

# **Memories of the Great Depression:**

**The Last-fleeting Memories**

**By John Donald O'Shea**

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



## Preface

The American Civil War began in 1861, and ended in 1865. According to a November 6, 2013 article written by Richard A. Serran, that appeared in the *Smithsonian Magazine*, “By the start of the 1950s, about 65 of the blue and gray veterans were left; by 1955, just a half dozen.”

From the end of the Civil War in 1865, until 1955, eighty years have elapsed. During that eighty-year period all but six Civil War veterans passed away.

When the “Great Depression” *ended*, is a matter of debate. Some would say that it ended when World War II began on December 7, 1941. Others would say it continued on until the end of the war in 1945.

But for people, who lived on the city dump in the City of Rock Island, Illinois, it continued until their shacks on the dump — their shacks in the “Hooverville” — that served as their homes, were finally bulldozed shortly after the war.

Arbitrarily using the December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 date, the day Pearl Harbor was bombed, as the date the “Great Depression ended,” until April of 2023, eighty-two years have elapsed.

Therefore, it is easy to see why Americans with memories of the Great Depression are getting harder and harder to find. There are fewer and fewer of them still alive, whom I can reach, who

can give detailed first-hand accounts. And once they are found, before you can get their stories, they must be able and willing to tell them, and to allow you to record them.

I began gathering “memories” for my first book about America’s “Great Depression of the 1930s” in 1991. I gathered a handful of stories. Then got busy elsewhere.

I really became serious about collecting enough stories to write my first book, *Memories of the Great Depression: A Time Forgotten*, in 2014 and 2015.

Over the years, have gathered 91 original stories. I have used only four stories that have come to me from other sources. My first book contains thirty first-hand accounts. My second book, *Memories of the Great Depression: A Time Remembered*, contains twenty-four.

I expect that this third book will be my last book of *Memories of the Great Depression*. I therefore call it, *Memories of the Great Depression: The Last-fleeting Memories*.

As I write, in April of 2023, a person would have to be 93-years-old to have been alive when the “Great Depression” struck in October of 1929.

Couple that with the fact, that few people have any memories of their early years of their lives before they were four-years old. So, there are fewer and fewer people still living who have any meaningful memories of the early years of the Great Depression — the years from 1930 through 1935. And the memories of those 93 and older, in many cases, are fading.

Gathering these stories has become a “labor of love” for me. I feel that in talking and writing back and forth, I have become friends with some of the people who gave me their stories.

In some cases, the relationship ended almost as quickly as it had begun. I would call the story teller on the phone, and after getting the story teller’s permission, I would tape record the story. Then I would type up the recording, and send it to the story teller for their approval, which they would give. And in many cases, that was it.

But in other cases, a relationship developed. Dorothy Denkhoff, whose story appears in *Memories of the Great Depression: A Time Remembered* became a “regular correspondent.” After I recorded her story and sent it to her for her approval, from time-to-time thereafter, she would send me a letter containing additional memories. I would then add them to her original story, type up the revised version, and send the revision to her for her approval. Then, a few months later, she would send me the next revision, and the process continued on. Then one day, after I had received no more additions and corrections from her for what seemed like a long while, I wrote to her, and my letter was returned by the manager of the home where she resided, informing me of her passing.

A similar relationship has developed with George Johnson whose story appears in this book. And it’s amazing how the stories have come to fuller and more vivid life as the story tellers add their details. George was kind enough to provide five revisions, and in his additions, we can see

clearly his love for that “little dog that followed him home,” the birds whose songs he knew as a child, and the woods and hills that he loved to wander near his early home.

A few Sundays ago, when I stopped by our local Jewel Food Store after church to buy some donuts, I bumped into a friend, Pami T., who had introduced me to Mildred “Millie” Haynie, whose story appears in *Memories of the Great Depression: A Time Remembered*.

Pami advised me that, “Millie (has passed.” She was surprised to hear me say that, “I know, I have seen Mildred’s obit.” And then she told me one last story about Mildred. The Saturday morning prior to her death, Millie’s daughter had called her mother, and asked if, “She wanted to get together that evening for dinner.” Millie replied, “I can’t. I’m having dinner with God tonight.” Mildred passed away that evening.

But quite apart from any relationships that I have developed in gathering these stories, the stories told to me by Nellie Muños and Vahalia Vasquez Olvera that appear in this book, have given me a far deeper insight and greater appreciation of what it means to be an American. Their parents came to the United States from Mexico between 1910 and 1930 to escape civil war and poverty in their native country. In immigrating here, they asked no support from our government. They came only to seek work to create better lives for themselves and their children. If they received any assistance, it was from family and neighbors, who they in turn helped. Whether they realized it or not, their lives reflected two great divine commands: “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

That same sprit animates most other stories in this book.

I think you can see why gathering these stories has become a “labor of love” for me.

John Donald O’Shea, July 8, 2023

## **Chapter 1**

**“WE USED TO LIVE BEHIND THE SILVIS RAILROAD SHOPS. THEY HAD BOXCARS THERE FOR THE MEXICAN PEOPLE WHO WERE EMPLOYED IN THE SHOPS. THAT’S WHERE I WAS RAISED — BEHIND THE RAILROAD SHOPS IN SILVIS. WE LIVED IN ONE OF THE BOXCARS.”**

**Nellie Muños**

**Born May 5, 1923.**

I was born on May 5, 1923. I am 100 years old. I was born in Riverside, California when my father and mother stopped in Riverside to make money so they could come to Illinois. My father’s name was Benito Bravo Terronez, and my mother was Feilcia Ayano Terronez.

Once we got to Illinois, my dad worked in the Silvis shops. He was a blacksmith. They would bring him a piece of iron and a pattern, and he would make what they wanted.

What I can remember about my very early years, is that we used to live behind the Silvis railroad shops. They had boxcars there for the Mexican people who were employed in the shops. That’s where I was raised — behind the railroad shops in Silvis. We lived in one of the boxcars.

As a child, for me, living in a boxcar was like living in any other home. It was a roof. We had no electricity; rather, we had lamps. We had fire-wood stoves. We had no running water in the boxcar. We got our water from a pump in my aunt's home, which was right next door to us. My aunt also lived in a boxcar. All of us got water from that pump.

Besides my mother and father, there were 13 of us; nine girls, and four boys. If I recall, just three of us kids were born in the boxcar. The others were born before we moved into, or after we moved from the boxcar.

I had a very happy life, with all my brothers and sisters. We never argued and we never pushed each other around. We were always happy.

I went to McKinley School in Silvis. I never faced any discrimination or name-calling while I was there in school, perhaps because I had light hair, hazel eyes and light skin, like my mother.

McKinley school was a regular school. I had all my friends there. But rather than study, I tended to goof off.

I started in kindergarten there and they took me out in seventh grade when my mother got sick and began to experience serious heart problems. They took me out of school to care for my younger brothers and sisters. My mother, however, eventually recovered her health, and lived into her nineties.

At the time I left school to take care of my younger brothers and sisters, there were four that I took care of. I had learned to cook when I was about eleven. So, I knew what to do. I had learned because I had helped my mom to cook all the time. So, I did the cooking and fed my brothers and sisters while my mother was sick. But they would all help me. They'd cut things, and I'd put them together. I was a pretty good cook. And I still am!

On Saturdays, my sister and I warmed the water, and gave everybody a bath. And I washed the clothes. I was the fourth oldest child, and my sister was the third oldest. We did things together. But I was the main one who did what had to be done. I was the main one because I had always helped my mom. I would cut things up, and I knew what to do.

During those years, a lot of my friends would say they went to bed crying, because they were hungry. But we — my family — never went to bed hungry. Every night, before we went to bed, we used to have our cocoa or our tea, and bread with butter, or toast or whatever. We never went to bed hungry — never.

By and large, my dad worked through the Depression. But I can recall a time when he was not working. At that time, he had a two-wheel cart. During the time that he was out of work, he'd take that cart and go along the railroad tracks and pick up the discarded railroad ties, and sell them to people for wood to heat their houses. And in those days, coal was transported in box cars, and it would drop off the box cars. My dad also went and picked up the coal and sold it. Because my dad picked up the coal, we never had a cold day. My dad worked hard. He worked hard to support his family. That's one thing I can say — bless him!



We didn't have fancy food, but we had our beans, and our daily potatoes — fried potatoes —, our tortillas, our chili and all that. We were happy.

Of course, we had a garden where we raised food. We had corn, peppers and tomatoes. All kinds of things. Everybody had a garden. When we lived in the boxcar, our garden was across the tracks. There were a lot of lots across the Rock Island Railroad tracks. That's where the people who lived in the boxcars had their gardens. I can't remember whether they had to rent the lots that they used for their gardens, or whether they were just allowed to use them.

But then, all of the people who lived in the box cars were told that they had to move by the Silvis city officials. At the time, the city of Silvis wasn't collecting any taxes from the people who lived in the railroad yards — in the boxcars. So, the people who had been living in the boxcars, now had a choice. They could rent a place to live, or buy a lot and build a home.

At first, we moved in with another family — the Gomez family. They offered to let us stay with them. They said we could come and live in their basement. They were very good friends of my mom and dad. So, we moved into their basement. I think six of us moved in with them — my mom and dad, Theresa, Gabby, Jessie and I, and we stayed there until my dad bought our lots on 4<sup>th</sup> Street in Silvis, and built our home there.

Then, after we lived with the Gomez family, we moved to 4<sup>th</sup> Street. At first, dad built our basement, and our family moved into the basement and stayed there for a while — before he

built the rest of the house. But the city said he had to build up; he had to build the rest of the house.

When my father built the house on 4<sup>th</sup> Street, he built it atop a hill, and every time it rained, the rain would cut ditches into the hill. On that 4<sup>th</sup> Street lot, we also had a garden and a garage.

Later, I got married when I was 18, in 1941, and my husband and I moved into and lived in that garage. We had no other place to go, So, I went back with my dad and mom and I lived in that garage.

During all these years, my dad never had a car. He never drove.

When we were young, we attended church at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Silvis. At first, the church was in a pair of boxcars over in the yards. They had an altar in the boxcars. Later, they built the original Our Lady of Guadalupe church, and it was also over on 4<sup>th</sup> Street, on the hill. Years later, they built the present Our Lady of Guadalupe over on 17<sup>th</sup> Street in Silvis.

As kids, we used to walk along the railroad tracks to the Strand Theater in East Moline. My dad would give each of us ten cents to see a movie. I can remember seeing the *Flash Gordon* movies. We'd go to see an episode every Sunday. And my dad always had a radio. There was always a lot of crackly noise — static — but he always had it on.

My mother raised all 13 of us children, and she taught us right from wrong. She had her hands full with all of us. My mother used to make all our clothes. They weren't the best ones, but we

had clothes. She used to buy the materials. There was also a seamstress, and my mom would also have her make dresses for us.

My parents had neighbors to talk with and visit with. And we used to go to Mexican programs where there would be entertainment — plays, music, singing and dancing.

The neighborhood — 2<sup>nd</sup> Street (now called Hero Street), 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, 4<sup>th</sup> Street, and 5<sup>th</sup> Street — was pretty much all Mexican-American. It was a pretty tight community. If you needed this or that, a neighbor or relative would help you. If you were building a house, and someone was an electrician, he would help. It was always a very tight community. 2<sup>nd</sup> Street was mainly Mexican people and boxcars. Even today many of the houses on Hero Street (Second Street) are built around boxcars. But most have been extended, added onto, and sided, so that you would not know they were originally just boxcars, which they had towed down onto the lots.

This home, in the front is a boxcar. The house next door, just north of this house, is also a boxcar that has been added onto. The gray house across the street started as a box car, and has been added onto. There is a store just to the south of that house, but the green house immediately south of the store began as double boxcars. That's where my husband grew up. Most of the houses on this street were originally box cars.

After we moved to 4<sup>th</sup> Street, my older sister Jessie — the third in line — started working in the welfare office in Moline, where they distributed food — cheese, milk, oranges — to the poor. The people would go in to the office to pick up the food. Jessie was the one who put electricity

and running water into our home. She helped my dad. I was number four, and Jessie was number three.

I had an uncle and an aunt who never had any children. They used to take me for weeks or months to be with them. They would give me nice little dresses and shoes. They never had any children of their own.

## **Chapter 2**

**“IN AND AROUND THAT LITTLE TOWN WE HAD  
SNAKES — RATTLESNAKES AND COPPERHEADS. IN  
THE SUMMERS WE WALKED IN OUR BARE FEET**

**ALL THE TIME, EVERYWHERE. AT NIGHT THE  
SNAKES WOULD CRAWL UP ONTO THE ROADS  
BECAUSE THE ROADS STAYED WARM.”**

**GEORGE E. JOHNSON**

**Born January 9, 1928.**

My name is George Johnson. I am 95 years old. I was born on January 9, 1928. It was a good year for a lot of things, including wine!

Besides mom and dad, I had two older brothers, Samuel and Walter. My mother's name was Lou, and my father's name was Plummer. My mother was forty-two years-old when I was born. She had been born in 1886. Her mother, my grandmother, had been born in 1844, and she had been forty-two when my mother was born! My grandmother's husband had two brothers who had gone off to fight in the Civil War. They fought at Antietam and Chancellorsville. One of them ended up in the terrible Confederate prison camp at Andersonville. I never met my grandfather, but I did get to meet my grandmother, but I was so young that I have no memory of doing so. They were Americans who definitely believed in this country; and I do too!

I was born in a small town in the mountains of Pennsylvania. The name of the town was Mapleton. It was about 50 miles south of Penn State College, along the Juniata River. Besides the River, there were two streams. One had trout in it; the other just had little sunfish, catfish and other small fish in it. We fished in those streams a lot.

Mapleton was right on the Pennsylvania Railroad's main line. You could hear the trains come up and down the hollows at night, with their whistles blowing. And there were the whippoorwills. You'd hear them call at night. I miss those sounds. They are all good memories. After we moved, I've never heard them again.

I think everyone in the town was poor, but it was a beautiful place to live.

We lived in a nice home, on the edge of Mapleton. Immediately behind our home, we had a large lot. We had fruit trees on that lot, and my dad had a garden there. Besides the garden that we had behind the house, the American Legion had given lots, on the edge of town, to men who had served in the First World War. My family had a car for as long as I can remember. We were able to afford a car because my dad received a bonus for being in the First World War.

That car allowed us to visit relatives from time to time — if we had money for gas. In those days, the roads in town were okay, but those in the country were terrible. Most of our relatives lived outside of any town. In the country, the roads, when they got muddy, were almost impassable for cars. When we got stuck in the mud, dad would cut down bushes, and lay them under the tires. That always seemed to work.

My dad could do about anything. He cut hair, he replaced soles and heels on shoes, he could butcher farm animals, he built a great stone wall, and he was a terrific gardener — not to mention, a great dad. And he was like a "Luther Burbank." He would graft trees. He put a branch

from a good apple tree on an old scrub-apple tree, and it always worked for him. He had magic. He loved nature and he loved this country.

My dad was always out there working. He was that kind of a guy. The things we grew in those gardens and on our fruit trees, my mother canned, and put away for the winter. We lived on what she canned all through the winter. And we picked the dandelion greens, and used them for salads. If we were lucky, but we usually weren't, we had a little bit of bacon with the salad.

There was an Amish community about twenty miles (from Mapleton) where we lived. Dad and us three boys would go there and pick fruit. They gave us half, and kept the other half. While we were there picking fruit, the Amish people always gave us something to eat, and it was always very good.

As a boy, I really didn't realize how much hard work mom and dad did. Sometimes, now, I wish I had helped a lot more than I did. My parents worked very hard. Because we had those gardens, we always had food to eat. We also raised chickens. So, once in a while —on Sunday — we ate chicken, and that was great. From time to time, mom also would kill, clean and dress a chicken for the store in town, upon their request.

In those days, flour, that was used to make bread, came in large cloth bags decorated with patterns. Mom made us underwear out of those bags.

Immediately beyond our back yard, there were woods. Then, beyond the woods, was a gradual incline. As you went up that incline, there were outcroppings of rocks. When you walked on the outcroppings, you had to be careful. You had to have good balance, so you wouldn't get hurt. I never thought about that danger when I was a boy.

That hill, behind our house, with its outcroppings of rock, rose up a thousand feet or so, high above the town. We used to climb up to the peak a lot. And when you'd look down on the town, the trains would look like little toys.

You could go up to the top of the mountain, and look down at the river. There was a little "V" in the river, which had been built long ago with rocks — by either the Indians or by early American settlers. They would go to a certain point in the middle of the river and chase the fish into the "V," and catch them that way. Where we lived was so beautiful — an absolute dream for a boy. It was a beautiful little town, and a great place to be a boy. When we later moved to Pittsburgh, I hated it.

Our house in Mapleton was a frame, two-story house. We had a wood stove, no electricity, and an outhouse. Today, people don't understand, because they have so much. They don't appreciate how much they have.

There was no heat in the upstairs of our home. There was something like a pipe through the floor that let the heat up. I can only remember two upstairs rooms, but there could have been more. My brothers and I slept in one of those rooms. My parents slept in the other.



Because the house had no electricity, my mother would take us up the steps at night with a coal-oil lamp. We had no bathroom in the house. As I said above, we had an outhouse. And we had a slop-jar. I don't know if you know what a "slop-jar" is ... or was. You will understand if I tell you that mom had to take it out and clean it. Because *she* did that, we didn't really much think about it. Sometimes we'd ask her for a drink of water. It was no fun running down stairs and bringing it back up. But my mother was real-good. Perhaps, because she was a bit older, she was very patient and understanding.

Downstairs, we had three rooms: a kitchen, a living room, and another room. And we had a little screened-in porch, where my mother had a coal-oil stove. She would often cook there in the summer when the weather got hot. We, of course, had a wood stove in the kitchen, but the kitchen would get too hot during the summertime, so she instead used the coal-oil stove on the porch. She was a great cook.

That large wood stove in the kitchen had a little temperature gauge on its front, and one of my brothers broke the glass on that gauge with a bow and arrow. So, my dad had to drive three miles to get a little piece of glass to replace what my brother had broken. And then, as soon as he put it in, I picked up a hammer and knocked it out, again! I was really small at the time, so, Dad didn't get mad at me.

We bathed in a big tub that we put on the kitchen floor. You'd pour in some hot water, and then add cold water. All three of us boys would get into that tub, one after the other. I usually got to

go first. When we got done, we'd dry off. My people were very clean people — Germans, Dutch, Scandinavians. And mom would also do the laundry in that tub, using an old corrugated wash board.

I began school in Mapleton. It was a four-room school. There were eight grades, with two grades in each room. The first and second grades were in one room, the third and fourth grades in the next room, and so on. The school was on top of the hill. As a boy, I was dyslexic, which meant I had trouble reading. But nobody knew what dyslexia was at the time. Some of the other kids thought I was dumb, but I wasn't.

Because my dad had been in the First World War and had some rank, he was like a "platoon-sergeant" with the Civilian Conservation Corps. On weekends, when the young men would go into town, Dad would take us out to the CCC camp, and we'd stay there with him. We'd spend Saturday night there, and we'd come back home on Sunday afternoon. That area of the valley is now covered by a big dam. Dad worked with dynamite. He was a hard worker and a good man.

My dad always took us to church. We went to a Protestant church, but I can't recall what denomination it was. I was just a boy, so, I don't have any special memories of that church.

While we lived in Mapleton, my dad used to take us out in the woods to gather all varieties of nuts to eat. We'd also gather huckleberries and all sorts of other berries. When we walked in the woods, he knew almost every tree and most of the plants there, and he knew which ones were good to eat and which ones were poisonous. On one of our trips into the woods, we came across

some unusually large tree stumps. When I asked what they were, he answered, “That’s what’s left of a couple of Great American Chestnuts. The blight got them.”

We also tapped maple trees for maple syrup. Tapping a maple tree was really pretty simple. First, you’d make yourself a little tube with an Elderberry branch. Then you’d drill a little hole in the tree, insert the branch and hang a bucket on it. When we’d get the syrup, we’d boil it down until it thickened.

On one of our walks, we went to a place called White Rock. It was an opening in the woods where wild strawberries grew. They were small but delicious. One day, while we were picking berries there, there was a strange hum in the air which grew gradually louder. Then the sun light began growing gradually dimmer. It was a cloud of locust, that seemed to be coming our way. We got out of there as fast as our legs could carry us.

I spent a lot of time in the woods. I just walked. In the spring, there would be new growth on the birch trees, and I’d chew the bark and eat it. I liked doing that. In the summer time, there would be flowering dogwood, pines and deciduous trees. It was beautiful in the woods. I loved the woods.

In the summers we walked in our bare feet all the time, everywhere. But in and around that little town we had snakes — rattlesnakes and copperheads. At night, the snakes would crawl up onto the roads, because the roads stayed warm. One of the kids, who was walking in his bare feet, was

bitten by one of the snakes, and for years afterwards, he had trouble with his knees and joints. There were lots of snakes there, because there were lots of woods.

I didn't play much ball, because I had vision problems. I had trouble catching the ball. When you play ball, if you're good, they want you; if not, they don't want you. Nobody wants you on their team, if you can't catch. And if they didn't want me, they couldn't have me. I wouldn't be there.

Dad brought back some guns from the First World War. One was a 45-cal. revolver. He showed us how to field-strip it. He then turned the job over to us three boys. We took turns taking it apart and putting it back together. When we became proficient at doing that, Dad had us put on a blindfold. We got so good at what we were doing, that we could take that .45 apart and then put it back together again, blindfolded!

Another thing we boys did, was to see how long we could hold our breath under water. We would fill a washbasin half-full of cold water, put our faces in, and count to see how long we could hold our breath. No cheating was allowed!

While we lived in Mapleton, we had a radio, but we didn't use it, because it needed big batteries, and we couldn't afford them. It was only after we moved to Pittsburgh that we listened to the radio. We listened to Gabriel Heater and Lowell Thomas, and all the news prior to the war.

Once-in-a-while, in the wintertime, we would make ice-cream — if we could get ice. We had an ice-cream mixer. It was a wooden bucket with a crank, and with a removable metal tank in the

center of the bucket. The tank itself had a removable top. You'd put cream, sugar and vanilla into the center tank, then you'd put ice in the bucket around the tank, and put salt on the ice. Then you'd rotate the tank with the crank until the cream turned into ice-cream.

My family hunted. My brothers hunted. I was too young then. My brother, Walter, was a heck-of-a-good shot, and a good hunter. He really understood the animals, too. My oldest brother, Samuel, was more of a naturalist. He cared about the country, and everything related to it. Samuel had only a high school education, but he later wrote three books.

In Mapleton, there was a store that mainly sold food, but it also sold other things. I was not too interested in it, because I was just a boy. And there was a little drug store where they had a soda fountain. But we couldn't afford to buy anything there. I never bought a soda there, because we didn't have any money.

In 1936, there was a great flood in our area.<sup>1</sup> Small buildings, houses and barns were washed down the river. They piled up at the first bridge. There, they were ripped apart. When you see a flood like that, the only thing to do is to get to higher ground.

I had a wonderful boyhood until we moved to Pittsburgh, when I was eight. I had my ninth birthday in Pittsburgh. We lived in Homestead the first year, and while I was there, I began fourth grade.

Then we moved to Munhall. Munhall was a suburb of greater Pittsburgh. The population there was made up of many nationalities. But they got along well with each other. Of course, when we moved from Homestead to Munhall, I had to make friends all over again. I did so, as soon as possible, to get along in my new neighborhood. I had good times with my new friends.

The steel mills were there, too. The steel mills were all along the rivers. In fact, the biggest steel mills were right there. The air was full of smoke. Your throat and your eyes could feel it. But it was a “man’s” way of making a living. A lot of people worked in the steel mills.

As I said above, I started fourth grade, in Homestead. At that time, I still didn’t understand the nature of my learning problem. I still had problems in school, because I had problems reading. I couldn’t really read. So, when I started fifth grade, my teacher, Miss Toole, held me back two years — and rightfully so. I simply couldn’t read. She used to keep me after school and tried to help me. Miss Toole was really a fine teacher. Of course, at the time, I didn’t think what she did was so great. But I know now that she was.

What really hurt, was that when I had to read out loud, some of the kids laughed at me. I used to play hooky to get away from it. One time, I got caught, and they took me before the principal. I figured I’d get paddled. But he was very kind as he talked to me. He just seemed to understand — at a time when I did not understand.

Another time, we took a streetcar to the Buhl Planetarium in Pittsburgh. It was on the north side of the city, some twenty miles away. On the way home, some kids began making fun of me to

the point where I couldn't take it anymore. I pulled the buzzer cord, and I stopped the streetcar and got off. It was snowing, it was bitterly cold. But it was like being "kissed by an angel" compared to how I had been treated by those boys on the street car. I walked for miles to get home. Fortunately, I had great stamina. The boys on the bus who had made fun of me, simply made no effort to understand that I couldn't help reading the way I did. I had a handicap. When a person is born into this world, he has no choice of whether he is black, white, crippled or handicapped. It is simply wrong to pick on somebody for something they have no control over.

One night, a little stray dog followed me home, and my mother gave him something to eat. This little dog was covered with burdock burrs, and Spanish nettles everywhere, and he was matted on the back side. My mother fed him and took care of all his problems and gave him a bath. After that, he wasn't about to leave.

Our new home was situated about seven miles from the county airport. Prior to World War II, many military aircraft flew in and out of that airport every weekend. It wasn't unusual for us to walk seven miles, on weekends, to watch the planes come and go. I got so that I could tell one type of plane from another, just by the sounds of their engines. I could tell whether the sound came from a single-engine fighter, or from a four-engine bomber, such as a B-17 or B-24. And wherever we went, that little dog was always with us. He was never on a leash; he just stayed close behind us. It was great to be a boy and have that wonderful dog.

My aunt had two farms. Each one, about 100 acres. The farms were about two miles from our house. There were small buildings on the farms. And when I'd go there, I was fascinated with

how the little birds — the barn swallows — would fly and pluck the bugs out of the air. And I was also intrigued with an owl that lived in my aunt's barn — he lived in the top, at the back end of the barn. I can remember how, when I would go in and he would see me, he'd always fly around. He'd catch and eat the mice in the barn, and would leave graphic proof of his prowess.

When I was about 13, I'd go down to the farms to run my aunt's tractors. They were John Deere tractors, with metal wheels with little "spades" or cleats all around the wheels for traction. One day, while I was alone, I hit a big rock in the field, and before I could shut the machine off, the wheels had dug themselves into the ground — to where the tractor was sitting on its housing. When I was finally able to turn the tractor's motor off, I thought, "What am I going to do now?" But in Pennsylvania, there are many glacial stones in the soil, so I went over to the property line where the stones were piled up, and got a bunch of stones and put them in front of each wheel. I then disconnected the plow, got back on the tractor and started it. It came right on out. Then I backed up to the plow from a different angle, and I was able to pull the plow out, as well. I was just a boy, but I got it out. There were no men around to help me. They were all at work in industry. It was 1940. The economy was beginning to pick-up because everybody knew war was coming.

Another day, when I was cultivating, I began day-dreaming. When I got my mind back on what I was supposed to be doing, I realized that instead of cultivating the crops, I was digging up the crops! So, I had to go back, and replant the crops by hand.



There's one thing more that I remember that was interesting. They had drilled for oil on that farm years before, but rather than getting oil, they only got water. It was "egg water." It smelled bad. But you could still drink it. The water was still coming out of a six-inch pipe, which they had used in the oil drilling process, and it probably still is.

About a hundred, or perhaps two hundred yards from that pipe, they had an orchard that abutted a hill. Water would come out from a spring in that hill, and they used to bottle it, and sell it as mineral water.

I joined the Boy Scouts, because my older brothers had been scouts. In the summer, we went to Camp Sagamore, which meant "Chief" or "Great Man" in the language of the American Indians. The camp was on Lake Erie. We played games, canoed and swam in the lake. One night, we had a ride in a large boat out on the lake.

Later on, when the war came, and I went into the army, they tested me and told me that I had a high IQ. At first, I couldn't believe it.

We were poor. I was the youngest of the three boys. So, I got all the hand-me-downs. I had patches on all my clothes. Everything I had was patched — patches on the knees, on the elbows and on the seat of my pants.

But, I didn't know that we were poor, because everyone else was poor. Of course, there were some families who were a little better off, but most were poor.

<sup>1</sup> On March 17, 1936, Johnstown experienced a devastating flood caused by heavy runoff from melting snow and three days of rain. Before the waters receded the following day, the flood had risen to 14 feet in some areas.

Mapleton is about 51 miles due west of Johnstown.

*The Conemaugh River* forms at Johnstown at the confluence of its tributaries, the Stonycreek River and the Little Conemaugh. Mapleton is a borough in Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania, United States. The population was 441 at the 2010 census. It is located on the Juniata River, which is a tributary of the Susquehanna River

### Chapter 3

**“[THE TWINS] WERE VERY TINY, AND WHEN COLD WEATHER CAME, THEY WERE WRAPPED IN LITTLE FLANNEL BLANKETS, LAID ON A FLAT METAL PAN AND PLACED ON THE OPEN OVEN DOOR TO KEEP THEM WARM. BY LATE NOVEMBER, ONE OF THE**

**TWINS BECAME VERY ILL, AND DEVELOPED  
PNEUMONIA.”**

**Dorothy Heinze**

**Born February 24, 1927**

**END OF FREE PREVIEW**