snakes up there.

Those snappers get to be enormous size. I used to get them down in Virginia at my daughter's place. My son-in-law said, "My brother is a big turtle hunter, Pap." He said, "These are small ones you got up here. You get big ones down there." I didn't know his brother's name then, but I got to know him though--I was introduced to Melvin. He said, "Yes, we'll go out and get some turtles." So they go out in a boat. They didn't fish by hand. I didn't know that. They have these big bamboo sticks--6-7 foot high with a line and hook on it. They go out in this boat, stick them in this muck in shallow water 4-5 feet deep. They stick maybe 200 of them in. We went about 1/2 mile back. Then we go to the bank and sit and watch the shakers (the bamboo sticks). So, when they started to shake, there was something on that line. The turtle had taken the bait and hook. We used chicken guts on the hooks, then whatever we caught--like eels and fish (we cut them up for bait).

You could tell what took the bait. If a fish gets it--it shakes real fast. If a turtle gets it, it goes real slow. I learned the tricks with him--he was good. He worked for Ford. He was a good mechanic. He always had something for me when I would go down. One time he said, "I've got something for you. Come on upstairs." So I went upstairs--they had a bathroom upstairs. We went to the bathtub, there were two big turtles in the bathtub, a 25 pounder and a 32 pounder. They couldn't take a bath till I got the turtles out of there.

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My wife made turtle soup and I would freeze it. You take your turtle, cut it up, and add your vegetables. Make it like vegetable soup. That's a job. You make a big kettle and then freeze it.

I also used to race motorcycles on the race track. That was when I was a boy at home. I got a motorcycle when I started to work at 14. They had about five or six different makes then. I sold my motorcycle two days before I was to leave for W.W.I. A guy from Troy Hill bought it. I told him to be careful because it was a powerful machine. "Aw, we'll take care of it." He went up there and got killed on it. He hit a telegraph pole.

I like a Harley. I had a four cylinder. Then the Indian--they had a nice cradle frame--easier to ride. The Harley was a rough rider. They had a Merkle at that time--a Flying Merkle and two or three other ones. But these, you had to put them on sand and crank 'em till they started. They had a belt to push down to start it. Pull the belt back--that released the pressure. Then when you wanted to go, you pushed the handle. You got to a hill, you had to pedal and help it along.

We went down to the Wheeling Race Track. We left Pittsburgh and going down, we'd pick up different groups and all go down to the race track--all motorcycles. We got down to Wheeling, and a man from Hamilton said he was in charge. He said, "No cut outs." That's when you kick out and --boom--boom--boom. Sounds like shooting. "Anybody that cuts out on it will be locked up." There was a steep hill going down into Wheeling, a paved street. I was at the back. I thought, "I'm going to pass him up." I went--whang--and they all followed me. They couldn't lock us all up. There were too many of us. That was so-o-o noisy. Then we went to a restaurant, then to Wheeling Race Track to have our pictures taken. First, we went around there, but I near got killed. I had leggings on and got my shoe and all torn off. But I never got hurt. I got a bronze medal for that race. There were motorcycles--handlebar to handlebar all around the track. They had a revolving camera that took pictures all the way around. I don't know yet how I'm still living.

You know, "I enjoyed my life. I enjoyed it, but I don't want to live to be an invalid, all crippled up, to have to have people take care of me. I want to lie down, pray the Lord my soul to keep, and just die a natural death in my sleep. I don't fear death. I don't fear it at all.

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*by Ruth and Jim Preto*  
1902-2000 - 1905-1998

**RUTH:** "Do your thing. Nobody else did it for you." We had our own playthings. John and I, of course, we were close together (he's a year and a half older). Everything one did the other one did. Well, my dad would get mad, we weren't out working. If there was work out in the fields, we had to do it and that was it! And different times there was this picnic down in the Freehling's woods. We asked, "Can we go?" My dad said, "You've got to go out and hoe the corn first. You get that done then you can go." I said, "Come on John, let's hurry up and get at the corn." We'd do it until dinner time. We'd come in. He'd never say one word. We'd get ready and go.

But we would play, too. John fixed up one of these things of an old buggy (the wheels and the body). He fixed it up as our 'automobile'. He took a board and put a license number on it. He had a wheel on, and then he had these guide things. We'd come away up on top of the hill. It was almost as far as from here down to the lane. We'd push this thing up there. Give it a little push and away we'd go down that hill, around the barn, and out to the driveway. Well, we got heck for that. My dad got mad one time and broke it up. Then John would fix it all up again. Dad just didn't want us to do this play thing.

So then one time Anna and Alice, my sisters, went up for a ride. So we took them on. Well, we had a barbed wire fence down this lane. He run this thing into the fence. Well, that stopped it for a while. But they didn't get hurt that much. But John had that thing for the longest time, and even after he was married down here, Johnny and Jim and them (must have told them), his sons, fixed up one of these things and they did the same thing. Took our girls down for a ride.

Well, that was one of our things. Then we had rail fences every place. Of course, we just loved to walk rail fences. The higher you could go, the better it would be. Well, he and I would walk these rail fences down in the swamp. My dad would see that, he would come down with a whip and chase us up. Didn't do any good. Oh, we had to do something. Didn't work all the time. Every place that John went, I went, and we always did things together. We had a lot of fun. Those were our playthings. Nobody ever got us any playthings. Course, in the winter time we'd go sled riding. Go up the hill, and down we would go. Had a lot of fun.

I was two years old when we moved down here on the farm (that long lane down here where the pine trees are). I still feel I'm a farmer. You know once a farmer, you're a farmer. Then when I went away to work, we didn't have any money, but if I wanted anything, my mother would get me a few things. She had to buy my shoes. I would go and do housework -- which I just hated to do. Oh, I just hated it, but I had to have some money. I think for about four weeks, I went down to Cabot and worked for Juanita Fox. She was married to an Irwin. She was sick

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and they needed somebody so I had to go down there. I would get so homesick. On Saturdays I would walk to come up home. I couldn't stay away from home that long. Then I worked for Dena Painter over here when they were doing this road. It was just a mud road at that time. It is called the Cabot-Winfield Road.

When I was twenty one, I worked at Smith & Logan's Store in Cabot for a summer. Then Mr. L. A. Smith was the post master. When he'd go for lunch, he told me how to fix out money orders, and I was responsible for the post office. You had to be under bond in order to do that, but I guess he trusted me.

Then I went down to Hepler's down near Jardines. They wanted somebody. Mrs. Hepler was sick and they needed someone to stay with her till she'd get better. To me they were old people at that time, maybe they weren't so old. But anyway, they had this little house. They had the kitchen, and their bedroom alongside the kitchen. They had a pot-bellied stove in that and; of course, I slept upstairs. There wasn't any heat up there only through the register. They had a coal burning stove in the kitchen. Mr. Hepler would get up in the morning and he'd start the fire in this stove. It was an experience to me. I didn't know how to cook on it. But I rather enjoyed it. You got your fire started, you had your heat there. But it was a wonderful experience for me and I worked there for three or four weeks till she got better.

Oh, I don't know what I did then. I was down home most of the time. I took care of the chickens, geese and the ducks. I don't know why mother let me do these things. And then of course, I took over the cows, too, and did the milking. You had to help out. John and I were responsible for taking care of the manure in the horse stable on Saturday mornings. It was our job. We didn't think anything about it. I didn't mind it. And of course, get the wheel barrow and start. We had four horses in there and you'd have to clean them out. Wheel it out into the barnyard -- we had a plank that would go on out.

You learned these things from little on. It didn't just come to you all of a sudden. After I started taking care of the cows, in the wintertime I would take care of the cow stables and manure them out before I would go out to milk. You had a lot of responsibilities but you didn't have time to think about it.

We had these other couple of farms down where at the Montgomery place (where my father's mother lived). My mother was raised on the other side of the road -- the Wetzel home. That's the Montgomery farm, too. My father's name was Gundlach and my mother's name was Wetzel.

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My father lived on the other side of the road from my mother. Then his father died when he was around 12 or 13 years old. They had a bull and this bull chased his father (I think) and gouged him. The only thing that saved him was a dog. His father told the dog, "Sic him Shep", and that was the only thing that saved him. That didn't heal the way it should have and he died. Then his mother got married again and he didn't like his stepfather. They just couldn't get along; so I think when he was around 16 or 18 he took off and went out West.

My dad was out West there for about 10 years. Once in a while there'd be a company come, and he'd start talking, rattling off about these years out West; of course, I'd be all ears. There'd be things that he did. He was mining in the zinc mines and he drove a stagecoach from Joplin, Missouri and Tulsa, Oklahoma. He had the payroll and he'd look up over the horizon and there he'd see the Indians standing up there. He'd keep on going -- making the horses go. Oh, the things I would like to have asked him about his life!

**JIM:** But you don't think to ask when you are younger.

**RUTH:** My mother was about ten years younger than my father. My grandmother told him Mrs. Wetzell had a baby. We'll go over and see the baby. She would take my father along to visit.

When he came back from out West, why they met again and got married. He needed somebody for the home -- to help with the home, do the cooking and this and that. That's the way the men did in those days. If their wife died, they had to go and find another one.

**JIM:** My parents came from Potenza, Italy -- not far from Naples, and not too far from Vesuvius and Pompeii. My mother's sister, Aunt Rose, and her husband, Jim, came over from there. My uncle, Mike, was a barber in Tarentum (my mother's brother). My parents were already married before my father came over. My mother came over later. My grandmother was here, also. My grandfather was killed when they were excavating for Joseph Horne's store -- a cave-in. My dad came in 1898. They came to Pittsburgh and then to Tarentum and worked at Pittsburgh Plate Glass. Pittsburgh Plate used to have two plants down there. There was another plant up this way, where the Tarentum Bridge is now. There used to be an old street car viaduct there at one time. He worked at that plant. Then he went from there up to Allegheny Steel.

**Ruth:** On the way over on the boat, Jim's mother lost one of the children -- the baby died. She had a couple of children die over in Italy, too, I believe. Babies didn't have too much of a chance back then. Diphtheria, typhoid, smallpox were common. Also, measles and whooping cough.

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**JIM:** Yes, you would see so many of these quarantine signs on the houses.

I had two brothers and four sisters. My oldest brother's name was Mike. He died about five years ago. He moved from Tarentum and worked for Seltzer Confectionary. Seltzer moved to Steubenville, Ohio and he went out there with them. He lived there from age 18 on.

I was next. Then my brother, Paul, who lives next door, then Mary, then Rose (she died about 20 years ago of a bad heart), then Margaret (she had lymphoma and died 11 years to the day Rose died), then Anna. Paul, Mary, and Anna are still living.

Paul is married to Ruth's niece. So, I'm her uncle and brother-in-law, too.

**RUTH:** I also had four sisters and two brothers -- Albert, Pauline, Anna, Alice, Esther, and John. Anna and them used to tell me that I was spoiled; I'm the youngest.

I got older, about 24 years of age, and I started looking out for different work. I left home and went down to work for Mrs. Hill, who had the hotel and restaurant in Tarentum (corner of Corbet and 4th Ave.). I didn't know too much about serving in a restaurant. I used to work up at the YWCA in Butler when they had Teacher's Institutes. The teachers had their week's vacation at Christmas time. I'd always go up and help out. Anna and Esther, my sisters, worked there steady. They would ask me to come up at Easter time and work in the kitchen.

At that time Mrs. Hill's Restaurant in Tarentum was doing pretty good. Mrs. Hill had about ten rooms upstairs. I stayed with another girl. We had a room there. Tarentum was a busy town. They had the Star Theater where the old Murphy 5 & 10 cent store used to be. One morning I heard this WHOOM!!! It woke up everybody. I looked across the street and where Fishkin's store was a brick building. The whole wall was red and I thought, "My goodness, what happened?" Here, there was an explosion at the theater. We all got scared. There were two great big windows in the restaurant and the explosion blew them out. So I didn't know what to do. Of course, I threw what little clothes I had in my suitcase and threw my hat on and purse and started down the steps. A couple of fellows said, "Well, Ruth, where are you going?" Oh, it was funny. To think I put my hat on. I still had my nightgown on. You didn't have time to dress. You didn't know what was going to happen.

**JIM:** Yes, I was born and raised in Tarentum. I heard that explosion, it woke me up. I looked out and saw the big flame. So I got up. I belonged to the fire department. I threw on some trousers, shoes (didn't bother with socks), jacket, and started out. Went out around Corbet

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Street, crossed the street there (my one shoe came off), went back and grabbed it and went running down to the Fire Department in the back of the Boro Building. I know I tramped on a pane of glass. When I got down there, there was another fireman there. He must have been loafing around there. (In those days we loafed around the firehall. There was nothing else to do. In those days no TV; radio was just coming in.) About that time, someone else came in. I said, "Come, let's go." So we jumped into the fire truck, took it around the corner, connected the hose up; and we got water on the front part of the theater pretty good. There was a couple living upstairs, and that blast never woke them up.

**Ruth:** Those rooms were facing the railroad and when you went along there after the explosion -- all those walls were blown out; all you could see were partitions.

**JIM:** This occurred at 2 A.M. It was a gas explosion. That old theater; we used to have fun down there. When we were kids, we used to stand on the side. It was a nickel or a dime to get in (they called them nickelodeons). We got to know the lady that sold the tickets. Every once in a while, we'd be standing along there, and she would motion to us and we'd walk up and she'd give us a ticket. We used to see a lot of movies. That would be before 1920. They were silent movies, westerns -- Tom Mix, William S. Hart, Hoot Gibson.

**RUTH:** It must have been around 1920 when I went to work at Mrs. Hills restaurant.

**JIM:** I worked about two doors away in a meat market.

**RUTH:** A lot of times we'd run out of something. Mrs. Hill would say, "Go over next door and get the lunch meat" or whatever we needed. I would go out the back way, in the door, "Hurry up, give me this and that" and he'd get it, but I never paid any attention to him. I'd go out and sweep the sidewalks and he'd be out sweeping his sidewalk and I'd never, never look at him.

**JIM:** The first time I saw her was out sweeping. In fact the first thing you did when you worked in the store in town, was grab the broom and go out and sweep the sidewalk. I was out sweeping this one morning and she was sweeping. I started whistling. I thought, Gee, they've got a new girl over there. But she wouldn't even bat an eye. She wouldn't even look. But she called me up one day.

**RUTH:** Yes, the other girl dared me. She said, "I dare you to call up Jimmy." I thought, nobody is going to dare me anything!

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**JIM:** But she called me this one morning and that's how it got started. She hung up. She saw my boss coming around the corner. She hung up on me. But I talked to her a few minutes. My boss left again; I called her back. So you can see what she got herself into.

**RUTH:** Oh, I guess it wasn't so bad after all. We've been married since 1931.

Mrs. Hill sold the hotel down in Tarentum, and this hotel in Leechburg was up for sale. It hadn't been open for a while. There were three floors (about 40 or 50 rooms). So she asked us, "Will you go up along?" I guess she knew that I'd go, Vern also, and the Dahmen men. The place was run down. So we started to clean, wash the windows. We'd hang up in those windows. It was a wonder we never fell. But we washed the windows inside and outside. We got everything cleaned. We had to wallpaper almost all the rooms; another girl and I -- that was a job. And of course her furniture; she didn't have near enough. Anyway, she got all the rooms furnished. There was a nice big dining room. She put linoleum on the floor. There was a big lobby. It was so much nicer than the hotel in Tarentum. There were stairs going up to the third floor.

We finally got the place all straightened up for the opening. We were kind of excited about it ourselves. So she advertised for a chef. She got one. She had chicken and this chef had big kettles. He took these chickens (with pin feathers on) and put the whole chicken into the kettle. Mrs. Hill came out and she had a fit! She started to yell, "You get out the door and I never want to see your face again!" So we all had to pitch in then and help.

We had the opening. That place was thriving. We had all those rooms filled. You had what they called the transient trade. They would come in on the train, walk across the bridge, and stay at the hotel. Salesmen would stay there; and she would have tickets for the mill workers. That mill was thriving. At night you would hear that old mill roaring, and squeaking away. It would wake you up. Everything was booming.

**JIM:** There were two mills at Leechburg at that time. Allegheny Ludlum and the American Sheet and Tinplate at the end of Market Street.

**RUTH:** At lunch time, they would come over from the mills to eat. You would have business. Mrs. Hill was a good manager. She would look into these things.

**JIM:** Yes, I believe at one time she had the Central Hotel in Freeport. Those little hotels thrived in those days. You had the railroad traffic -- people riding the railroads.

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At first when we were married, we lived close to Vandergrift. I went there in 1930 to work in Vandergrift. We were married in 1931 and found a place to live up there and I worked in Vandergrift until 1946 (15 years). Then we moved to Weinel's Crossroads. In 1946 I went to the Leechburg A & P. I was there 1-1/2 years. Then there was an opening in Tarentum. The boss came up one day and wanted to know if I'd like to go to Tarentum. Tarentum was my old home town, so I went back in 1948 and I was there 21 years till I retired. That store was where the Town & Country store is now.

When I worked in Leechburg, we went to the Hebron Lutheran Church and stayed members there until 1954. Nancy was in her last year of school in Leechburg and we didn't want her to change schools just for a year, so she stayed over there at friends of ours. Friday nights, when I would leave from work, I would go up to Leechburg and pick her up and bring her home here for the weekend. Sunday morning we'd all go to church and we'd leave her in Leechburg. We didn't like to see her changing school during her last year.

I was on Church Council at Hebron about 15 years. I was on nine years, off for a while and back on again. I was secretary to council for a few years. We had gotten pretty active there. Pastor Bowersox was pastor until 1952 and then George Vetter was pastor. I had met George at Zelienople. In those days they called it East Conference and West Conference. And lots of time those meetings were on my day off. Pastor Bowersox would call me up to come along with him. That's where we first met George Vetter.

I think we joined St. Paul's in late 1954. Everyone was so friendly and we still like going to church here.

**RUTH:** When I was working over at Leechburg, Mrs. Hill needed someone to do the cooking. The other girl had left, so she asked her sister, Tillie, to come but she would not get up early. We had all these men, eight or nine, to get breakfast for in the morning. Mrs. Hill said, "Ruth, will you get up early in the morning and prepare their breakfast?" I said, "Yes, I guess I can."

I'd get up at 4:30 a.m. I had to get the coffee started in this big coffee urn. I had to pack these lunches. First, I had to go downstairs and fire the furnace, which was a big thing as big as our kitchen. I was afraid of it anyway. You had to shovel coal in. I got the furnace started so it would be warm. The men who stayed in the hotel would get up around 6 A.M. I had to go and take their orders, pack their lunches (they were working on the Serpentine Road., Rt. 356 into Vandergrift from Weinel's to Vandergrift). It was also called the LaBell Road.

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The other girls would come in about 8 o'clock in the morning. I'd have the morning work pretty well done. I would have to scrub the dining room about once a week with a mop and then the lobby. But I did all these things. I don't why I didn't say no, but I never did.

Then when she was away, I always had to take charge ordering. Ordering anything that needed ordered. I had to do the banking. I guess she trusted me enough. Those were two things I had to do there and I often wondered why. But I guess she thought that I could do it and that I would do it. But every once in a while we'd have a scrap and I'd get mad. Of course, when she'd start to holler at me, I'd never walk away from her. When she was sick, I'd stand in her doorway and she'd start. I'd just stand there. But I had to do this and I had to do that.

I was supposed to teach one of the girls about the cooking. I wasn't the cook. She knew what she was told to do, but I still got the blame for it. And of course, when I'd walk away, I'd start bawling. But I stayed there until a year before I got married.

Then my brother, John, took me down to Pittsburgh and I worked at Roth's Grill -- a fairly nice restaurant on Penn Avenue. The first day I worked there we were busy. Of course, they'd always shove the new girls back because the ones out by the windows would get the better trade. It didn't matter to me. It was a job. Everything just went so smooth -- I just got these meals out. There was Mr. Roth, sitting back there in the corner watching everything I did. I thought, "How wonderful that all was going smoothly that day."

I worked there for six months till my mother died at age 72 of creeping paralysis. After we were married I stayed at home, and Jim stayed at home. There was my Dad and my two brothers down here and, of course, my mother had died and then I stayed home. I knew that the boys had to have somebody at home to help do the cooking and stuff. There were peaches to be canned, and I knew they couldn't do that. I canned for them, and bought jars and canned for myself. I stayed down there until my Dad died the end of November. He had a bad heart. One morning when he got up, he just fell over. He was about 80. People didn't go to the hospital then.

Our first child wasn't born until we were married three years. I didn't have a washing machine. We didn't have a refrigerator. I did my washing by hand until a couple of months before she was born. We would get milk, sit it out on the back porch. In the morning, we would go out to get the milk. The milk was gone. At that time it was during the Depression. You knew that there were people around who didn't have anything. Your milk was gone, but you never said anything. I always felt thankful that Jim was working. He had a job.

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**JIM:** We lived in Vandergrift the first 4-5 years we were married and I worked there. That was during the Depression. Up on the Heights, the population was maybe 50% Italian. People came into the store. Sent their kids in. Course stuff was cheap in those days. They'd ask for a dime's worth of hamburger and have a family of half a dozen children. Many times I'd give them 15-20 cents worth of ground meat. Some of the fellows came in and got their checks cashed. Maybe they worked a day, but if you only worked one day anything that had to come out of your pay, they took it out. We got many pay checks cashed in the store for \$2 or \$3. That's all they had.

**RUTH:** Yes, the Depression was bad. People would be standing on the street corner. I used to go down and help Jim on Saturday evening; he worked till 10 P.M. I'd scrub his wooden block and wash all his pans that he had his meat in. I'd wash the inside and outside of his glass cases. We'd get through at 2:30 A.M. -- even with me helping him.

**JIM:** Those days we worked 7:30 A.M. till 6 P.M. You didn't work just eight hours in those days. Saturday you went at 7-7:30 A.M. and they maybe closed the doors at 9 o'clock. Somebody would come rap on the door after that and the manager would always leave them in. There was a movie up on Longfellow Street. The movie would let out at 9:30 and people would come along and want to buy something, the manager would always let them in. That would hold you back. Then we always had meat in the meat department. We had to take inventory and send that into the office. They always figure out our gross profits. We had to clean out our meat cases. At that time, we had ice in the cases. We had ice containers in the back counters. The ice man would come in the mornings and fill them up. We didn't have freezers. If you had meat leftover on Saturday, it was hard to hold it over till Monday. Finally, I did get refrigerated cases in.

In those days there were a lot of meatpackers in Pittsburgh. We'd call in our order to the office every morning for delivery the next day. We'd get deliveries every day. The big meatpackers had their own places. There was Armour's, Swift, Wilson's, and Cuday's. There were a lot of independent meat outfits. Those were the outfits. I liked their products better--especially their lunch meats, wieners, bologna. Those meat packers were Freid and Rineman, Oswald and Hess, Holmes, Dunlevy, Henry and Lori--many of them. Armour's plant was on Herr's Island. They did all their own butchering. Another one was Pittsburgh Packing Company.

In those days we didn't have fish. A & P didn't get into the fish business until after the war. Then all the fish was packed in ice. We would cut it in the cases. In those days the fish were plentiful. The Great Lakes weren't polluted like they are now. That's what killed all the fish.

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We built up a fish business. In those days, Wednesday and Friday were fast days. They observed their fast days more than they do now. For a long time I had the biggest fish distribution rate of any store in the Pittsburgh area. I would run about 12-13-14% of sales in the meat department was fish. And it was a real profitable item. We got up to 2,500 lbs. of fish a week (fresh and frozen). A & P used to have their own brand, Captain John, frozen in one pound packages. They had red fish, flounder, and sole.

I used to bring home big lake trout. We used to stuff them and bake them, also yellow pike, and blue pike fillets. I used to love halibut and fresh salmon steaks. A & P got them whole. Halibut weighed 70 to 80 pounds apiece. It was like eating chicken. Even when fish started to go down, A & P was getting a lot of blue pike fillets. Even when it was a dollar a pound (which was high then), I was selling still a couple of hundred pounds a week.

Yes, people shopped every day when they didn't have refrigeration; just ice boxes. That's what I liked about it. You had that personal contact with the customers. When I worked in Vandergrift, we used to have a lovely time there. I knew everybody. You'd get a lot of characters come in--Italian guys. You'd have a lot of fun. When you have self-service, you miss that personal contact.

**RUTH:** I don't like self-service. I like to be waited on. I do very little shopping because I just don't want to pick things out. So I do without.

**JIM:** Now that I'm retired, I like to putzy around here and I like to read spy stories--mystery, intrigue, C.I.A. I like action stores.

When you are our age you just take life from day to day. Don't worry about it. I always figure, Lord willing, if I can live a couple more years, you know, without being a burden to anybody - why . . .

**RUTH:** Yes, that's one thing, you hate to be a burden to your children, so I'm hoping I don't have to be. I feel that when you get older, you live from day to day. You don't know what tomorrow's going to be. Maybe you'll be here tomorrow, maybe you won't. So I do what I can do. That's one reason I don't get so much done anymore. I do my work in the forenoon. I feel fine. then when it gets to be dinner time or in the afternoon; I don't know whether it's tired (I think the heat has a lot to do with it. You just feel (sigh). . . In the cold weather you don't feel quite that bad. So if tomorrow comes, O.K. If it doesn't, O.K.

## **PRESERVING THE PAST**

*by Charles Demski  
(1893-1986)*

I was born way back in 1893. That's a long time ago. This was the old road. It was a muddy road. There were no trucks. We used horses. If you went anywhere, you would hitch the horses to a buggy. Now there are houses over at Sarversville, but at that time, there was only two houses. They used to have a school house at Sarversville -- a high school. Just farmers around here.

I was born on a farm here. Do you know where the Bob Wilkewitz farm is on Bear Creek Road? There's a lane goes way back there and I lived back in there. That's where I was born. I was born in a shanty down over the hill. In them days they built near a spring. There was a spring down over the hill. I was born in a two room shack--a board shack. In them days nobody ever come around. See, we lived back in there and didn't see anybody for days and weeks. Us kids was backwards. I had two brothers and three sisters. They're all dead.

First thing I mind was my sister and I had a little black dog. He was barking. He had something and my mother ran out there, he had an animal. We got stones and stoned it. We thought it was a little pig. Here it was an opossum. We didn't know that till my daddy came home.

My dad built the house that was up on the hill. We didn't have much at that time. I mind my mother and my older sister carried the stove. See, I was a little kid then and I wanted to help. "Now, you get out of here, you're too little." The stove had to be carried up the hill. We moved in there. It was a four room house. The kitchen and living room were downstairs and two bedrooms upstairs and in the middle the stairway went up. We had no rugs in them days and no furnace. The only heat we had was in the kitchen and us kids played in the corner on the floor. My mother--we had to keep out from under her feet because she was workin'.

We had no electric then, only oil lamps. My daddy did his work at the farm feedin' and he'd come in and it would be dark and he'd get the newspaper. We'd light an oil lamp and he'd stretch out the newspaper and us kids would play on the floor and whenever a neighbor would come and knock at the door, us kids would crawl under the table. We hid and wouldn't come out from under the table till the neighbor left. That didn't happen very often.

We had no toys for entertainment when we were kids. We played on the floor. Didn't even have a rug in the kitchen. My mother saved duck and geese feathers and she put them in a bag. We had a big table and we all got around this table and put, maybe, a bushel of feathers on the table and pulled the stems out until ten o'clock. Then we went to bed. The bedroom was zero and we'd run and jump under this feather tick my mother made and we'd keep warm.

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We planted beans in the cornfield and when we cut the corn, we gathered the soup beans, thrashed them, and had bushels of beans. We had to sort out the bad ones and we did that in the wintertime every night till ten o'clock. My dad would tell stories after he read the paper and that was the entertainment. He was raised in Germany and he used to go deer hunting there and tell us these stories.

When I got seven years old, my dad said I had to go to school. I couldn't speak English, only German. We never got anyplace to learn English. I had to walk from the farm around the hill across the creek and the railroad and then walk a mile to Kelly School. It was just one room.

When I was a kid, I made money trapping. I would trap anything; even skunks. Sometimes, I went to school smelling like skunk. Bet the teacher felt like throwin' me out.

We belonged to St. Matthew's Church. St. Matthew's was German till Rev. Fetterly come. They couldn't get a German speaking preacher anymore and so we turned to English. I was confirmed in St. Matthew's. The congregation dropped down. Some went to Saxonburg and some to St. Paul's and they tore the church down. It was a nice church. It had a high steeple and a stove on each side.

Whenever I was 13, I got scarlet fever. My scarlet fever turned to appendicitis. They didn't know what to do with it then. My dad didn't believe in hospitals. He said, "When you go to the hospital, you die." In them days a lot of people died when they went to the hospital. I had to stay at home and I got so sick I had to crawl to the window to get by breath. I couldn't walk anymore. Dr. Ross was the doctor at Sarver. One day he came out and said, "Take that fellow to the hospital, he's gonna die." So my daddy give in. The next thing I knew, he hitched the team to the bobsled and loaded me on this bobsled and took me to Sarver. We got on the milk train. There used to be a train go down on the Butler Branch at 6 o'clock in the morning and that was called the milk train because all the farmers would take their milk to this train and ship it to Pittsburgh. I'd never been away from Sarver and I was ridin' down to Pittsburgh on the train. See, there wasn't a hospital in Natrona Heights. I had to go to the West Penn Hospital. The ambulance got me at the depot. They put me in a room and undressed me and the first thing I mind was looking up at the ceilin' -- electric lights! I couldn't figure out what made the wire burn.

They operated on me right away. They cut it open and left it beal. It was gangrene and it bealed for a year. I went back then and had my appendix taken out. I came back home and the doctor forgot and he left some gauze in and it broke open and it bealed again. I had to go back and have the gauze taken out and it healed after that. I lost three years of my life.

## **PRESERVING THE PAST**

I was too big to go back to school after I had my appendix out. I was a big fellow and the kids going to school were small. I didn't want to go back to school -- a big fellow in among a bunch of little kids. I didn't get up to the eighth grade. I was in the seventh grade.

The first job I got was attending a stone mason. He was building a stone wall for a house. I mixed the mortar and helped him roll the stone around. In them days there was no cinder block. It was all stone.

The next job I got was putting in a pipeline from Shusterville to Grange Hall. They laid the pipe joints down. One man took a 20 foot joint and dug the ditch. When he got the ditch dug, he went ahead and took another 20 foot joint and dug another ditch all by hand. After the ditch was dug, we had to screw the pipe together with tongs and put it in the ditch and cover it up. Grange Hall is torn down now. It was along the Winfield Road in Cabot.

I always wanted to learn a trade; that was the idea of changing jobs. In them days we had no government control and business boomed. At Sarver there was three coal mines. Every place was busy and you could get a job anywhere if you was a good worker.

On my third job, I went to the sand plant. There was a sand plant about three miles from Sarver. I worked there a while, then I quit and went to work in the woods and loaded railroad cars. Everything was busy in them days. I loaded cord wood in cars in Sarver, Cabot, and Winfield; also, railroad ties, piling, and all kinds of stuff. We loaded a boxcar then when the train come along, they took it where it went. The cord wood went to Pittsburgh to smoke meat. Zollers had a plant in Pittsburgh and they bought this cord wood and smoked meat.

I worked on the telephone lines in Pittsburgh and at the steel mill for four weeks because I had to work 13 hours a day and all I could get was a labor job and I wanted to get something that I could learn a trade. I couldn't get it at the mill.

I went peggin' on the railroad. That's fixing the railroad track. The railroad track was divided into sections. One boss had so many miles to take care of and another boss had so many more miles to take care of. Each boss would hire three men and you'd go along and fix this track to keep the track in shape. Today they don't do that. We fixed the ditch. Then we'd lay the gravel nice in rows so when the superintendent came riding up the track, the ditch would look nice and straight. Today, the ditches are full of weeds and if you walk along the track, you'd break your neck.

In 1918 I went to the army--that was World War I. They shipped me to Camp Lee in Virginia. I was at Camp Lee a week or so and I went to visit these new fellows that come in.