

THIS IS MY LIFE

→ 1942



BY VIRGIL F. MACK

Chapter I

I was born on August 4, 1924, in Orford, New Hampshire, to Mabel Ramsey Mack. My mother, who had had nine children before me, was small, about five two, and weighing about one hundred and twenty-five pounds. Having come to the Mack farm to work when she was about sixteen years old, she struck up a happy relationship with my dad, Fred Mack, and they were soon married. She was very young, but my dad was about twenty seven, some ten or eleven years older.

As you will see as we go on in this story, my mother worked very hard and complained very little. Because I was the last of ten children to be born, I did not know about all the family hardships, but I do know my mother was always smiling.

Dr. Ladd delivered all my mother's babies. A little story goes along with one of Dr. Ladd's visits to the house. When he got home that night, his wife said, "Tell me about your day, Doctor."

He said, "Well, I was called out to the Mack's to deliver a baby today, and after I had delivered the baby, they asked me to have lunch."

"Go on," she said, "what did you have for lunch?"

The Doctor said, "I had string beans."

"That was nice, what else did you have?"

He said, "I had more string beans."

"What did you have for desert?"

"I had more string beans."

This would sound funny to most people today, but it seems the old doctor had some kind of problem and then it was thought that if you ate one thing, you had to stick with that.

The children in our family were like steps. Two of the babies had died at birth, so we were left with eight, five boys and three girls. (Don't laugh, there were sixteen in my father's family.) When I was born, the eldest, a girl named Mildred, was eighteen. There were six children between us. Walter was next to Mildred, then came Irene, Delbert, Evelyn, Ralph, Kenneth, and then me, a bouncing boy of twelve and a half pounds. This was enough to end it for any mother, which it did. Mildred didn't stay at home very long after she finished school, she went out to work. In those days, it was great to have a lot of boys if you lived on a farm—it took a lot of people to run a farm. Our farm was made up of 375 acres. The tillable land had many, many rocks—sometimes it seemed like we grew rocks. I guess that was why so many stone walls surrounded each field.

I don't know how old I was when I started helping out on the farm, but I'm sure it was at an early age. When you got old enough to know what was going on around you, you just had to be doing something, even if it was wrong, and it usually was. One day when I was very young, I was out and about with my mother, who had to see the light of day once in a while. I probably sneaked away for a little bit without my mother knowing it, and childlike, I had to explore things that were new to me. I was in this farm building we called the shop where all the repairs to the farm equipment were made and the scythes and cutters for the mowing machine were sharpened. Because every bit of space had to be used in this

building, there was space underneath it where the pigs were raised.

In the far room of this building was a trap door which could be opened. Through this, sweepings from the floor were swept into the pig pen below. I decided I should pull up this door and see what was in there. The trap door didn't have any hinges, so you had to be careful when you lifted it that it didn't fall down into the pig pen. This time it did fall and took me with it. Luckily, it was only a distance of about eight feet. The pigs were happy to have some company and the mud they were wading in was warm, so the only thing I hurt was my pride. Of course it was pandemonium for a few minutes until my mother rescued me. That wasn't all—I needed a bath from head to foot after being in that pig pen.

This was easier said than done. Great preparations usually had to be made for a bath. We had no running water, only the pump in the back room. A wash tub was the quick way out. Mother had to heat a kettle on the back of the wood burning stove (or maybe the water in the reservoir on the back of the stove was hot enough), then dump the water into the wash tub, all while I stood outside crying and naked, waiting for the whole procedure to take place. Eventually it all happened and I was back in everyone's good graces.

Even though there was a lot of work to be done on the farm, all of us got an education and no one ever left school before the school year was finished. I remember seeing pictures that were taken of the kids in our one-room schoolhouse, and at that time there were only about three kids who were not Macks. Later on, one of those, Maurice Chase, married into the Mack family—he married Irene Mack, his childhood sweetheart. (Incidentally, they had one child, a girl they named Connie.)

Our school teachers never lasted more than one year. Teachers moved on to greener pastures or got married and immediately became pregnant. In those days no one would hire a pregnant women. God forbid.

Delbert came home from school one day with a very high fever. Mother got in touch with the doctor who came out, and after a thorough examination, decided it was scarlet fever. Delbert was quarantined to his room and no one except mother was allowed to go near him for several weeks. I remember seeing him at the upstairs window over the front porch. I suppose we were lucky the whole family was not quarantined.

As time went on and everyone grew, I too was ready to go to school. I was to go to the same one-room school that some of my brothers and my sisters graduated from. Things were basically the same, the school teachers were young

my first grade teacher. Her name was Carrie Bean, and she was local, from Orford, so all the townspeople thought she was great.

Miss Bean, as we were to address her, boarded and roomed at Glen Pease's, which was only a few blocks away from the school, as the crow flies.

Miss Bean thought I was the cat's meow. I could read like nobody's business, primarily because I read the same story over and over again. I can still remember it: *Mother rabbit went into the woods, hop, hop, hop. Father rabbit went into the woods, hop, hop, hop. Baby rabbit went into the woods, hop, hop, hop. Mother rabbit found some grass, father rabbit found some grass, baby rabbit found some grass.* I guess I could go on and recite the whole book today. Anyhow, I was so good, she thought I should skip a grade. This was fine until one day the superintendent of the district came by for a visit

and she told him what a wonderful reader I was. But she forgot which book I was so great at reading and handed me the wrong one. I stumbled and stammered so much that he got bored with whole thing and left. This was the end of any talk about my skipping a grade.

That first year in school I had perfect attendance, even though I had to walk a mile and three tenths each way and I was only five years old, and sometimes the snow was so deep—oh well, I won't go any further because some of my children think I had a baked potato in my pocket to keep my hands warm and then I ate the potato for lunch.

My first year of school had been such a whiz, I thought they would all be the same. Miss Whitcher, my second grade teacher, was about to change this. Someone had written something with chalk on the wall in the back of the school house. To this day I don't know what had been written or who did it, but all trails seemed to lead to me. Miss Whitcher said, "Everyone will stay after school until someone owns up to it." School was supposed to end at three-thirty but not this day—it went on until nearly five o'clock. When I couldn't hold out any longer, I started to cry, so immediately I became the victim. Everyone else could leave but me. I knew then my goose was cooked. Out came the paddle and I got it, but I still don't know to this day why. I didn't have anything to do with the chalk marks. Maybe they had been there for a long time, but you wouldn't have convinced any one of the other children of that.

Ruth grew up to be a fine lady who taught school for years in Hanover, New Hampshire. I understand she did a good job.

Every year in September the Plymouth Fair was held in New Hampshire. When I was a little guy, my brother Walter used to take Mother, Dad, my brother Kenneth, me, and sometimes Uncle Walter to the fair. We would go by and pick Uncle Walter up at his farm in Piermont. Uncle Walter had never married, and when he retired from many years' work on the railroad, he found this little farm called Echo Farm, and settled down to spend the rest of his life. He kept everything as neat as a pin. There weren't very many fields and his house and garden were neat and clean.

On one outing to the fair, we waited in the car for Uncle Walter for what seemed like hours. Finally Mother said, "One of you boys go into the house and find out what is taking so long." When my brother returned, he reported that Uncle Walter would be along in just a few minutes, he had to wash off the toilet seats. We all thought that was funny, and it became a family joke. Of course there was no running water, but the privy, as it was called, was built into his back room, so at least you didn't have to go outdoors.

Many people resided in our community in the summertime but left again in the winter. Now we might call them snow birds. They came from New York, New Jersey, or Pennsylvania. Many farm houses and cottages were closed for the winter and then opened again in the sum-

mer. Two nearby lakes, Upper Baker Lake and Lower Baker Lake, were surrounded by cottages and camps for boys and girls.

One family, Virgil and Lulu Prettyman, came every summer. Because my family was friendly with them, many people thought that I was named after Virgil. Mother said, "No way." Lulu Prettyman had many parties to which she would invite me and my brother Kenneth. She used to give me a gift of some kind every year—if it wasn't a trinket, it was maybe five dollars for my bank account. The Prettymans had a son named Lambert. Lambert and I would play in the sand box for a while and then we would go into the house for ice cream and cake.

The Prettymans also had a big German shepherd dog. I don't think he liked me very much, because he would always growl and bark at me. One time he broke through the screen door. Not knowing what was going to happen, I ran, but he caught up with me. Sure enough, he didn't like me—he laid his teeth into one cheek of my you know what. Of course the Prettymans described it as just a scratch, but they did take me to the infirmary at one of the camps to have a doctor look at it. Later on, I understand, the Prettymans came to live there the year around. They are buried in the cemetery close by and have a tall monument at the head of their gravesite.

The winters around Orford were miserable. As I remember it, the snow would start coming in November and it would be May before it was halfway dried up for the summer. One time a couple named Mr. and Mrs. Charlie Woods lived at the foot of Piermont Heights. They didn't speak very good English because they were French Canadians and had very little education. I don't remember much about Charlie and his wife other than that they lived to a ripe old age. They had one child whose name was Jessie.

Jessie married another Canadian whose name was Alfonse. Jessie was very overweight but was good at having babies. She had Richard, Dorothy, Bee, Roger, Ruth, Bill, Marie, and several others that didn't live. Alfonse was a hard-working man who couldn't do many things, but he was a good logger. He could put up a cord of wood in no time at all. He knew how to stack a cord of wood so it had more holes than you could believe. My father used to hire him to cut cordwood once in a while when he was broke (and he was always broke). Al would come by our house in the winter when the snow was blowing and it was colder than a witch's you-know-what to see if he could get a bag of potatoes—this was all his family would eat if they got hard up. Sometimes my dad would make a bargain with Al to cut wood for his potatoes. When times were good, Al's family might have some salt pork and biscuits to go with the potatoes. They would make poor man's gravy to pour over all of it.

Piermont was the town next to Orford. In the part of Piermont near us, there was a road that was cut through the mountain, and that part of the town was called Piermont Heights. In the wintertime, if you took a traverse or sled and started at the top and came down, by the time you reached the bottom you might be traveling at a rate of more than fifty miles an hour. This was fun to do at night when the moon was bright and the weather was cold.

My father's land ended at the edge of Piermont Heights. We also had a "sugar bush" in this area. A sugar bush is a group of sugar maple trees that are used to get sap for making maple syrup. The trees in a sugar bush, which spreads over several acres, are tapped in the spring, maybe the last of February or the first of March. When a tree is tapped, a hole is drilled in the tree about two inches deep, a spout is inserted, and then a bucket

is hung on the spout to catch the sap. When the ground freezes at night, the sap will not run. As it thaws in the daytime, the sap goes from the roots of the tree to the branches, where the leaves are to be formed. The sap only runs when the nights are still cold and the days start to get warm. This condition will last approximately six weeks, then the sap gets sour and milky looking. The syrup that is made from the late sap is very, very dark and bitter tasting.

In those days the sap was all gathered from the trees by hand. If the sugar bush was a long way from the sugar house where the sap was boiled to make syrup, a horse or ox pulled a tank for the pails of sap to be dumped into as it was gathered. If you were a young boy as I was, and only about four feet tall, a lot of the sap ended up in your boots. The gathering tank was emptied into a holding tank outside the sugar house and a pipe carried the sap from the tank into the house. A big wood-fired stove called an evaporator was used to boil the sap.

My dad went way back with sugaring, when it was done a lot differently. He used to have a sugar bush east of the Munroe farm. His trees were tapped the same and the buckets hung the same, but the boiling was done in a one-pan affair under an arch. The arch was built of stone or bricks, cement holding them together, built up on both sides to give room to stack the wood in the fire box, where the pan rested on the two built-up areas at the top. The sap was added to the pan at intervals as the evaporation process took place. When it was boiled to the right consistency, the pan was removed from the arch and the syrup was strained into a five- or ten-gallon can.

When the syrup was finished this old-fashioned way, it was always much darker. My dad had customers all over the United States. When he moved into his new facilities, with an evaporator and more modern equipment, a

woman in Buffalo, New York, placed an order with him but requested, "Mr. Mack, please give me some of that darker syrup this time."

We always had two uncles who stayed with us, Uncle Ollie and Uncle Erdie, my father's brothers. Uncle Erdie actually boarded with us and paid Mother so much a week. Uncle Erdie worked for Mrs. Baer as sort of a caretaker and he worked the year around whether she was there or not. He would care for the gardens, flower or vegetable, all summer long, as well as trim the trees and hedges. The wintertime was spent mostly in his greenhouse, starting vegetables for the following year. Erdie had to kick over the traces once in a while. The winter, I suppose, got boring, and he would go to town with someone and come back pretty well oiled—but he would always buy us food: chickens, steaks, or something like that. He had the only radio in the house and every time he got oiled like this, he had to take his radio apart. This one time the whole family was playing cards while Erdie, who was oiled, worked on his radio. On his hands and knees looking at something in the back of the radio, Erdie turned toward the family, peered over the top of his glasses, and said, "You like your chicken but you don't like to help fix the radio." This always stuck with the family and was a joke for many years.

Mrs. Baer was a lady who came to Orford for the summer. She had a large apple orchard and shipped apples all over the world to different people. She employed three men to care for the trees and pick the apples in the fall, my brother Walter, and Charlie and Oscar Ladd, who were brothers. They would start early in the spring and prune the trees. They would just about get through with that when it was time to spray the trees. Mrs. Baer had all the equipment to do these operations: a tractor and all the spray apparatus. Anything they

needed they would buy, and Mrs. Baer would reimburse them, within reason, of course.

Mrs. Baer, when she was in residence, also had a batch of Chow dogs. By this time I guess you have come to the conclusion that Mrs. Baer was pretty well off. She had many kennels and fences. Some of the dogs weren't very friendly, even though they did get fed the best cuts of meat. Most of the dogs were show dogs and Mrs. Baer went all over to shows. One of her other employees would drive her to the shows, towing a dog trailer behind them.

We usually knew about when Mrs. Baer was due to arrive, but if we didn't, it wasn't long before we found out. During the process of unloading her goods and her 60-some dogs, one dog would always get loose, and trying to find his way, would end up at our place. (Our land and Mrs. Baer's were only a couple fields apart.) We usually had at least one or two dogs, but they were always tied up. Chow dogs are great for fighting and our dogs, even though they were tied, would not see another dog invade their property without raising a fuss. Not only did Mrs. Baer have dogs for a hobby, she was always building something or making rock gardens. Her husband, a very well known surgeon at the John Hopkins Hospital in Maryland, rarely came to New Hampshire.

The upstairs bedrooms in our house were occupied by the girls, Evelyn and Irene, on one side, and the boys, Kenneth, Ralph, and I, on the other side. In the summer, when we went to bed while it was still daylight, we sometimes didn't go right to sleep. Boys as we were, we had to pester our sisters a little. I don't remember just what we did on this one occasion, but Irene ran into our room after Kenneth, who, instead of running and getting into bed, got under the bed. Irene grabbed him by the leg to pull him out and he screamed, "Oh my leg, my leg, my

leg!" Irene, thinking she was hurting him, let go and hurried back to bed. Later Kenneth told me, "she didn't hurt me at all, I was just screaming so she wouldn't."

My dad was a big man or at least it seemed to me that he was big—when you're just a short shaver, everyone else looks big. He was about five ten and weighed about two hundred pounds. He worked hard on that old rocky farm to feed all the mouths. His sugaring brought in some income as well as his strawberries that he raised in the early summer.

This was a real project that involved everyone who was able to work. Each year a new bed of strawberries was planted, but no berries were picked from that field the first year. All the blossoms were picked off so that the plants would go to runners. During hot weather, the plants had to be watered frequently. In back of the barn was a pile of manure that we added water to. Around the base of the pile was a basin big enough to accept about one hundred pails of water. We poured the water into the basin at night and the next day we bailed it out and poured it on the strawberry plants. The water with dissolved manure made a great fertilizer and the strawberries did nothing but grow, making a tremendous bed for the next season.

The plants were mulched well to protect them from the winter. In the spring, only the top part of the mulch was removed and we scattered the rest of the mulch around the plants to protect the berries from any grit from the ground as they ripened. Strawberries would be picked from this bed the second year while a new one was being planted to complete the cycle. This bed had to be watered frequently if the weather was hot or everything would go to pot. When it was time for the berries to be picked, everyone turned a hand to make sure they got picked in a timely fashion.

Dad and Walter would then go out and retail the berries. Many evenings, when it was nearly dark after all the other farm work was done, I would see my dad still working in his strawberry patch.

Uncle Ollie lived with our family until after Dad had passed on and we all left the farm. Dad made sure that he was well taken care of. Uncle Ollie was a little man, maybe five feet tall. He had a hunched back that made it very difficult for him to do many kinds of work. Still, there were lots of chores around the farm that he could do. He milked and he took care of the new calves and taught them how to drink from a pail. He always fed the pigs, and in the fall of the year when harvesting was taking place, he would take some of the field pumpkins, cut them up, and cook them in a large wood-fired kettle that was suspended from a crossbar with chains. After he had cooked the pumpkin and it had cooled, he would mix grain with it for the pigs—they loved it. Ollie was a very religious person and liked to go to Sunday services. He would walk to Oscar and May Ladd's place and they would drive him to Atwill Hill where a service was held in a school house. A minister from one of the surrounding towns would come to say the service.

Two families came to live near us every summer and it was the chore of the smaller children to carry milk, cream, eggs, and butter to them every day, usually in the morning. The job fell on my brother Kenneth and me, the last ones in the line. One of the men was an artist, the other a violinist. They both taught in their corresponding cities. The violinist's family name was Stretch. The Stretches were caring for their two granddaughters, Doris and Connie. The girls were about the same ages as Kenneth and me. We used to go to their house for birthday parties and occasionally they would come to the farm. We always thought the girls were very naive about

life. I remember when one of the girls stepped in some cow manure which was quite fresh, because my brother said, "Oh my, what shame, you cut your foot." The girls thought this very funny.

Kenneth was undoubtedly the best companion I ever had. We could fight and carry on like nobody's business, but we were inseparable. It was great sport when someone came to visit for me to get out the boxing gloves and challenge Kenneth to a match. I was such a bull, nothing scared me, and I was a rugged little rascal, too. Nothing ever happened to just one of us, it was the both of us. When we'd see a drop of rain coming, off we would go, fishing with Uncle Ollie. A brook ran through the farm back in the woods, and it used to have some nice brook trout in it. We'd get a big kick out of Uncle Ollie because he would always be telling us about some fishing hole in the brook and he'd seen some "big hell'uns" in it. He would sneak up on these holes and say to us, "You must be quiet. Shhh, they'll hear you." I guess Kenneth and I spent more time with Uncle Ollie than most of the kids.

I remember when Uncle Walter had his stroke, we had to go over to his farm with Uncle Ollie and care for his animals. Uncle Walter was brought to our house for Mother to care for, and as I remember, it wasn't very long before he had another stroke and passed on. Dad was his administrator so we had several trips to Echo Farm to do the milking. I remember that we had to have some cows tested for TB.

The farm was sold to a couple who came there to retire. I don't think they knew what they were getting into. The farm was quite a way from civilization. Today you couldn't even get to it with a horse and buggy, but that's the way we would get there with Uncle Ollie when we were taking care of Uncle Walter's animals.

We did have another chance to visit the people who bought Echo Farm, but it wasn't very pleasant. It was the

dead of winter and my dad was getting ready for his sap season. The people at Echo Farm had told him about a dilapidated old building up the road from them on their property, and said that if he wanted it for his sugaring operation, he could have it. Kenneth and I heard the conversation and begged him to let us go along. Delbert was going anyhow to help out. After some deliberation, he decided to let us go.

We took our horse and dray, as it was called. After arriving at the place, I ran into the building, saying I saw some stamps on a piece of cardboard on the wall. I guess I must have been starting a stamp collection. The roof was laden with snow, and as I ran in, apparently my weight shook it just enough to make the whole building collapse. I didn't regain consciousness until I was lying on the lounge at Echo Farm. I understand my dad and Delbert both dug in the snow feverishly to get me out from under that old building. I can thank them both for saving my life. I was taken by car to the Mary Hitchcock Hospital. They checked me over and found that I had a compound fracture of the leg and many scratches and bruises over my face and body from the snow and ice. I stayed in the hospital for about a week before going home. A cast on one's leg for six weeks sounds terrible, but think of it in the winter time when all you can see is snow.

On the last day of April that year, we had a big snow fall of about thirty inches. Kenneth, Ralph, and my dad started to school with the horse and dray, but they only got part way when the dray became too much for the horse. They removed the dray and only used the sled, but soon this was too much, too, so they went the rest of the way on horseback. My dad then brought the horse home. I was able to keep up with my school work because Kenneth or Ralph would bring it home to me. I was back in school before the end of the school year.

That year, Ralph, Ruth Ladd, John Ladd, and a girl named Elma Smith graduated. That left only Kenneth, Ralph Chase, Penrose Chase, and me in the one-room school, so it closed. From then on we had to go by bus to Orfordville school. The bus let us off in Orfordville and then went on to drop off the high school students at the high school on Orford Street. Harold Swan drove the bus usually, but his brother-in-law, Ralph Munn, did pinch hit for him. Ralph had one glass eye, and he kept his head cocked so it looked as if he was looking out the side window all the time. He was a good driver but every time he drove, the kids took advantage of him. They would throw food at each other and generally the bus would be a mess.

In the new school, I thought I had to impress people, so I would act up and disturb those who were there to study. After I had been spoken to several times, the teacher, who was a man this time, said to me, "Mr. Mack, would you please come up to my desk?" Thinking maybe he had some thing good for me, I hurried right up. To my surprise, he did have some thing for me all right but it wasn't anything like I had thought. He opened his desk drawer and out came a rubber hose that was at least eighteen inches long and one and a half inches in diameter. He asked me to bend over and he slapped me about the back and head several times. This was enough to bring me in line. but I didn't shed a tear. Even though it did hurt like hell, I couldn't let my contemporaries see me in a state like that. Some of them did ask me at recess time if it hurt, but of course I said no. They hadn't had the opportunity or the nerve to find out. I had, but it wasn't because I knew I was asking for it. I grew up with those boys in that school and we all went our separate ways—today not one of them is still alive.

The next year, in the sixth grade, we had a different teacher. This teacher was big on extracurricular activities. The 4-H Club appealed to me. We collected samples of trees: pieces cut about four inches long, split in half, and mounted on poster board. This was but one of many projects we had, and the teacher would also take us to 4-H activities held in other towns.

I became sweet on a young lady who was older than I and a grade ahead of me. I knew when her birthday was and I was hoping to give her something. I had window shopped at a store near the school, so I knew what I was going to buy her, but without any money, it would be hard. I knew my mother had a collection of coins that she kept in her bureau drawer. Some of them were quite old and if appraised, might have been worth something. I sneaked into her room unbeknown to her and stole a ten-cent piece, just what I was short to buy the present I wanted from the local store. I went ahead and bought the present that day and gave it to the girl, who was very excited and probably gave me a kiss on the cheek. I immediately started thinking how I was going to replace the ten-cent piece without my mother knowing it.

I had a date stamp which I had gotten from some place, and I knew it must arouse interest somewhere—everybody should have a date stamp. The very first person I offered the stamp to said, "Yes, I'll buy it." It didn't take me long to get the money. I hot-footed it to the store and lo and behold, the ten-cent piece was still there. I asked for it back and got it. I then put it back in my mother's pouch, and to this day no one has ever heard this story.

Kenneth and I still continued to carry milk and cream and other goodies in the summer to the Stretches and the MacGinnises. Henry MacGinnis was an artist, and

spent most of his summers painting pictures. In the wintertime he was an art instructor at The School of Industrial Arts in Trenton, New Jersey. Being an out-of-doors kind of guy, he liked to paint scenes of my father and my brothers haying, the big hay wagons loaded with hay, the oxen pulling it, with my uncle raking the hay up behind it. In years to come, these paintings will probably be worth a lot of money. Henry liked the way I dressed and the little milk cans I carried. He knew there was a picture there some place.

I sat for what I thought was many hours while Henry daubed in paint. After he had more or less finished a picture, he would stand back and view it from different angles and touch it up here or there. I said, "Mr. MacGinnis, aren't you afraid you might spoil it if you keep fooling around?" He got the biggest kick out of this and was always telling someone this story. I sat for many of his paintings, and he always paid me. Besides painting, he always had projects going on. He wasn't a person who hired everything done; he never hired professionals to do the job while he sat back.

He gave lots of work to my brothers when they were able to do it. He built his whole house, did the plumbing, the electrical, or anything that came down the pike. He and my brother Delbert dug a well some twenty-five feet deep. But before they dug it, he even found the water by dousing with a willow stick—he was just a phenomenal person.

My dad and I went fishing a few times, mostly on Upper Baker Lake. We used to go out in a row boat, put the anchor down, and fish for perch. If you didn't anchor your boat, it would eventually drift right in to shore. My dad loved to fish for a large fish called a pickerel, but he liked to catch a perch first, cut a piece off its side and put it on his hook, move in near shore next to the lily

pads, and then cast his line out. With the proper motion, the piece of perch on the hook would look to a pickerel like a young perch skipping along, trying to swim to shallow water.

Once we had been sitting quite a while in the same spot, but neither of us had caught anything, so my dad said, "Maybe we had better move to another spot." At that moment I felt something tugging on my line, so I pulled it up rather quickly. A small perch was on the line, but as I pulled it in, a large pickerel, which apparently had been chasing this perch, came right out of the water and into the bottom of the boat. Very excited, I said, "Dad, do something! He's going to get away!" My dad was very placid about the matter and said, "No son, I think he's here to stay." Later we measured the fish, and if I remember rightly, it was thirty-six inches long.

A fellow named Louie Clifford used to be a very good friend of my dad's. He would stay overnight at the house and he and Dad would go fishing in the lake early in the morning. Sometimes they would come home with a string of fifteen or twenty fish, some of them twenty-four to thirty inches long. I don't ever remember Louie's wife, but he must have had one, because I do remember a couple of sons who were about Walter's age, one called Clarence and the other Little Louie. I guess they called him Little Louie to differentiate him from his father. They lived in Wentworth, New Hampshire, the next town to Orford.

Our address was always Pike, New Hampshire, because our mail was delivered by what is called a rural route. A man named Swin Lange used to deliver our mail, rain or shine. Kenneth and I would go to a spot on the Baker Pond Road and wait for Swin to come by. He'd have a horse and buggy in the summer and a horse and sleigh in the winter. Later on, he graduated to a Model

A Ford. We had a mail box, so if we weren't there, he would leave the mail in the box. I remember one day I went by myself and the wind was blowing like crazy. Uncle Erdie used to get the *Boston Post* paper, and no matter what, we always had to lie right down on the ground first thing and look at the funny paper section. On this particular day the wind blew the paper away from me. By the time I had gathered up all the pieces, the paper was a mess. I guess mother must have pacified Uncle Erdie somehow, but I couldn't face him for a week.

In those days, many things were sold by salesmen who drove around in cars and had the merchandise right with them: McNess, Watkins products, Fuller Brush, the fish man, and in the summertime, a salesman with a whole meat market in a panel truck. You would think anyone buying this meat might have gotten some kind of disease, but I guess it never happened, or at least I never heard of it. The Watkins man or Fuller Brush man didn't come too often, but they would always have some kind of gift to give you if you were a good customer. They were entertainment for the ladies in those days. They would come into your house and sit down with their hand-carried baskets so the women could paw through the stuff, which might be thread, needles, hardware of all description, or just gum or Necco wafers. They would always sell something, even though it might not be over ten or fifteen cents worth. The brushes and later on the vacuum cleaners called for demonstrations. Sometimes with vacuums an appointment would be made in advance.

Up there in the Northeast years ago, fur salesmen would come around in the winter, if they knew that there might be a trapper in the family. My father used to do a lot of trapping; he would catch raccoon, skunk, fox, mink, otter, beaver, wolf, bobcat, and others. One day a

salesman came to the house when my dad wasn't there. After much talking, he got my mother to show him a fox my dad had caught. After some Yankee dealing, mother sold him the fox hide. He was going down the driveway just as my father was coming in. My dad said to him, "Where are you going with my fox hide?" The salesman said, "I just gave the missus twenty-five dollars for it." Dad, knowing this was a good price, said "that's OK," and the fur dealer kept right on going.

Dad had several bouts of sickness and was in and out of Mary Hitchcock Hospital frequently. One day Mother took Kenneth and me aside and told us that Dad was having a lot of trouble with his prostate, and she tried to explain to us what a prostate was (I don't know whether she succeeded in her explanation or not.) At any rate, the hospital was trying a new method of stretching the gland. This method apparently had some merit, because it seemed to work in this case.

The road from the farmhouse came down the hill and around the corner. From this corner on for about five hundred yards it was solid with pine trees, most of them about the same size, about three inches in diameter. My dad had commented many times that this would be a great place to build a cottage. This was the summer to do it. With the help of all of us boys, Dad built a three-room cottage with a bathroom and a fireplace. His intention was that this was going to be a rental for the summer. We had dug a well up the hill from us, so the place had running water.

Whether we had much to do or not, we would go to the cottage with Dad anyhow. This one day, I had perched myself on top of a makeshift ladder my dad had built to paint the side of the building. Matter of fact, I was lying on it taking a nap. I fell off onto the ground and broke my arm. It was crazy as I look back on it now.

but Dad took it in all good spirits and got someone to take me to the hospital immediately. A broken bone was quite a thing in those days: they took x-rays, then gave me gas, and set the arm. When I came out of the gas, I was talking a blue streak. The doctor said to my dad, "This boy is quite a storyteller!" My dad said, "How come?" The doctor said, "He's been telling us a fish story, about a fish jumping into his boat." My dad then told him this was no story, it was the truth.

On June 1, 1936, my sister Irene, who had been hospitalized several times, entered the Woodsville Hospital for a new reason, to give birth. They had a baby they named Cornelia Ann.

Later on, we finished the cottage and rented it. In the summer of 1938 Dad wasn't feeling too well. He went back to the doctor and they put him in the hospital. The diagnosis this time was cancer. For a while he was in and out of the hospital, but really he was sent home to die. The lady we rented the cottage to had a full-time registered nurse, because she had a serious heart condition. Dad needed a shot every day, so I would sit with the lady in the cottage while the nurse went up to the house and gave Dad his shot. Usually the lady and I would play cards or checkers. Of course this kept me out of the way of all of it and no one had to answer any questions I might ask.

School had started and I was in my first year of high school. One evening Kenneth and I were attending something that was going on at school and Ralph came to pick us up. He said Dad had passed away that evening. It was a shock to us, even though we knew how bad Dad was and that the end could come any time. We thought our shock was bad, but for Mother it was much worse. She had been on that old farm all her life, it was the only thing she knew. She must have thought her world was

coming to an end. Although this was momentous to her, she never let on to anyone how bad it was. Mother had been keeping a diary for years, and she was able to talk to her diary. Later I went back to the old diaries and found the passage she had written for that day. "Fred passed away tonight, out of all his suffering. Poor dear, no one will ever know how I miss him."



Chapter II

While we were still living on the farm, soon after my dad died, we had a terrible hurricane. I went out in the pasture to get the cows that night, and the wind was blowing so that I could hardly stand up. The top of a tree blew off and it fell right at my feet. I was all for getting those cows and getting home as fast as I could. The old barns were not a much better place to be—I think the cows got a quick milking that night. The house wasn't any better, either, but that was as far as I could go. The wind just kept on coming, one wave after another, and I thought the old house was going to go. The storm finally subsided and we were able to breathe a little more freely.

The next morning the sun was out and everything was bright, but as you went down the road you could start to see the devastation. Looking toward the cottage, the wind had blown down all the pine trees that my dad had so carefully selected and left to grow. The cottage was fine, but trees were in the road all the way from the corner. You would need a saw and axe to cut your way through. (Oh how wonderful it would have been if we'd had chainsaws then.) It was the same all the way up Piermont Heights and around the lake. We often said how wonderful it was that our dad didn't have to be confronted with this. The sugar bush on the side of Piermont

Heights was devastated, all the nice maples that we'd been able to tap were uprooted. This was true of a lot of trees. They weren't broken off, they were torn out of the ground by the roots. It took days before any roads were passable.

Ralph and I were coming home to the farm one night in about 1940 when something crossed the highway in front of us. Not knowing exactly what it was, we stopped to investigate and found it was a beaver. It was quite unusual to see an animal like this away from its habitat. We had a leather dog leash in the car, so we tried to get this around its neck so we could get it in the car. We tried this to no avail—each time we tried, the beaver would just bite the leash in two. Finally we got it in position and when it went to bite, we pulled up quick and caught his front teeth in the slip noose. That way we were able to pull the beaver along and get it into the back seat of the car.

We took the beaver back to the farm. How we got it out of the car I don't remember, but we put it into an old sap-gathering tank that was handy. We thought we could get a better look at it in the daylight, so we left it there for the night. The next day we took it out of the sap tank, and looked it over real good. Then we hauled it down over the bank in back of the farmhouse and let it loose to fend for itself. A few days later, Ralph talked to the Game Warden, who said they had planted some in the area and he was happy that we got the beaver away from the danger of getting killed by the traffic.

In later years the animals were all over the place, damming up brooks and ponds. It was fun to watch them. If you were in a boat on one of the ponds where they were working and they saw you, they would slap their tails on the water to signal the other beavers in the area that some kind of danger was lurking. I have seen

trees almost a foot in diameter cut down by these animals. Their modus operandi was to get in a comfortable position, which would be about eighteen inches from the base of the tree, then chew the bark from the tree and keep going around the tree, chewing it until it fell to the ground. After the tree was on the ground, they would cut off the branches and put them in their dam. One year the beavers were so plentiful, the Fish and Game Department hired my brother Ralph to catch the beavers in a have-a-heart trap, which catches them alive without hurting them. The Game Warden could then relocate them.

We stayed on at the farm for a couple more years, but Ralph wanted to get on with his life. Walter already was working much of the time in the apple orchard or on his place that he had bought at auction on Orford Street. Mother and Walter had already talked to Charlie Ladd about boarding Uncle Erdie and to Oscar Ladd about taking Uncle Ollie.

Mother, Kenneth, and I were able to stay in the Field's house on Bridge Street with Eve and Cope the winter of 1941. The spring of 1942 we moved into Walter's house on Bridge Street. He had taken a job for the town as Road Agent and it kept him pretty busy. He had turned the apple business over to Charlie and Oscar Ladd, who were much closer to it anyhow. Kenneth graduated from high school in June of 1941, and soon afterwards he went to work in Springfield, Vermont.

When the news came through that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor, I was at the high school in the chemistry laboratory. We heard it over the radio we were listening to. I couldn't believe my ears and later had to rush home and tell Mother. It changed the world for everyone when the president came on the radio the next day to declare war and to update us about what had happened. Everyone followed the war much closer than they

had before. It wasn't just a war in Europe now, it all came closer to home.

I went to work at the Wheeler Farm part time after I got out of school, pinch-hitting for the caretaker, who had a heart condition and couldn't do much work. The Wheeler Farm was one of the seven well-maintained ridge houses, the second from the end on the north side. The Wheeler Farm was the only one that was a working farm. Another was owned at one time by Robert Fulton, who invented the steam engine. As I understand it, he ran the steam engine in a boat on the Connecticut River which runs between Vermont and New Hampshire. Another of the homes was owned by Samuel Morey, who in earlier years ran steam boats on the lake in Fairlee, Vermont, which was later named Lake Morey after him. My job at the Wheeler Farm was a good one and lasted me all the way through high school. I had to take care of the animals in the morning and again at night after school. They had a big garden that had to be taken care of in the summertime and occasionally we would ship vegetables, eggs, and butter from the farm to the owner who lived in New York.

During the last year of high school my very good friend Norman French lived with us. His family was moving and he was in my class at school, so we asked him if he'd like to stay with us until school was over. Norm got married and went into the navy a few months after school. While he was in the navy, he sired five children, all girls. When he got out, he went to New Hampshire State University. After graduation, he went to work for a computer company in Framingham, New Hampshire, where he worked until retirement. He resided in Florida in the winter, and came to Orford in the summer. He bought a run down piece of property and lived there with his wife while he fixed it up. Whenever I was back in

Orford for a few weeks, I would always see him. We went to the many school reunions together. The summer of 1990, when I went back to Orford to retire and build my new house, he came for the summer but was having trouble with his heart. Later that summer he died. His wife stayed a short time but went to live with one of their daughters in Framingham. I haven't seen or heard from her since.

My high school graduation was in June of 1942. Soon afterward, I went to Stamford, Connecticut, to work at the Sikorsky helicopter plant with two other boys from my class, Norm French and Bernard Bean. A man who used to come to Orford on his vacations had set this up for us. I worked in the finance department, Bernard in the machine shop, and Norm in the receiving department. We boarded with a group of other men who worked at the plant.

None of us were too happy about being this far away from home, but looking back now, I suppose it was good for us, or at least it prepared us for things to come. After a couple of weeks, Norm got a letter, or at least he said he did, giving him some reason to go home. He wanted to know if I was going to stay. At first I said yes, but after a bit, I decided I could do just as well in Springfield, Vermont, where my other brothers were working. We all made up some cock-and-bull story that we told our supervisors and we were on our way home. This is the last time I ever saw Bernard Bean. He drowned trying to save one of his brothers from drowning, while they were swimming in the river.

The machine shops in Springfield were always looking for someone to work, so I knew I could easily find a job. I went to Bryant Chuck & Grinder Company first, because that's where I had the most relatives working. They hired me and sent me to their training center. Train-

ing lasted only for a couple of weeks, and they paid you while you got acquainted with the different pieces of machinery: I suppose the shops always had openings then because they had a continuous flow of people leaving to go into military service.

After finishing my orientation classes, I went to work in the shop. I was introduced to a machine called a wobble grinder that I had never seen before. My lack of training really didn't matter, however, because the shop gave me plenty of time working with another man, so I had a good break-in period.

Later I was left to myself on this wobble grinder, which was set up for a particular operation. The man who trained me went on days and I stayed on nights. When I got caught up running my jobs on the wobble grinder, and jobs on other machines got hot, the foreman would let me try these other jobs. I made out so well that this became the thing to do, move me around. In the short length of time I worked there, I had ran most of the machines. Most men preferred to stay on one machine; they were afraid they would scrap a part and the foreman would chew them out for it. I guess I was just too young to care.

I met people in the shop that became lasting friends. A lot went into the service and I met them much later on in Europe. One was a young fellow like myself who was in the 30th Infantry. I visited him in Germany, where he may have been taken across the Rhine river by one of our men. I never saw him again.

Kenneth was one of the first of my brothers to leave for the war. I remember the last evening I was to spend with him. We were in Springfield, and he was to come to Orford before going on to Fort Devens, Massachusetts. We went out to dinner together. Neither one of us was accustomed to drinking, but we had a few that night just

to seal our friendship, as we had found ourselves coming closer together.

I could see my time coming, so one day I decided to enlist in the Air Force. Preliminary examinations were held in Rutland about forty miles from Springfield. One of the tests was for color blindness. The test consisted of a series of pictures in which you could see numbers if you weren't color blind. I couldn't see any numbers in some of the pictures, so this proved I was color blind. The numbers I couldn't see showed what type of color blindness I had—red-green. After I had these tests and failed, I said "I'll wait for them to come and draft me."

So I waited and later they did come, and I was ready. When you wait and know that a certain thing is going to happen, you are glad when it finally happens.

